

Guide to Interviewing at Health Professions Schools

The medical school application process is designed for schools to get as complete a picture of you as possible. The first stage is the review of applications by either the Dean of Admissions or members of the admissions committee. At this point, your grades, MCAT scores, recommendations, and the quality of your undergraduate curriculum are evaluated. A small number of applicants (about 10-25%) will be invited for interviews.

To be offered an interview by a medical school is significant; you cannot be accepted without one. You have survived the first cut and now they want to know more about YOU, the personal, subjective qualities that do not lend themselves to a “fill-in-the-blanks” application form. When you are invited for an interview, you should take it as a positive sign.

Ethical behavior, integrity, energy, good judgment and problem solving skills, your maturity, your leadership qualities, abilities to get along with people and to work closely with others, endurance and ability to manage stress and hard work: these qualities are essential to becoming a physician. The interview process is designed for the schools to learn about you in respect to them.

A second purpose of interviews is for the school to present itself to you. Take advantage of the interview day to learn as much as you can about the school. Try to get a sense of whether it is an environment in which you will learn well.

WHAT ARE INTERVIEWS LIKE?

There are several ways interviews can be conducted, and you will probably encounter more than one interview style. The interviewer may have read your application and be quite knowledgeable about you and your candidacy, or the interviewer may not know anything more about you than your undergraduate institution. In the latter case, you should be prepared to fill in the interviewer on the important aspects of who you are, what you have accomplished, and what you see as your strengths. In the interview in which your interviewer has read your application, you might expect more specific questions. You may have one long interview, two short ones, or one short one. You may be interviewed by admissions staff or admission committee members who are faculty at that medical school. Some schools use students as interviewers also. Most often interviews are one-on-one, but occasionally you may have a group interview.

You can expect to be nervous in this situation, but you can be assured that for the most part, interviewers are not out to give you a hard time. This is not to say that you won't find the situation a little stressful, but in general the schools want you to feel comfortable so that they can learn more about you.

What kinds of questions can you expect to be asked? There are some old standards: Why do you want to be a doctor? Tell me about your motivations for medicine? What have your experiences been? How do you know medicine is the right career for you? Beyond these, there are many other possible questions. (See the next-to-last page of this Guide.) Remember, the schools are trying to get at subjective qualities, such as leadership, compassion, motivation, integrity, maturity, curiosity, and judgment.

We have appended a list of questions that students have been asked in the past. Don't read this list and go back and write out your answers and practice them. Rather, look at them and ask yourself if you have thought about these issues - if you have anything to say about them. If they are at all difficult, take it as a sign that you need to do more thinking about your own positions.

You might be presented with hypothetical situations and asked how you would handle them. By asking these difficult questions, the interviewer is hoping to gain a sense of your values, how you solve problems, how thoughtful you are about larger issues. What you reply does matter, but how you arrive at your position and how well you defend it are equally important. The analytic skills you have developed through your Williams education should stand you in good stead.

Here are some questions you should not be asked, but in an imperfect world, might be. If you are a woman: Do you plan to marry? Have children? How do you plan to combine family life and medicine? Rather than refuse to answer these questions, re-word them into a question you feel comfortable answering. Let us know about any such questions and how you handled them.

Be honest and sincere in your answers. Don't try to figure out what the interviewer wants to hear. If you don't know something, say so. If there are problem areas in your candidacy, this is your opportunity for "damage control." You can explain a circumstance on your own terms. Watch your tone on these answers; be positive and don't indulge in "what should have been." More productive than being defensive is for you to explain what happened and discuss what you learned from the experience.

You can expect to be asked about the current state of and the future of healthcare in this country. How will healthcare policy changes affect the way you will be practicing medicine? You will find that it is easy to learn about these issues if you make an effort to be well read. *Newsweek* and *Time* and the *New York Times* all devote a good deal of print to these issues. Here are other good sources of information:

- American Medical News: <http://www.ama-assn.org/amednews/>
- The Next Generation: <http://www.nextgenmd.org/>
- American Medical Student Association: <http://www.amsa.org/>
- Washington Highlights: <http://www.aamc.org/advocacy/washhigh/start.htm>

LOGISTICS/PREPARATION

When you are invited for an interview, set a date carefully, checking your exam schedule, paper dates, and other important events. Allow yourself plenty of time to find the medical school; go early that day or the night before. Be courteous in all your dealings with the admissions office, from the receptionist up to the physician who interviews you. The students who take you on a tour of the school, or have lunch with you, might well be asked to share their impressions of you with the admissions staff.

Knowing what prior students' experiences have been can help you feel more confident and relaxed. Be prepared to complete some of the Medical School Interview Reports available from our web site about the schools you are visiting, and help other Williams applicants in the future. Go to this web site for impressions from students across the country who have already interviewed at "your" schools: <http://more.studentdoctor.net/schoollist.php?type=2>

Be prepared to ask questions. Show that you are interested in that particular school: be able to communicate why you have applied. Be aware of any special programs at the school. Consult the school's website for the latest information.

Dress appropriately. That means suits or jackets and ties for men, suits (with skirts or pants) for women. Skirts should not be high, nor blouses low. No excessive make up or jewelry: no tongue, nose, or eyebrow piercings, and no ear cuffs. No more than one earring in each ear for women, and none for men. Don't wear cologne or perfume.

Reread your application and supplementary essays. Review what you have told the schools about yourself. Be prepared to discuss any research that you have done, especially if it is in a scientific or medically related field.

Brief, handwritten thank-you notes to the person who interviewed you are certainly appropriate, and welcome. The admissions office can give you titles, addresses, etc.

While most medical schools discourage applicants from requesting interviews, under special circumstances it may be appropriate for you to request one. If your plans make it possible or convenient for you to be in a distant city at a certain time, it is appropriate for you to bring this to the attention of the other schools in that city to which you have applied, and ask for an interview around that time (if they were going to interview you anyway). The more advance notice you can provide the admissions office about your plans, the better.

Should you decide that you need to re-schedule an interview, or you change your mind about the school and decide to withdraw your application after you have seem invited for an interview, it is critical that you deal with the school courteously. Contact the school as much in advance of the date as you can, so that another candidate can be invited for that time. If you call to change an interview or withdraw from one, follow that call with a confirming e-mail. Phone messages can get lost, and we'll be sure to hear from a Dean of Admission if you "no-show." In all of your dealings with a school, remember that your behavior reflects on you as well as on all of us at Williams.

Be sure to notify us about all of your interviews (and their outcome!). We are concerned about your progress and want to know how things are going. Occasionally it will be hard for you to know if an interview has gone well or poorly. If you have concerns about an interview, get in contact with me and I will help you sort out what happened. □

Interview Worksheet

1. List the major areas of responsibility in being a physician:
2. List your past experiences and/or accomplishments that relate to these responsibilities:
3. Prepare to present yourself effectively:
List the major points you wish to make. List examples you will use to support each point.
4. List the questions you would like to ask the interviewer. In an actual interview you may not have an opportunity to ask all of them so list them in order of importance to you.

Commonly Asked Medical School Interview Questions

Why are you applying to this school?

How do you spend your free time? / What do you do for fun?

What stimulated your interest in medicine?

Tell me about your family and your relationship with them.

What do you think the most pressing health concern is in the U.S.?

How do you plan to finance your medical education?

There are 1,000 applicants as qualified as you; why should we select you?

What steps have you taken to acquaint yourself with what a physician does?

What will you do if you are not accepted to medical school?

Describe your personality.

What aspects of your life experiences do you think make you a good candidate for medical school?

How have you shown your sensitivity to others' problems?

What major decisions have you made on your own?

What causes AIDS?

Tell me about why you did not do well in course?

Why did you major in ?

What will you be doing in medicine 10-15 years from now?

What are your weaknesses, and how do you try to overcome them?

What has been your biggest disappointment?

What extracurricular activities have meant the most to you?

Describe your research.

What makes you so sure you want to be a doctor?

What was the last book you read? (Note: The schools are tired of hearing *Harry Potter*!)

What is your opinion of managed health care?

How do you deal with stress?

What would you do if a patient won't follow directions?

Who is your role model?

Why did you choose Williams?

What was the most important experience in your life?

Why do we still have 46 million uninsured people in this country?

How have your volunteer activities affected your view of medicine?

What do you think about physician-assisted suicide?

What has been your exposure to/experience with faiths outside your own?

How have you helped a senior citizen recently?

Describe a situation in which you were a leader/ team player.

What will be your greatest challenge in med school?

Things To Remember During Medical School Interviews

Be sincere, courteous, use tact, and show enthusiasm. It's okay to use humor, but don't be a wise guy. Do smile!

Display an interest in the interview. Treat every question as important.

Be honest and consistent in responses.

Listen carefully to the question or comments being made. Ask for clarification if a question is vague: "Did I understand your question to be...?" "As I understand the question....."

Use the thinking/pause method when you need to regroup or organize thoughts.

Don't try to second guess the interviewer's politics when asked your opinion about some issue. It's the way you have arrived at your opinion that is of interest to him/her.

Avoid negative comments about professors or classes where your grades are lower, about fellow students, former employers, co-workers, etc. No whining!

Be prepared to respond to questions about your weaknesses as well as your strengths.

Respond to questions about your personal life tactfully.

Don't be intimidated by the other applicants interviewing that day. Think positively.

Maintain good eye contact and positive body language.

Keep the interviewer's attention by varying the tone of your voice: lower/raise, vary the tempo, speed up/slow down, but always be articulate. Speak loudly enough. Women, try to bring a high voice down.

Be polite to everyone you meet.

Control the content of the interview. The interviewer will ask specific questions. Your response should address the question and can also make reference to an area or subject that you want to talk more about. Before the interview, make a mental list of five things you want the interviewer to know about you before the end of the interview.