

## Hunter College Pre-Health Advising Office

From The Director's Desk - Commentary by Dr. Karen E. S. Phillips

### When is it best to take the MCAT?

In my combined roles as the Director of the Pre-Health Program and an Organic Chemistry Instructor here at Hunter College, I very often find myself giving advice to students about when to take or not to take the Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT). After spending many hours either talking with students about this or writing lengthy e-mail messages in an effort to dissuade some from taking the test at an inopportune time, I decided to summarize my thoughts in writing. While the data that I will use to substantiate my reasoning is specific to the MCAT, many of my suggestions could translate into good advice for students who have their sights set on dental, veterinary, and other professional schools as well. All doctoral level programs employ some version of a holistic review process, with information from course grades, standardized test scores, experience histories, and letters of recommendation serving as criteria for selection, as well as the actual content and quality of completed applications. Although each of these factors can be listed independently, performance in one area is often connected to what is happening in another. This communication will focus on the timing of the MCAT as a contributing factor in this overall picture.

The MCAT score provides a standard measure of a candidate's potential for academic success in medical school. Because it is independent of applicants' undergraduate institutions, medical college admissions committees rely very heavily on the MCAT as a way to clarify or further substantiate evidence provided through a candidate's Grade Point Average (GPA). A stellar MCAT score can help to compensate for a slight dip in grades, or vice versa, but both of these measures are very heavily weighted in medical school admissions decisions. Since it is my firm belief that you should endeavor to be the best applicant that you can possibly be at the time when you first apply to medical school, it is ideal to do as well as you can in all relevant academic areas, including your courses and the MCAT.

One of the first things that members of medical college admissions committees will tell you is that you should only take the MCAT when you really feel that you are ready to do so. Your preparation for the test begins with the courses that are listed as pre-requisites. For the current version of the MCAT, your potential for success depends on a clear conceptual understanding of a year's worth of topics in General Biology, General Chemistry, Organic Chemistry, and algebra-based Physics. Taking the MCAT before completing all the required coursework is simply a bad idea. I have heard some students express the misconception that material covered in Organic-1 is all that is needed to achieve success on the test, and I have seen others demoralized by failure after following a suggestion that it was fine to take the MCAT without first completing Physics-2. I am not sure where ideas like these originate from but they are definitely not correct. It is very difficult to predict what will appear on the MCAT but there have been studies conducted by the American Association of Medical Colleges (AAMC) to determine the relative importance of the different topics covered in the four required science classes. Coincidentally, the topics from a year-long Organic Chemistry course that were voted most critical to the MCAT and for effective preparation of students for medical school are the same topics that are usually covered during the last month of the second semester (<https://www.aamc.org/students/applying/mcat/mcat2015/admins/data/>). If your plan was to take the MCAT in April, you might miss out on the benefits of learning these topics as thoroughly as you need to in order to perform well on questions related to them. Some students struggle to teach this material to themselves while others hope that they can compensate for this with the help of MCAT preparation courses taken in the months before the exam. What you should remember is that a targeted MCAT review should only serve as reinforcement of material already learned or refinement of test-taking strategies, not as your first exposure to required content.

Several companies use their own versions of MCAT reference materials and exams to help students review course content and gauge their progress. Whether you choose to engage one of these companies to help you to prepare or not, you should always confirm your readiness for a particular test date by observing the progression of your scores on actual AAMC full-length versions of the MCAT, taken under appropriately timed conditions. Several MCAT practice tests are available for purchase through the AAMC Website and at least one full length test is also provided free of charge (<http://www.e-mcat.com/starttest.aspx?cmd=login&checkclient=true>). Taking one of these practice tests during each of the final weeks of your preparation will help to keep information at your fingertips, get your timing up to speed, indicate what you need to review more, and give you the feedback that can help you to gauge what to expect from your official scores. This could still be off a bit since it is impossible to simulate the tension accompanying the actual test, but at least you will have an idea whether or not it is even worth your while to proceed. If your scores on these AAMC tests are consistently in the teens or

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low 20's, it would be foolish to expect a miracle on the actual test day, but if your scores are consistently in the mid to high 30's, then you are probably ready for the real thing.

The previous paragraph hints at another reason to avoid taking the MCAT during the spring semester while you are still completing relevant coursework. This has to do with the possible emotional impact of such a combination. The stress associated with a high-stakes, high-volume, standardized test such as the MCAT should never be underestimated. By the time most students get around to taking this test, it usually symbolizes the one thing that could still stand in the way of their dreams. This elevates the anxiety associated with the MCAT, and anxiety can have a significant impact on performance in courses as well as on the MCAT itself. This effect could be amplified when the course involved is something like Organic Chemistry because this subject is known to elicit its own share of stress and anxiety. If you stop for a moment and picture what it might be like to get ready to take the MCAT and learn new material on your own, while still trying to pay attention in lectures, keep up with practice problems on material being taught at the time, and take midterm exams or the final with the rest of your class, you can immediately see what a nightmare all this could become. Invariably, something has to give and both your MCAT score and your course grades are likely to suffer. In a system where both of these measures matter, this could mean the difference between imminent medical school matriculation and the likelihood of going through the whole ordeal all over again.

I am not suggesting that no one should ever take the MCAT in April or May. In fact, students vying for the mere handful of spots available through linkage programs will need to do just that. What I am trying to emphasize is that students applying through the regular cycle really have no need to take the MCAT before the spring semester ends, especially if they are still completing the required classes. Many students insist on doing this anyway, usually because they heard that they should submit completed applications as soon as the system is open to receive them on June 1. This, frankly, is overkill. While some who had already finished the required courses the year before might do fine with that timing, I definitely do not recommend this for everyone. I also would not recommend waiting until August to take the MCAT. It takes about a month for scores to be released, so an August test date might cause your application to miss the early rounds of admissions committee reviews. Test dates up to the middle of July should be fine. Then all facets of your application could be completed, with scores in and transcripts verified, by early to mid August. You should, of course, begin the MCAT review process several months before your actual test date so that you have the time to gradually build your momentum as it approaches. Taking the MCAT by mid-July would still leave you with almost two months after spring final exams to really push yourself through the last and most intense stages of your preparation.

Since the MCAT is now administered via computer, there are many more test dates to choose from than there once were. However, the average score for Hunter students on the MCAT seems to vary quite a bit depending on the month in which the test is taken. Generally, MCAT averages for Hunter students are higher on tests taken in April, May, June and July than they are for tests taken in January, August or September. This pattern has been quite consistent over the past four years. In some years the difference between the average Hunter student scores for these two groups of months has been as much as 5 points. For 2011, the average score for Hunter students who took the MCAT in June was 9 points higher than the average score for those who took it in January. On an exam for which the maximum possible total is 45 points, that much variation between scores for different months can be very significant. While it is impossible to be certain of a cause for this, I usually urge the students that I advise not to take the MCAT during the months when the average scores tend to be much lower.

The sum of all of this is that there are many factors to be considered when deciding on a date for the MCAT, some of which you might not have even thought of before. I hope that my thoughts expressed here will help to clarify some important points and give you more meaningful information to work with when deciding on your MCAT date. Choices that work for your peers are not always sensitive to your particular circumstances so you should seek advice about this that is specifically tailored to your needs. The best approach to this and all other major decisions related to your medical school application is to act under the guidance of an experienced Pre-Health advisor. Along with others in the Pre-Health Advising Office at Hunter College, I consult directly with authoritative sources such as the AAMC and medical college admissions committees in order to verify the information that I pass on to you. It is our objective to help each of you to be the best candidate that you can possibly be when you are ready to apply to medical school, so please work with us to make sure this happens.