Taking a Year Off between Undergrad & Grad

If a student decides to take a year off between completing undergraduate education and entering medical school, this is typically referred to as the Glide Year. During this time, students submit applications to medical schools for admission. The Office of Career Development can assist students in finding ways to use the glide year productively to enhance their preparation for medical school, whether it be through employment opportunities, additional courses, volunteer work, graduate degree study, or research.

When should I apply to health professional school?

The most important advice we offer is to apply to professional schools when you are ready to present your strongest application possible. Some students are going to be significantly stronger, whether academically or professionally, at the end of their senior year as opposed to the end of their junior year. If this is the case, it may be in your best interest to apply after you graduate.

How do health professional schools view taking time off between undergraduate and professional school?

Taking time off can be a very positive step on your way to becoming a health professional. In fact, the median age for first-year medical students is nearly 25. Of course, what you do with that time should be meaningful and perhaps science, health, or service-related; working in a research lab or a hospital; teaching; completing a fellowship or service program, or perhaps even traveling and exposing yourself to medical care in the places you visit. The added experience can enhance your qualifications and show your commitment to a career in the health professions. For many students, it may be an advantage to wait until after graduation to apply. It gives you extra time to raise your GPA, study for entrance exams, refresh, and gain additional related experiences. Taking time off is definitely something to consider.

What are some good reasons to wait for a year?

Deciding when to apply to health professions school is one of the more important decisions that you will face as an applicant. For example, only about 40% of Johns Hopkins applicants in 2009 were from the Class of 2009 – everyone else was taking or has taken some time off before matriculating. Most students who have taken time off have benefited from it. Most find productive activities to do in their time off, and may be more attractive candidates to admissions committees. These students often gain new experiences and maturity from being in the real world for awhile. For students that are undecided, here are a few reasons why it may not hurt to wait:

1. You need more time to study for the MCAT. You could spend all summer studying for the MCAT, and still have time to retake it if necessary before applying.

2. You have a borderline GPA. The numbers part of your applicant profile almost always improves in your senior year if you're a junior, because you have more control over the courses you take, and you're just more acclimated to the college environment.

3. You don't think you'll have strong letters of rec. Again, if you're a junior, your classes are likely to get smaller next year, and you'll have more opportunity to forge relationships with
your faculty. You’ll also have this summer to work on getting a letter from a supervisor or volunteer coordinator in your summer activity.

4. You don’t have time to focus on the preparations required to apply. You have essays to write, letters of recommendations to gather, standardized tests to study for, schools to research, as well as the rest of real life and figuring out what to do this summer. If you can't spend the time you need on application prep now (and secondary essay writing this summer for MD/DO applicants), it might be better to start getting organized this year, but focus on applying next year.

5. You have no idea of what working in medicine, and with patients, might entail. Without having participated in some activities that allow you to serve the community, and build the skills you need to be a physician, it will be hard to convince schools that you have a realistic understanding of what you’re about to undertake.

6. You just aren't sure about medicine yet or you can't articulate your motivation well on paper or in conversation. If you need more experiences to back up your "gut feeling" that you "must" be a doctor or dentist or, then by all means, take the time to find those experiences.

7. There are other things that you want to experience before taking the next step to health professions school. Once you get to medical school, it becomes more difficult to take time off -- you're more likely to have financial concerns, family concerns, and a professional schedule that will keep you from, say, traveling to Africa for six months, or learning to skydive, or going to culinary school. Health professions school will still be there for you if you go and do these things and return to the application process later.

**What should I do during the glide year?**

There are many ways to spend time after graduation and before enrolling in medical school. During the glide year you will be filling out secondary applications, going to interviews, and wondering what you will be doing next year. You also need to keep your foot in the door of the medical field in order to show your continued interest and dedication. You do not need to do all of the following, but you should consider doing at least two of them in addition to applying to medical school:

1. Take additional courses in upper-level biology and/or chemistry.

2. Get a job in order to support yourself, pay for application fees, finance travel to interviews, and pay off educational debts. If you can find work in a clinical health care area, or biological/medical research environment you may strengthen your medical school application.

3. If you are fortunate enough not to need to work, additional volunteer work in healthcare or research could also strengthen your application.

4. If you receive MCAT scores of 9 or lower you may need to retake the MCAT. This means that some of your time during the glide year should go toward studying for the MCAT or taking a review course.
What if I will be abroad during my glide year?

Many students successfully navigate the challenges of being abroad during their glide year. Here are some helpful tips from those students:

- **APPLY EARLY** – The most important piece of advice is to turn in everything as early as possible. Although this is the general advice for everyone, I cannot stress this enough for those with restricted schedules. This enables medical schools to notify you with interviews earlier, during a time when they are still flexible in scheduling them.

- **SEND LETTERS** - In addition to my application, try to send out a separate letter of explanation as to when you will be in the country and available to interview. Also state your schedule restrictions in any space provided in the secondary applications.

- **CREATE 2 TIME SLOTS** – Try to make your schedule as flexible as possible. Instead of only coming back to the U.S. once for interviews, chose 2 months, like October and January, to be available to interview. If you apply early enough, you should be able to hear back from schools between late August and early October – perfect for round-one interviews, which typically occur in October. January serves as a good backup month for those schools that review your file for a second time before offering an interview or for those schools that don’t start interviewing until November.

- **ASK FOR EARLIER CHOICES** – Most schools allow applicants to select the interview date. If the options do not match with the applicant’s schedule, he/she can call the school to explain his/her situation and location abroad. Most schools will recognize their abroad experience as worthy of being flexible to change their interview date. Applicants should check their emails often (daily) and schedule an interview as soon as possible before optimal slots are taken. Also, there is always the possibility that an interviewee canceled on a particular date, allowing you to squeeze into an earlier spot. Applicants can call schools to see if there have been any cancellations, allowing them to interview and return abroad earlier.