

Post-bac Paths: Record Enhancers

Several institutions around the country have responded to the need for programs that address the student who has a bachelor's degree, but does not have a sufficiently strong academic record to apply immediately to health professional school. A recent search of the AAMC post-bac database (<https://apps.aamc.org/postbac>) shows 155 academic record enhancement post-bac programs in the U.S. Students considering their options for demonstrating their academic readiness for medical school should weigh their options carefully and speak to both Princeton HPA and post-bac program staff prior to applying.

Upper-Level Undergraduate Work as a Non-Degree Seeking Student

A student who graduated with a cumulative undergraduate GPA well below a 3.0 would benefit by demonstrating the ability to perform well in upper-level science courses at the undergraduate level, then considering graduate work and then applying to medical schools. Most medical schools will not accept candidates into their programs with an undergraduate GPA far below a 3.0. In order to demonstrate your ability, take a minimum of three courses per semester for a full-year at a strong, four-year institution, and earn at minimum a 3.6 GPA, taking the MCAT (or other standardized exam) after gaining this more solid foundation.

If successful, it may be possible to realistically move on to a graduate program to further advance your qualifications, or it may be appropriate to apply to medical school directly after increasing your GPA and MCAT score. It is not recommended that you apply, and then take courses during the year after you have applied: schools will need to see these grades on your application upfront. It follows that medical school may be a number of years away if GPA repair to this extent is necessary; students at this level (and all levels) of preparation must decide whether the time it takes to become competitive for medical school admission is a better choice for them than exploring alternate career paths.

Regular Graduate Program in the Sciences

There are two types of students for whom this option is particularly well-suited.

First, students with a cumulative undergraduate GPA performance below a 3.0. Based upon personal experiences with graduate admissions, with this academic background, you are more likely to be accepted into a graduate bioscience program than into a special master's type post-bac program (described below). Seek programs whose courses are scientifically rigorous and know, to be a successful applicant to medical school, your GPA must remain high. It may still be helpful to enroll in enough undergraduate-level courses to bring your cumulative BCPM GPA above a 3.0.

Second, students who strongly favor the sciences but are undecided on their career path with regard to practicing medicine versus conducting scientific research are well-suited to this option. If this is your situation, you may do well to enroll in a thesis-based Master of Science program in a discipline of personal interest, e.g. biochemistry, physiology, neuroscience, etc. While in the program, if you discover that research is definitely appropriate for you, then you could decide to continue on for a Ph.D. or join the workforce with the master's degree. If you decide that you would prefer clinical medicine, you could apply to medical schools while completing the master's. Students taking this route are encouraged to continue to stay engaged in medically-relevant activities such as volunteering in hospitals, working as Certified Nurse Assistants, or otherwise finding ways to explore the clinical route.

Non-bioscience based programs, including most public health programs resulting in a master's degree, would be less likely to enhance your candidacy, since performance in the sciences is more critical to success in medical school. However, a MPH degree is a fine preparation for careers in health care within the field of public health, which will allow you to serve the community in other ways; they are also fine for students with strong science credentials, who just want to gain more expertise in this area prior to medical school.

Students applying to medical schools from a graduate program should be aware that acceptance to a medical school is usually contingent upon the completion of their graduate degree. This is sometimes problematic for the applicant since research results and thesis writing may not follow the anticipated time course. In this case, it may be best to wait until the research is completed before applying to medical schools.

Non-Degree Post-Bac Program

A student with a cumulative undergraduate GPA in the upper 2s or low 3s (with an equal or slightly lower science GPA) could benefit from a strong science based program. Similar work could also be done as a non-degree student by enrolling in classes at a local school. The benefits to a formal program include access to advising, a more structured environment, and sometimes some preference to postbac students in certain schools' admissions processes through linkage agreements with health professions schools. By taking advanced undergraduate courses, your GPA as an applicant will reflect your work at Princeton and in these programs in a cumulative undergraduate GPA. It is better to participate in these programs and apply after your grades have been posted, than to apply and take these courses in the application year; you will be a more competitive candidate if schools see your grades in your initial application. Some programs will incorporate MCAT review.

Example programs:

- U Penn Pre-Health Specialized Studies: [SAS.UPenn.edu/LPS/Postbac/Pre-health/Specialized](https://sas.upenn.edu/LPS/Postbac/Pre-health/Specialized)
- Harvard Extension Program: www.extension.harvard.edu/academics/premedical-program
- American University Post-Bac Premed Certificate Program. American.edu/CAS/Premed/index.cfm
- Lake Erie College of Osteopathic Medicine. LECOM.edu/Admissions/Entrance-Requirements/Health-Sciences-Post-baccalaureate-Entrance-Requirements/
- Washington Univ. of St. Louis: UCollege.WUSTL.edu/Programs/Postbaccalaureate/Premed
- UC Berkeley Extension Program: extension.berkeley.edu/spos/premed.html

Special Master's Programs

Students with cumulative undergraduate GPAs above 3.0 and average MCAT scores could consider a special master's graduate program where they take medical school courses and are graded in relation to the University's own medical school class. These programs allow you a chance to prove your capacity to do well in a rigorous medical school program. A certain number of seats are usually held at that institution's medical school each year for those students who have done well in the post-baccalaureate program. At this level, it may or may not be worthwhile to apply to health profession school prior to beginning a special master's program, and complete it in the subsequent year. Consult with post-bac program staff and HPA regarding this. Your graduate GPA will be reported separate from your undergraduate GPA when you apply to medical school.

Example programs:

- Drexel University College of Medicine Interdepartmental Medical Science (IMS) offered in Sacramento and Philadelphia. Attend med school courses simulcast, take same exams as med students: Drexelmed.edu/Home/AcademicPrograms/ProfessionalStudiesintheHealthSciences/PreMedicalPrograms/InterdepartmentalMedicalScienceIMSProgram.aspx
- Georgetown University Special Master's program in Physiology. SMP students take six of their ten classes with Georgetown's first-year medical students. SMP.Georgetown.edu/

- Boston University Master of Medical Sciences program. Candidates are required to complete a research-based thesis. BUMC.BU.edu/GMS/
- Mount Sinai Masters in Biomedical Sciences. This program combines rigorous course work and an intense research experience in a supportive environment, with an emphasis on individual advising. Icahn.MSSM.edu/Education/Masters/Biomedical-Sciences
- University of Cincinnati Master's program in Physiology. Med.UC.edu/MSinPhysiology
- Robert Wood Johnson Medical School Masters of Biomedical Sciences. rwjms.rutgers.edu/gsbs/msbio.html
- Temple University School of Medicine Advanced Core in Medical Sciences. Includes conditional admission to the medical school. <https://medicine.temple.edu/education/postbac-program>
- Tufts University School of Medicine Master of Science in Biomedical Sciences. PublicHealth.Tufts.edu/Academics/MBS-Microsite

Special programs for students from underrepresented groups

Individuals of ethnic and racial minority backgrounds, including African-Americans, Mexican Americans, and American Indians, represent about 25% of the U.S. population, but account for less than 8% of practicing physicians. Those from economically disadvantaged areas and backgrounds are also underrepresented in the career. The minimal number of practicing physicians within these groups has a negative impact on health care delivery. In order to address this imbalance, numerous programs have been developed that assist students who identify themselves as members of such groups in gaining acceptance to medical school.

Programs exist both for post-baccalaureate students prior to application, and for students who have applied and been accepted to health professional schools. The Health Careers Opportunity Program (HCOP) is one initiative that supports the pre-health preparation of students from disadvantaged or under-represented minority backgrounds, offering opportunities to strengthen their academic and clinical readiness for the challenges of medical school. These programs can be an excellent launching pad for physicians who have the cultural awareness and desire to serve minority patients in particular, and to expand the diversity of our physician population in general. Currently, more than 50 programs for economically and educational-disadvantaged students are listed on the AAMC website, and 81 are specifically designed for minority students. Some medical schools accept students but require them to participate in a summer enrichment program to facilitate the transition into medical school. In some instances student performance may dictate that they be placed in a decelerated program (first year of medical school taken over a two-year period).

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 <http://apps.aamc.org/postbac>. 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 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?
- How much flexibility is there in course selection?
- 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?
- If students aren't accepted to health professions school after this program, what other career avenues are they prepared for?
- 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?

Some information adapted from "Postbaccalaureate Options for the Medical School Applicant" by Gerald Soslau, Ph.D., Yolanda Pressley, and Laura Mangano, published in NAAHP's *The Advisor*, Vol. 25, No. 3, September 2005.

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