

UNDERSTANDING ADMISSION TO THE UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON SCHOOL OF MEDICINE

*By Matt Hollon, MD - Clinical Associate Professor UWSOM
and Carol Tietz, MD - Associate Dean for Admissions UWSOM*

Interest in how undergraduate and graduate schools select incoming students has increased across the nation. The medical school application process is one of the most competitive of any profession. With the very strong interest and competition for medical school positions nationally, many applicants are elated when they are accepted at the medical school of their choice and disappointed when they are not. The University of Washington School of Medicine (UWSOM) works hard to make its admissions process contemporary, fair, transparent, and highly relevant to the Northwest region. In this article, we provide basic information about the process and outcomes for our medical school.

THE ADMISSIONS PROCESS

The UWSOM typically receives almost 5,000 applications for 220 positions in each class. Ten positions are reserved for the combined MD/PhD program which receives 250-300 applications annually.

The Admissions Committee consists of University of Washington faculty members from throughout the WWAMI (Washington, Wyoming, Alaska, Montana, Idaho) region as well as medical students and a few members of the non-UW community. The 178 members of the Admissions Committee are responsible for interviewing applicants. The Executive Committee, a subset of the Admissions Committee, is composed solely of faculty members and has 23 members. Executive Committee members are responsible for screening applications, interviewing applicants, and voting on whether to accept or reject applicants. Executive committee members have typically served on the Admissions Committee for at least three years before being appointed to the Executive Committee where they may serve two three-year terms. Two to three members of the Executive Committee screen each application. Applicants who are “screened in” (two positive “screens”) are interviewed sometime between October and March by a panel of three Admissions Committee members. One Executive Committee member is part of each interview panel and is the only one of the three panelists with access to the applicant’s grades and MCAT scores. Thus two of three interviewers consider the applicant solely on the basis of his/her performance during the interview. The interview is intended to assess the applicant’s motivation for a career in medicine, knowledge of the field of medicine and healthcare issues, interpersonal communication skills, and problem-solving skills.

Each Executive Committee member presents the applicants he or she has interviewed to the rest of the Executive Committee for consideration, discussion, and decision. This presentation includes information from both the written application and the interview. Executive Committee members have access to each applicant's electronic file, which includes summaries of the interview impressions submitted independently by each interviewer. Applicants are accepted (or rejected) on a rolling basis between the end of October and mid-March.

THE RESULTS

The number of applicants has increased nationally over the last five years from 37,372 in 2005-2006 to 42,269 in 2009-2010, with just under 50 percent of applicants accepted. In 2009, 791 Washington residents applied to medical schools across the United States and 454 matriculated into medical school, slightly exceeding the proportion of applicants accepted nationally. Of these Washington residents, 733 applied to the UW and 126 matriculated at UW. 279 Washington applicants were not accepted at any medical school.

Compared with other states with similar population numbers, Washington and the Pacific Northwest have fewer seats for students who want to go to medical school. Other than the University of Oregon, the University of Washington is the only allopathic medical school in the Pacific Northwest and has a longstanding contract with Wyoming, Alaska, Montana and Idaho, to educate set numbers of residents from those states.

Our relatively limited number of medical school seats and the national recognition for the quality of our medical school make the admissions process to UWSOM highly competitive. For the 18th consecutive year, a US News and World Report survey ranked the UW School of Medicine No. 1 in the country for primary-care training, and for the 20th year, the School was ranked No. 1 in both family medicine and rural medicine training. The School was ranked No. 2 in research funding from the National Institutes of Health (among all medical schools) and No. 1 among public medical schools. Among the 123 medical schools in the rankings, the UW School of Medicine was one of only three schools in the top 10 for both primary care and research.

In Washington, there are typically five to six applicants for each available medical school seat. In addition to the students we admit to the MD/PhD program and those we admit to the MD program from Washington, we admit 80 students from the other WAMI states. Our medical students benefit

greatly from our affiliation with the WWAMI states not only because of the diverse backgrounds of the students, but also because of the unusually wide range of available training sites. Our students have clinical training opportunities at over 200 sites in all types of medical practices ranging from single-physician rural practices to tertiary-care hospitals. In between are community health centers, Indian health service clinics, and international health clinics, both in the U.S. and abroad, as well as private practices caring for both insured and uninsured patients. Experiences are available in urban and rural, primary care and specialty care, clinical and research environments.

Over the last five years, the UW School of Medicine Admissions Committee has typically interviewed between 650 and 850 applicants each year. Applicants from our partner states may interview in their home states and are considered in comparison to their peers from the same state. Washington applicants may interview in Seattle or Spokane and are compared to other applicants from throughout Washington. Although the UW School of Medicine receives approximately 3,600 applications from outside the WWAMI region each year, relatively few are interviewed, and the acceptance rate for these applicants is typically 0.3 percent. The acceptance rate for the WWAMI states, combined, averages 19 percent. In a five –year analysis that compared the acceptance rates of UWSOM of applicants from Eastern Washington with those from Western Washington, the acceptance rates were not significantly different (19.96 and 19.16 percent, respectively.) Applicants from within the WWAMI region who were not accepted on their first application and choose to reapply are typically accepted at a rate of 20 percent.

THE CHARACTERSTICS OF OUR STUDENTS

The UWSOM admits the best and the brightest students who have characteristics that national studies have shown are important for future physicians. Our holistic decision-making process considers not only grades and MCAT scores, but also problem-solving ability, communication skills, motivation for and understanding of a medical career, record of service, broad interests and life experiences, and other characteristics. Our mean MCAT score and GPA are at the national average.

Given the commitment of time and money necessary to become a practicing physician, medical schools across the country look for demonstrable understanding of the day-to-day rewards and difficulties in the life of a physician. This is most often gleaned from the observation of doctors as they care for patients. Even pre-medical students who grew up in a family in which one or both parents are physicians benefit

from observing the patient-physician interaction. In a series of recent analyses at the UWSOM, the acceptance rate for offspring of physicians was compared to the rate for applicants whose parents were not physicians and was found to be identical. Moreover, the representation of physicians' offspring in the accepted applicants mirrors their representation in the applicant pool.

Broad life experience can be acquired in numerous ways and is thought to enhance physician's cultural competence, empathy, and ability to handle stress. The age of students beginning medical school at the University of Washington has typically ranged from 19 to 46 over the last five years and the mean age of our first year matriculants, 25, has not changed significantly over the last five years. The mean age nationally has been 23.6 for the last three years. We do not consider age in our decisions, but rather the totality of many attributes.

An applicant does not have to be interested in a primary care career to be admitted to the UW School of Medicine although we have a special focus on primary care. Students interested in any specialty receive the best training for their future careers. The mission of the UW School of Medicine is to improve the health and well being of the public. In pursuit of this goal, the UWSOM is committed to excellence in biomedical education, research, and health care. The people of the state and region are served best when graduates of the UWSOM choose a variety of careers that will meet the healthcare needs of our region, recognizing the importance of primary care, clinical specialties, and leadership in the biomedical sciences and academic medicine.

In summary, the large pool of highly qualified applicants to the University of Washington School of Medicine creates both an enviable and difficult position. The School can easily fill its seats with bright, talented, compassionate people who will make great physicians. Unfortunately, in the process, some applicants will not be accepted and they and their families will be disappointed. We have worked hard to make the admissions process transparent and fair, and the Admissions Office strives to put all applicants on an even playing field with regard to the UW School of Medicine's expectations for applicants.

The Admissions Office holds town hall meetings each spring and provides detailed information on its website. For more information please see:

- **UWSOM Admissions:**
<http://uwmedicine.org/admissions>
- **UWSOM Admissions, Advice from the Admissions Dean:**

<http://uwmedicine.washington.edu/Education/MD-Program/Admissions/Applicants/Pages/AdvicefromAdmissionsDean.aspx>

- **Notable Features of UWSOM, summarizes distinguishing characteristics of the UW MD Program:**

<http://uwmedicine.washington.edu/Education/MD-Program/Admissions/Pages/Notable-Features-UWSOM.aspx>

There are additional sections on the website for applicants and their families, as well as for physicians who are interested in helping future applicants.

Comments and suggestions are welcome and can be directed to askuwsom@uw.edu.