THE PRE-MEDICAL PROGRAM OF STUDY AT VALDOSTA STATE UNIVERSITY

When planning a program of study, students should keep in mind that they must usually meet three different sets of requirements. First are the requirements of the medical school, which must be completed before the applicant matriculates. Second are the general degree requirements that are set by the university for a particular degree. Third are the requirements set by the departmental faculty for a specific major. Planning must also include completion of the subject matter which will be tested on the MCAT before taking the test. Each of these specific requirements will be discussed below.

Pre-medical Requirements
There are some variations between schools, but almost all of the U.S. medical schools will accept as minimum preparation in science one year each of general chemistry, general physics, general biology and/or zoology, and organic chemistry, all with the appropriate laboratory. Guidelines for applying to medical schools can be found at the website for The American Medical College Application Service (AMCAS). Most medical schools use AMCAS, so you should become familiar with their website: http://www.aamc.org/students/amcas/start.htm. This site is an invaluable source of information and should be consulted before completion of the application so that you know you have met all requirements for each school to which application is made.

Course Selection
When selecting courses, choose those that will fulfill your graduation requirements for VSU, count toward your major or minor, and/or satisfy the admissions requirements of medical schools. These requirements include at least one year of biology, two years of chemistry and one year of physics, one year of English, and one year of mathematics, and they are necessary for admission to almost all medical schools. In addition, many schools recommend that students take a variety of other courses. Courses recommended by ten or more schools are mathematics, biochemistry, humanities, physical chemistry, embryology, genetics, behavioral science and social science.

Additional Courses
Although many medical school course requirements are also required for specific majors at VSU, certain of these courses should be taken by all premedical students unless special circumstances prevent their being scheduled. In this category are Biochemistry, Genetics, Microbiology, and Cell Biology. Students should not attempt to take courses that comprise most of the first year of medical school during the senior year in college. Experience has shown, however, that if a student has a strong background in some of these courses, the first year of medical school will be less stressful and the student will get off to a much better start. The desire to obtain a better background for medical school
must be tempered by the realization that the senior year of college will probably represent the last opportunity you will ever have to pursue academic interests in areas other than medicine. Many well-qualified students take a few courses completely unrelated to medicine or degree requirements during their senior year in order to indulge in some area which they have always wanted to pursue in more depth.

FACTORS IN MEDICAL SCHOOL ADMISSION
Medical schools utilize an admissions committee appointed by the Dean for selection of the entering class. The size of the committee varies from school to school, but usually is composed of M.D.s from the clinical faculty, Ph.D.s from the basic sciences faculty, medical students who are typically in their third or fourth year, and a lay member. Year-to-year changes in the composition of the committee at any particular school are often reflected in slightly different emphasis on selection factors. However, all medical schools, in filling their entering class, will select students who show evidence of high intellectual ability, a good record of accomplishments, and personal traits which indicate ability to communicate with and relate to patients in a realistic, yet compassionate, manner.

Admissions committees strive for objectivity when making their decisions regarding admissions. There is, therefore, a great deal of emphasis on grades, MCAT scores, and other factors that can be easily measured; but they consider any information that is available regarding an applicant’s overall suitability and promise as a physician. Assuming such factors as state of legal residence and other absolute requirements are met, four factors will largely determine whether or not a particular applicant is accepted. These are:

1) overall academic record, 2) MCAT scores, 3) recommendations from faculty members who have had the applicant in class as well as others from outside academia and, 4) impressions made during a personal interview with the faculty and students of the medical school, including members of the admissions committee. Other factors that may affect the decision (not generally equal in weight to the four listed above) are work experience in a medical treatment facility and extracurricular activities.

Overall Academic Record
The undergraduate record, particularly grades in biology, chemistry, physics, and mathematics, is the most important single factor in predicting whether or not a student will be admitted to a particular medical school. Most medical admissions committees feel that the quality of work in the subjects taken leading to the baccalaureate degree is the most important indicator of probable success in medical school. The academic record may be viewed as including the cumulative GPA, subjects taken, rigor of the major, and trends in performance (i.e., were grades mediocre in the freshman year with a constant improvement during the sophomore and junior years, vice versa, or was performance relatively constant?). A strong undergraduate record is considered evidence of both ability
and motivation, hence, the heavy reliance by committees on this factor. Succinctly stated, if a student has both high aptitude and good motivation, a competitive academic record will be maintained. Grades are not evaluated alone but rather in the context of the total academic program, with such factors as part-time employment, participation in varsity sports, and other severe demands on study time looked upon as extenuating circumstances. The undergraduate academic record should be stressed since it is difficult to compare records made in graduate or professional school or as an irregular student taking carefully selected courses with those records made by an undergraduate student in a regular degree program.

Grade Point Average
For most medical schools, the grade point average is the most important single criterion in determining whether or not a given applicant is admitted. According to the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC), “College grades are perhaps the most important single predictor of medical school performance, although medical schools do recognize that grading policy may differ from one college to another, or even within departments of the same institution. The mean undergraduate grade point average (GPA) of the first year entrants [in recent years] was approximately 3.5 or a high B+. The C students admitted in recent years were usually individuals who either achieved strikingly improved performances in their pre-medical studies after modest beginnings in their early years of college or demonstrated other characteristics deemed desirable for medicine by the various medical school admission committees.” It cannot be too strongly emphasized that the higher a student’s GPA, the better the chances of being accepted into medical school. Whenever a premedical student registers for a course, it should be with the reasonable expectation of making an A.

Low Grades
Grades of D earned in courses specifically required for medical school admission will not be accepted. Such courses must be repeated. Grades of D are not looked upon favorably in any course. Grades of C are acceptable and even though they are not very good, they should not, as a routine matter, be repeated. Should a C be earned in a required course, it is preferable to take a different, higher-level course in that same discipline, rather than repeating the course itself.

Repeat Credit
Medical schools do not look favorably on students who have very much repeat credit on the transcript. They especially frown upon upperclassmen taking 1000-level courses a second time. Should a student find it necessary to repeat a course, any grade lower than an A the second time around will be looked upon with great consternation. Surely a student should be able to get an A in a course on his second try! See above on the question of repeating courses where C’s and D’s were earned. Note that AMCAS and many non-AMCAS medical schools
average the grades when a course is repeated, rather than substituting the second grade.

Withdrawals
A sprinkling of W’s (withdrawals) on a transcript is a cause for concern by most admissions committees. One or two W’s will not usually adversely affect a person’s chances for admission, but several, even with a good GPA, would be viewed with apprehension. Pre-medical students are therefore cautioned not to make a practice of withdrawing from courses. As a rule, admissions committees feel that a student who makes a habit of dropping courses lacks either perseverance or a realistic view of his own capabilities, or both. A series of W’s will definitely weaken your record!

Independent Study
Medical schools view independent study or participation in research or the Honors Program with great favor. The AAMC states, “Students who have taken special honors courses or who have been selected for advanced sections of a regular course should not hesitate to give medical schools detailed information about this. They should also request their college advisors to refer to this in their recommendations.”

The Medical College Admission Test
The Medical College Admission Test (MCAT) has traditionally been second in importance only to grades when evaluating an applicant for medical school. Become familiar with their website: http://www.aamc.org/students/mcat/start.htm
The MCAT is given twice each year, in April and August. The latest that the MCAT may be taken is in August approximately one year before an applicant expects to matriculate in medical school. However, applicants are urged not to wait until the fall of the senior year to take the MCAT, but to take it in the spring almost 18 months before the expected time of matriculation. If a student fails to score sufficiently well on the April test to be competitive, it is possible to retake the exam in August. Most medical schools will accept the otherwise well-qualified student who has poor MCAT scores in the spring administration of the test but good scores in August. The student who takes the MCAT for the first time in August as a rising senior and makes scores that are not competitive (even because of factors such as illness, accident, etc., that are beyond his or her control) will usually not be accepted the next year, causing a delay in entering medical school for a full year. There is considerable misinformation about the strategy which should be employed in taking the MCAT. Many pre-medical students have been advised to take the test “just for practice” the first time, and then to come back and prepare for the exam during the second and perhaps third test. This is generally very poor advice. One reason is that it is not possible to suppress the reporting of scores as was done several years ago. All applications will be accompanied by the results of the last two scores made on the MCAT, and all other scores are available to medical schools.
Extracurricular Activities and Work Experience
It is important to understand the role of extracurricular experience in the context of admission to medical school. Given two students with identical grade point averages and MCAT scores, then extracurricular activities will be a plus factor. **AT NO TIME AND UNDER NO CIRCUMSTANCES, HOWEVER, ARE EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES A SUBSTITUTE FOR GOOD GRADES.** The student who becomes so involved in campus activities that his grades suffer is not likely to be admitted to medical school. The student who has good grades and participates in extracurricular activities will undoubtedly be admitted before the one who does not have such outside interests. It is also important that you demonstrate **sustained activity** in a project or club. It will do you little good to wait until your senior year to join a club or gain “research experience”, as all reviewers will know you are just looking to check a box on your application. Get involved and stay involved beginning your freshman year.

Letters of Recommendation
Letters will be required from at least three sources when you apply for admission to medical school. One will be required from your faculty advisor. **Get to know the people who will be writing letters for you.** They will be able to write more supportive letters if they know more about you.