

Post-bac Paths: Career Changers

There is no single “correct” or “ideal” path to medical, dental, or veterinary school. Some students have the idea from the time they are very young that they want to pursue the health professions, and are engaged in the courses and health-related activities all along. Others make the decision much later, sometimes well into their undergraduate years or even beyond, shifting gears from other arenas that may not have been health or science-focused. Many programs are available for students who decide after graduation (post-baccalaureate) to pursue a career in the health professions. These programs are often referred to as “career changer” post-bac programs.

“Career-Changer” (or “Start from Scratch”) Programs

Students who performed very well as undergraduates, but did not take any (or only one or two) of the science courses that their health profession of choice require, will need to consider “career changer” programs. These are designed to meet the needs of students who lack both a basic science background to become qualified applicants. Sometimes students enter these programs right on the heels of finishing an undergraduate degree, and sometimes they do so after several years of unrelated work experience.

Qualifications

Career changer programs expect to see evidence of excellent academic potential in general (usually around a 3.3 GPA overall, but it varies by program). They will gauge your academic readiness by evaluating your transcript(s) and letters of recommendation. They will also look for some commitment to the kind of clinical and service responsibilities that the health professions will demand, and will expect that you have considered your reasons for pursuing a health career, and are able to articulate them through an application essay.

Services Offered

A career changer post-bac program may offer some or all of the following:

- **Coursework:** Career-changer post-bacs will typically require students to take all of the pre-health courses—biology, general and organic chemistry, physics and math—in a one- or two- year course of study. They may also offer opportunities to take advanced electives in the sciences, or related courses that are relevant to medicine.
- **Advising:** These programs usually offer an advising office (similar to HPA at Princeton) to help students with managing courses, finding clinical experience, and preparing to apply to health professional school.
- **Applicant Support:** Post-bac programs should offer a committee letter of recommendation, which is a summary of your candidacy written by the program, drawing on all aspects of your candidacy. Access to a committee letter is a significant benefit to pursuing a post-bac program rather than taking courses on your own at a college or university.
- **Linkages:** Linkage programs are formal agreements between specific postbac programs and specific medical schools. They enable highly qualified postbac premed students with a strong interest in one of these schools to apply privately to that school while in the postbac program. A successful linkage applicant would matriculate in one of the linkage schools as soon as he or she completed the postbac program.
- **Community/Student Organizations:** Some post-bac programs have activities and organizations that can help students gain a sense of community, among themselves or with the larger pre-health population.
- **Clinical/Research Opportunities:** Some post-bac programs will have a research or clinical component, in which you can work with a faculty member on research, or volunteer/shadow at local hospitals. More often, a post-bac program’s advising office can help you find these opportunities on your own.

Researching Post-bac Options

The most comprehensive database of post-bac pre-medical programs is available on the Association of American Medical Colleges website at www.aamc.org/postbacs. It can be searched by state, school, degree type (undergraduate or graduate), or type of program (career changer, academic enhancement, or for economically/educationally disadvantaged students or those from groups under-represented in medicine). To discuss planning for a post-bac program, or any other route to a career in the health professions, Princeton students and alumni are encouraged to contact the Office of Health Professions Advising.

Evaluating Post-bac Options

No single program is the best for everyone. It's important to know what's most important for you in finding a post-bac program, and asking questions that will help you weigh pros and cons of each. Factors that are significant to many students include: location, cost, size of program, size of classes, support resources offered, guarantee of seats in required courses, community among post-bac students, linkage agreements. We caution against concerning yourself too much with the "success rate" (e.g., how many post-bacs are accepted to medical school)—this tends to be more a reflection of how well the student fit with the program than the quality of the program itself. Much of what you gain from your program will depend on how much you put in. Many post-bac programs will have program participants who you can contact to ask additional questions about their level of satisfaction. This can be more useful than statistics. In addition to doing web research, it may also be helpful to sit in on a class, or meet with an adviser.

Questions to Ask

- Is there a linkage program? How many students have successfully linked to the medical school(s) in recent years?
- What MCAT support is available? How well do post-bacs fare on the MCAT?
- How often do you meet with an adviser? How available and supportive are the program staff?
- Can I take electives outside of the pre-med core requirements?
- How would you describe the class environment? What do faculty think of post-bac students?
- How would you describe the post-bac student culture (e.g., independent, community-oriented, competitive, collaborative, etc)?
- What academic support is available if I'm struggling in a class?
- Do you have contact information for program participants or recent graduates who I can talk with?
- What are the qualifications I have to have to have a committee letter prepared on my behalf? How many students in a given year qualify for a committee letter?
- What's the cost of the program? How do students usually pay for it?
- What kinds of students tend to be successful in your program?
- What's the timeline to apply? Is it best to apply early, or is it okay to apply at the deadline?
- Can you go over the timeline – how long will it take to complete the program, apply to, and start health professions school?

Example Programs

The AAMC currently lists 83 post-bac career changer programs. Some of the long-established, well-known career-changer post-bac career changer programs are:

- Bennington (VT): <http://www.bennington.edu/Academics/GraduateCertificatePrograms/Postbac.aspx>
- Bryn Mawr (PA): <http://www.brynmawr.edu/postbac/>
- Columbia: <http://www.gs.columbia.edu/postbac/>
- Georgetown: <http://premed.georgetown.edu/postbac/>
- Goucher (Baltimore, MD): <http://www.goucher.edu/x15377.xml>
- Mt. Holyoke (MA): <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/prehealth/postbac>
- Tufts (Boston MA): <http://uss.tufts.edu/hpa/postbac/>

In recent years, Princeton alums have attended these programs and gone on to medical school: U Penn, UC Berkeley, Bryn Mawr, Columbia, UT Dallas, Scripps, Johns Hopkins, Goucher, and Harvard Extension.

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