

Is There a Future Doctor in the House? A Guide to Choosing a College and Preparing for Life as a Premed

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INTRODUCTION

The bad news

It's hard to cheerlead around the fact that most college students who want to be doctors never realize that dream.

60% of medical school applicants are rejected every year. And that figure doesn't account for the thousands of premeds who decide not to apply after realizing that they just aren't competitive applicants.

Many of those who get rejected have actually done everything they thought was necessary to get in. They have worked hard in college and got good grades. They did research, volunteered at hospitals, and studied for the medical school admissions exam. They passed up a lot of opportunities to have fun in college.

Then they got rejected and had to find a new career path.

Imagine if you spent your college years working as hard as you could, swearing off fun and parties so you could go to medical school, and then you got nothing but rejections in return. You're not going to be a doctor. That dream is over.

That bleak outlook is a lot different from the positive one I'm used to preaching at Collegewise where we help kids find, apply to and attend the right colleges for them. We spend a lot of time trying to get families to relax and enjoy college admissions. There are 2,500 colleges in the country and all but about 100 of them take pretty much everybody who applies. Wherever you go to college—whether it's Princeton or Providence, you're going to learn and have fun.

But students who want to be doctors have chosen one of the most competitive career paths. They enter college knowing that the statistics say they'll never reach their goal. Students who want to be journalists, teachers, or accountants face far less daunting odds.

I'm not trying to scare you. But it's important to appreciate that if you want to be a doctor, the decisions you make about where you go to college, what you major in and how you spend your time while you're there, are too important to get wrong like a lot of premeds do.

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The good news

Lots of people get accepted to medical school. But you—and an unfortunate number of overworked premeds in college—might be surprised to learn just exactly who gets in.

There are music majors who get accepted to medical school.

There are students from tiny colleges you've never heard of who get accepted to medical school.

There are students who studied abroad, played college water polo, joined fraternities or sororities, took poetry classes, majored in German, and had lots (and lots) of fun while they were in college who get accepted to medical school.

Sure, they worked hard, too. But unlike typical premeds, they enjoyed their college years. And they're still going to be doctors.

The good news is that you don't have to be one of those suffering premeds who spends four years trying to outwork your competition only to be disappointed by rejection. You can learn what successful applicants do differently and empower yourself with information. Then you can use that knowledge to pick the right colleges for you. And you can start developing the skills and experience now that you'll need to be a successful premed later.

The challenge for future premeds

I often hear high school students say things like,

“I want to go to UCLA because it's good for premed.”

“I'm applying to Harvard because they also have a good medical school.”

“I'm going to major in biology because I want to be a doctor.”

At best, those statements are based on flawed assumptions. At worst, while lots of students are certain they want to be doctors, they know almost nothing about how to actually get there.

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Most premed hopefuls don't know that there is no magic list of schools that are "good for premed." They don't know that it doesn't matter whether or not your college also has a medical school. And they don't know that a desire to go to medical school is not a good reason to major in biology. These prospective MDs are making fundamental mistakes before they even get to college.

I don't fault them for not knowing. They're so busy just trying to get into college that it seems premature to worry now about how to get into medical school. It's like focusing on what it would take to buy a four-bedroom house when you're still living at home with your parents and have never even had your own apartment.

But future premeds know something most high school students don't—you know (or are seriously considering) what you want to do with your life. There's too much at stake for premeds to pick colleges without knowing what they'll need to do to achieve their goal and what they're going to need from their colleges to get there.

A family would never buy a house without having it inspected first. You wouldn't buy a car without test driving it and maybe even reading some consumer research. Future premeds need to apply that same level of diligence to selecting colleges, courses, majors and activities.

So there's your challenge—you need to be a more discerning shopper than the average college-bound student. You need to understand how medical school admissions really work and how successful premeds set themselves apart from those who are rejected from medical school. It's a lot to take in when you're still worried about raising your SAT scores. But by learning and acting on that information, you'll already give yourself a huge advantage over the rest of the premeds.

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Why I wrote this guide

I wrote this guide to help high school students answer three questions:

- How do successful premeds get accepted to medical school? That's your goal, too, so you should understand how the people who've succeeded have done it.
- How can you find the right colleges for you to have a successful premed career?
- What can you do in high school right now to prepare for life as a premed?

I think it's best to tackle those questions in reverse chronological order. If I told you right now that reading biographies about serial killers could help you get into medical school someday, you probably wouldn't believe me. But it will all make sense if I start by fast forwarding a few years and showing you what students who are accepted to medical school did to earn that right. Then you'll understand what you need to do in the future. No more guessing.

Once you know what a successful premed's college career looks like, I'll back up and talk about how to evaluate and choose the right colleges. You'll be able to identify which colleges—for you—would be good places to stand out as a successful premed.

And then I'll move to present day and talk about some steps you can take now to prepare for life as a premed later. It won't be all the same advice you've already heard like, "Study for the SAT" or "Volunteer at a hospital." Some of the suggestions might surprise you (this is where those serial killer novels might come in handy).

Where did this information come from?

What I'm about to share here isn't just a crazy theory I developed. In fact, it's not even a secret. Talk to a medical school admissions officer, a current medical student or a premed advisor on a college campus and they'll tell you the same things I'm about to tell you.

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Still, most premeds aren't following this advice for some combination of three reasons:

1. They don't know it.
2. They never reached out and asked those who know for advice.
3. They've heard it but are too scared to follow it.

A lot of premeds are afraid to do anything that feels too different from what the rest of the premeds on campus are doing. When you co-exist in that kind of hypercompetitive world, doing anything the rest of the pack isn't doing feels risky. If you're doing what everybody else is doing, you feel secure that you can't possibly be punished by failure. That sets up a vicious cycle for many premeds—they race to keep up with each other by doing the same things, even if all the facts say they should be doing something different. It's like a premed affliction.

The fact that so many premeds are biology majors is a good example of this. Believe it or not, biology is not the official premed major. In fact, biology is actually a terrible major choice for many premeds. It's not a secret. Even premed advisors will swear up and down that it's OK and maybe even beneficial for students to choose a different major. Still, it's counterintuitive. If so many other premeds are doing it, it must be a good idea. They don't want to go against the premed grain, so they stick with biology. Then they find out later how hard it is to stand out when over half of the applicants who apply to medical school are also bio majors. And by then, it's too late to make a different choice.

We can spot signs of this kind of premed pack-mentality in some of our high school students. It's counterintuitive to think that a prestigious school like Duke isn't inherently better for premeds than a less selective college you haven't heard of might be. But when I mention schools like Knox, Goucher or Elon to some of our premed hopefuls, their eyes glaze over. They want to talk about how to get into an Ivy League school. They can't accept that a prestigious school isn't inherently "better for premed," no matter how much

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factual evidence proves otherwise. I understand their reluctance given the pressure they feel. But I can also see those students morphing into typical premeds who are likely to be disappointed with their outcomes four years from now.

If you would never consider going to a college that isn't a famous and prestigious one, beware—you've got the symptoms. I hope you'll feel differently after reading this guide.

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I need to establish two basic premises before we start.

First, medical schools require that you apply for admission. That might seem obvious, but I think many future premeds don't realize that much like when you apply to college, you actually have to apply for admission to medical school at the end of your undergraduate years. You'll submit grades and test scores, get letters of recommendation, write an essay and maybe even interview. You apply during your junior year if you want to begin medical school in the fall after you graduate, and the average applicant applies to about 14 medical schools. The first part of this guide covers what you'll need to do in your college years to actually get accepted to medical school once you apply.

Second, any student from any major who plans to apply to medical school is "premed" or "a premed."

"Premed" isn't actually a major at most colleges; it's just a declaration of your future career goal. Premeds all have to complete some required science courses and take a standardized test called the MCAT (Medical College Admissions Test), so they do have some things in common with each other in addition to the fact that they all want to be doctors. But you can major in pretty much anything and go to medical school.

If you actually want premed to be your major, you don't have as many choices as you might expect. Do a search on collegeboard.com for colleges that offer a premed major and you'll find about 330 out of over 2,000 four-year colleges. 330 might sound like a lot of schools, but once you factor in your other criteria like where the school is located and how much it costs, you might be left with a pretty short list. Do the search yourself and see what your options are.

So don't necessarily rule out a college that doesn't offer premed as a major. Yale, UCLA, Ohio State, Georgetown and plenty of other colleges have sent lots of students to medical school without offering a premed major.

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Two kinds of premeds

The best way I can explain why so many seemingly qualified premeds are rejected from medical school is to separate them into two very different groups—the typical and the standouts.

When applying to medical school, a typical premed is virtually indistinguishable on paper from thousands of other typical premeds. They've all worked very hard doing exactly the same things.

Here are the most common characteristics of typical premeds:

1. Most are biology majors (because they thought bio was the “premed major”).
2. They've done some research or lab work with professors on campus.
3. They've volunteered at hospitals or shadowed doctors.
4. They have very few—if any—other extra curricular activities, besides #2 and #3 above.
5. When anyone asks them why they want to be doctors, their answer is some version of “I want to help people.”
6. They've done very little coursework outside of the sciences. And they never take courses with extensive reading and writing requirements like literature, philosophy or political science unless their college forces them to.
7. Their personal statements and performance in their med school interviews reveal that they don't have strong communication skills.

They sound pretty accomplished, and they are. Being typical doesn't mean that they haven't achieved. It just means that they've achieved the same things as too many other applicants.

Imagine you were a medical school admissions officer with twenty applications in front of you. All of them have similar good grades

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and test scores. 19 of them are typical premeds who did what all the other typical premeds have done. But the 20th is a Spanish major who's on the swim team in college. She did research on plant life in Copper Canyon, Mexico one summer. For the last two years, she's volunteered as a translator for a mobile health unit that gave free medical care to the migrant farm workers in her college's community. She wrote one of her essays about her desire to continue that work with a disadvantaged population when she's a physician.

Who would you catch your attention? Who stands out?

The 19 typical pre-meds are all good, but they haven't given you a reason to pick one over the other. That 20th applicant would stand out. Compared to the rest of the applicants, she's interesting. It's not that she's necessarily worked harder or achieved more than the typical premeds. But she made choices that are different from those of the typical premeds, and she's just given you the reason you want to admit her.

If you want to get accepted to medical school, you can't be a typical premed. You need to be a standout.

Ten Traits Medical Schools Seek from Applicants

There are ten qualities medical schools look for in every applicant. To show you just how different the standouts are from the typical premeds, let's go through each of these desirable traits and contrast how typical and standout premeds demonstrate (or don't demonstrate) them.

First, here are the ten qualities.

1. A strong cumulative GPA;
2. Good grades in the required sciences;
3. High MCAT (Medical College Admissions Test) scores;

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4. Scientific research;
5. Strong letters of recommendation from professors;
6. Demonstrated interest in serving others;
7. Communication skills;
8. Inter-personal skills;
9. Other passions and interests; and
10. Individuality.

You'll notice that the first three qualities involve grades and test scores.

Trait #1: A strong cumulative GPA

Medical schools will look at your overall GPA. That means that your freshman year is just as important as your other years of college. It also means that if your school requires you to take humanities, language or other non-science courses as part of your general education requirements, you'll have to work hard no matter how much disdain you have for Shakespeare or French verb conjugation. It's all going to count.

Trait #2: Good grades in the required sciences

It makes sense that medical schools want to see that you've got some science game. So in addition to your cumulative GPA, med schools will also pay particular attention to your grades in a required science sequence of:

- 1 year of biology with laboratory;
- 2 years of chemistry with laboratory (1 year general chemistry and 1 year of organic chemistry); and
- 1 year of physics with laboratory.

Those are the only science requirements for medical school. It's the virtually the same sequence that students who want to be dentists, optometrists, and nurses take. And lots of students who don't even major in the sciences complete this sequence as part of their path

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to graduate school in some kind of health science. I'm not saying it's easy, but in terms of college level science, we're talking about introductory stuff here.

Trait #3: High MCAT scores

Think of the MCAT (Medical College Admissions Test) as the SAT of medical school admissions, only more difficult and much longer. It tests biology, chemistry, physics, verbal reasoning, and writing ability. Most premeds take it during their junior year of college. About three quarters of the test consists of reading comprehension passages that use science as their subject matter.

The required science sequence I mentioned is the only science tested on the MCAT. That's why once you complete that sequence, you've taken all the science you need to apply and get accepted to medical school. If you major in biology, chemistry or physics, you'll complete the science sequence in your first or second year of college and then move on to material that is much more difficult than that tested on the MCAT.

The fact that the MCAT is largely a reading test also means that students whose majors require a lot of reading tend to do well. The more you read, the better you're likely to perform on the MCAT.

It's hard for me to overstate the importance of what you should take away from these first three criteria.

First, you do not have to major in biology to go to medical school.

In fact, you don't have to be a science major at all. You could study history, political science, drama—it doesn't matter. As long as you take the required science sequence, you can study anything you want in college. So why not major in whatever interests you?

Given that medical schools will pay attention to your cumulative GPA, the best thing to major in is something that really fascinates you, something that you'll be excited to go to class and learn about every day, a subject where studying won't feel like work. Whatever major fits that description, the more likely you are to do really well

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and earn a high overall GPA. You're going to have to take—and perform well in—the required sciences no matter what you major in. So when you're outside of those required science courses, it makes sense to play to your strengths and interests. That's what the standouts do. That's why a music major can get into medical school.

Second, you should know that non-science majors statistically perform as well or better on the MCAT than the science majors do.

There are two reasons for this. First, many majors outside of the sciences require substantial reading (reading your organic chemistry textbook is difficult, but it's not the same as reading *Moby Dick*). And readers tend to do well on the MCAT.

But even a major like drama or music, neither of which involves substantial reading, can still provide you with MCAT advantages. The only sciences courses a non-science major needs to take are those tested on the MCAT. Contrast that with a science major who finishes the required science sequence early and then moves on to much more difficult science coursework. Nothing that she's learned since the sequence is being tested on the MCAT, and she'll likely have to go back and study all of that material again. Some science students don't have difficulty doing that, but plenty do.

So think hard about your chosen major in college. Make sure it's something you really enjoy. It's fine if your passion really is biology. But if it's Japanese, psychology or journalism, don't pass it up just because it's not a science major.

So what kind of grades and MCAT scores do you need?

High grades and MCAT scores alone don't get you into medical school, but low numbers can absolutely keep you out. I don't care if you did soil research on Mars—if you have a 2.75 GPA in college, you're not going to medical school. The Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) has all kinds of information about application and acceptance rates to medical school. One of the most interesting pieces is a chart of average GPAs and MCAT scores, divided by undergraduate majors for those who apply to

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medical school and for those who get accepted. I can't imagine any savvy premed ignoring this kind of hard data if you're serious about medical school. Go to www.aamc.org, then visit their "Data and Analysis" section, then click on "Applicants and Matriculants" data.

Trait #4: Scientific research

Doing scientific research, usually with a professor, shows that you appreciate the attention to detail that's required to be a good doctor and that you'll be prepared for first year gross anatomy. But typical premeds do research a lot differently than the standouts do.

The typical premeds just take whatever research they can get because they've heard that's what med schools want. They don't care what it is or what they're doing. Their only concern is how many hours it involves and whether or not they might get a letter of recommendation. A typical premed's description of his research sounds like this:

"I spent the first semester of my junior year working in Doctor Joseph Gilman's laboratory. Dr. Gilman is studying the evolutionary theory of aging by examining the life cycle of the fruit fly. Three nights a week, I spent 2-4 hours in the lab recording various data such as the flies' activity, reproduction rate and reaction to various environmental factors. I also compiled the data and summarized my findings for Dr. Gilman in preparation for his presentation to the faculty."

This student doesn't sound enthusiastic about his research. He only did it for one semester. And it sounds like all he really did was record data. There's nothing wrong with that, but if you just dutifully go through the motions and don't appear particularly excited about the work, you're just another premed doing what you've heard you're supposed to do. You're not going to stand out.

A standout premed's description of her research sounds like this:

"One potential answer for our energy shortage might just live at the bottom of a muddy river. As part of Dr. Louis Sweeney's

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research team, I traveled to the Orinoco River in Venezuela last summer to study electric eels. Our team had one question—can we, through the use of modern engineering design tools, create artificial cells that mimic the electrical behavior of an eel's cells. We spent our mornings in the river studying the electrical output of the eels, then afternoons in the lab pouring over our data. Every day, we talked about the potential implications of our work. If we could find a way to mimic an eel's cells, we might actually create a new power source for medical implants and tiny devices, something that had never been done before. And we did it. After 8 weeks, we produced an artificial cell that actually improved on the electrical performance of an eel's cells. I've never been happier to be at least 21 years of age when professor Sweeney broke out a six-pack of warm Venezuelan beer for the 10 of us to split in celebration of our breakthrough. It was the best summer I've ever had."

The second applicant's research stands out. She didn't just go across campus to the lab. She went all the way to Venezuela. She was in a river. With eels. But what really makes her stand out is her excitement. She isn't just going through the motions—she also sounds fascinated by what she's doing. You get the sense she would have been there even if medical schools didn't appreciate research. Her curiosity, not a sense of competition, is what drove her.

Typical pre-meds do research because they have to. They're looking to just clock in the hours and list it on their applications. Standouts do it because they want to. They find opportunities that interest them and that will allow them to make real contributions to the projects.

Trait #5: Strong letters of recommendation from science faculty

Applicants to medical school will need at least two letters of recommendation from science faculty. Let's compare the typical premed's approach to that of the standout premed.

The typical premed waits until he applies to medical school to even think about letters of recommendation. Then he goes back to professors, usually those who taught the classes in which he did the

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best, and asks them to write letters on his behalf. At a large school, the professors don't even remember him. Even at a small school, the professor can only comment on one semester's worth of work, and will probably repeat what a medical school will already know from the student's transcript.

The standout premed finds a professor in her first or second year who she really likes. She visits that professor during office hours and gets to know her. She learns more about the professor's research and might even look to get involved in her lab. She makes a point to do her best work in that class, participating and asking intelligent questions. And if that professor teaches other classes in the science sequence, she takes them.

The standout isn't doing this because she wants to use that professor for a letter of recommendation. She's doing it because she enjoys the work and the instructor. But that kind of intellectual curiosity pays off. When the standout needs a letter of recommendation, that professor will have plenty to say.

Successful applicants to medical school establish long-term relationships with potential recommenders. Find a professor, preferably one from your early science classes, and stick with him or her throughout a sequence of courses if you can. Make a point to be the most involved, engaged student you can be in the course.

This is also a good time to mention that you should develop a good relationship with the on-campus premed advisor if there is one. Some schools have robust pre-med advising departments. Others have just one professor who handles it in his spare time. Whatever your school offers for premed advising, avail yourself of it and follow their instructions. Every pre-med should know the premed advisor(s) by the end of their freshman year. Don't wait until you apply to medical school to seek out their advice.

Trait #6: Demonstrated interest in serving others

"I want to be a doctor because I want to help people."

That statement is a big fat premed cliché. It's the first thing typical

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premeds say when med schools asks them why they want to be doctor. And no medical school has ever been impressed by it. It's too easy. It's too vague. It's typical.

A desire to help people is not a reason to be a doctor. It's a *pre-requisite* to being a doctor. If you tell your med school interviewer that you want to be a doctor so you can help people, you're likely to get a follow-up question like, "Well, you can be a social worker and help people. Why not do that?" It's a fair point.

The typical premeds take on typical volunteer work. They spend time at hospitals where they help with administration and assist the nurses. They might even shadow a doctor and get to sit in on examinations or watch surgeries. A few might even get to observe an emergency room in action.

I'm not saying those activities aren't worth something. But it's not particularly challenging to follow the other premeds and do what's already been done over and over again. You don't show your interest in serving others by doing what's easy. You do it by going where people need you the most, even if it means going outside of your comfort zone.

Standout premeds really want to make a difference, no matter how uncomfortable or inconvenient it may be. They find the one clinic in town that will see patients who don't have insurance, and they offer to work for free. They'll travel with outreach organizations to third world countries to give immunizations to kids. They'll visit inner city schools and teach classes for teens about preventing pregnancy and STDs. Peace Corps volunteers have a lot of success getting into medical school.

Two things separate the standouts' demonstrated interest in serving others from that of the typical premeds. First, the standouts are working directly with the people they're helping. They're taking vital signs, translating for the patient who doesn't speak English, performing mouth-to-mouth, drawing blood, and holding the hand of the crying child who's getting his first polio vaccine. They're not just watching from the sidelines. They're right in the middle of the action.

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Second, the standouts aren't afraid to get down-and-dirty. They'll get blood on their hands. They'll work in filthy conditions if that's where people need them. They'll give a complete medical examination to a homeless person. They'll clean up vomit (and worse).

If that sounds disgusting to you, (I completely agree, by the way, which is one of many reasons I'm not a doctor) you might want to consider why you really want to work in medicine. Med schools don't want future doctors who only want to help people if the conditions are clean, comfortable and safe. They want to train MDs whose dedication to serve others will be reflected in their work. That's what the standouts do right. They know that real medicine isn't about the glamour of being a doctor. It's about serving people who need it the most.

Typical pre-meds say they want to help people but don't want to go too far out of their way or their comfort zone to do it. Standouts are out there doing it already, making a difference, connecting with the people they're helping.

Trait #7: Communication skills

The best doctors, the ones whose patients rave about them, are great communicators. They know how to explain a procedure to a patient. They can use their words to make a patient feel comfortable and calm. They're clear, empathetic and able to make a patient understand even the most complicated medical terminology.

Communication is a learned skill—nobody is born great at it. A lot of great communicators develop that ability in college. Unfortunately, the typical premed's academic and extracurricular choices tend to inhibit, rather than improve, their communication skills.

A typical premed spends most of his time studying sciences, working in a lab and doing volunteer work where he doesn't actively interact with patients. He'll avoid classes that require significant reading or writing. If he gets an interview at a medical school, he isn't as articulate as he'd like to be. Communication isn't his strength because he hasn't used his college years to improve it.

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Standouts make choices that improve their communication skills. They seek interaction rather than hide out in the library and the lab. They take classes that require them to write. They visit professors to chat during office hours, call or email people about volunteer opportunities, and do activities that require communication with other students and faculty. They're confident and at ease during their med school interviews. They can handle difficult questions and give thoughtful responses. Communicating is a strength because they've worked at it.

No matter how valuable the advances in medical technology may be, even the doctors of the future will need to know how to communicate with their patients. Standout premeds understand this.

Trait #8: Inter-personal skills

The life of a typical premed can be a solitary one. They're in the library and the lab. They're studying for classes and for the MCAT. They socialize in study groups and don't venture outside of their typical premed world. Being a premed is their most important activity. Solitary people might make good researchers in the lab, but they don't make for warm and affable doctors. That's why successful applicants to medical school have shown that they can work well with others.

The standouts seek out activities that require them to lead, work in groups, teach or mentor. And they do these things even in areas outside of the sciences. They volunteer in the school's orientation program for new students. They teach CPR classes to residents in the dorms. They're presidents of fraternities, officers in student government and student reps in the chancellor's office. They're the captain of the school's hockey team. They tutor, organize intramural sports teams, or run events for campus cultural organizations. They're involved members of the campus community who are contributing every day. Being a premed is an important part of their college career, but it's certainly not the only part.

The more you can show that you work well with others, that you can be a member of a team or even a leader of one, the more appealing you'll be to medical schools.

Trait #9: Other hobbies and interests

Pr-meds have a lot of choices handed to them. You have to take the science series. You have to study for and take the MCAT. You have to do things that demonstrate your interest in helping others. But that doesn't mean that you shouldn't do other things simply because you like them. In fact, other passions and interests help you stand out.

If you like to write, play the drums, sing, dance, or write computer programs, you should do those things. Don't assume those activities aren't valuable just because they don't relate directly to medicine. Medical schools want interesting people that other med students will like being around. In fact, many former students have told us that their med school interviews focused primarily on things that were totally unrelated to medicine, like "Tell us about your experiences on the diving team."

Typical premeds might join a premed club or honor society because they believe those will "look good," but they won't do much of anything else. Part of what makes the standouts different is their willingness to do things that might have nothing to do with getting into medical school.

Trait #10: Individuality

It's easy to understand why conformity runs rampant among typical pre-meds. All they hear about is medical schools' selectivity and that they're in the race for a spot with every other premed on campus. So it's hard for them to imagine being that different could actually be rewarded. But whether you're hoping to make new friends in the dorms or trying to get into medical school, you should never feel the need to change your personality just to fit in. People are far more interesting when they're genuinely comfortable with who they are. That might not be true all the time in high school, but that's going to change when you get to college.

Med schools don't want premed clones who spent four years of college following the path of the other typical premeds. That's why it's important for you to be an individual. If you like punk rock music, fine—knock yourself out. If you're secretly wishing for a return of

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the disco era and the white polyester suit, don't be ashamed of it. If you think that med schools won't be interested in the fact that you're always the funniest person at the party, or if you're happiest when you're at church, or if you love making pastry desserts for your roommates, you're wrong. That's who you are, and that's what makes you different. So don't suppress your personality. Celebrate it.

"Be yourself" is a cliché. Still, it's good advice and a great strategy for standing out as a premed. You don't have to be like every other premed. You don't want to be like every other premed. You want to be yourself, someone who's sincerely committed to a future career in medicine, and someone who has other facets to your life and your personality.

Further reading

The Association of American Medical Schools has information about admissions requirements, applying to medical school, and even a suggested timeline for what to do during each semester of college. You can get it free at <https://www.aamc.org/students/applying/>. Don't arrive to your freshman year of college without it.

What's next?

So there it is—you know what separates the typical premeds from the standouts. You know more about getting into medical school than a lot of students who have actually applied.

Now that you've seen what a successful premed career looks like and what you'll need to do to be a standout, the next section addresses how to pick the right colleges where you can do those things.

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You might expect that this should be easy. If you know you want to go to medical school, why can't someone just tell you what the best premed schools are? If you want to study journalism, business or engineering, you can find schools that are recognized for those programs. What about premed?

The truth is that there is no list of "best schools for premeds." You won't find an accurate comparison of medical school acceptance rates divided by college. You won't locate a list of schools ranked by who offers the best overall program for premeds (if you do, be very wary of it and read what criteria, if any, was used to make that determination).

Even if you were to ask potential colleges what their acceptance rate to medical schools are, many of them will tell you that they don't track it. If a college did quote you a statistic, what does that really tell you? A college could claim that their acceptance rate is 100%, but if only two of their premeds applied to medical school last year, that's not all that impressive. You also don't know where they were accepted. Lots of premeds apply to med school in foreign countries if they can't get into a U.S. school. So this kind of data isn't as useful as you might expect it would be.

That's why so many premed hopefuls choose their colleges for the wrong reasons. They can't find any objective criteria, so they rely on things like whether or not a school is prestigious.

Qualities premeds should look for in colleges

Still, some schools are better choices than others for premeds. You just have to look for two things,

1. What schools offer the right opportunities for standout premeds?
2. Which of those opportunities are most important for you?

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There is no such thing as a perfect college no matter what you want to do with your life, but any future premed will benefit from knowing your college's premed strengths and weaknesses before you get to campus. You can use this list to evaluate your schools and make smart decisions.

Here are some qualities a future premed should look for in your potential colleges.

1. A reputation for rigorous academics.

You simply cannot attend the University of Chicago and not work hard. That's why the students there lovingly call their school, "The place where fun comes to die."

There's a reason why Swarthmore students wear t-shirts that say, "Anywhere else, it would have been an 'A.'"

Johns Hopkins, Williams, MIT, U.C. San Diego, Colorado School of Mines, Harvey Mudd, Rice, Caltech and Carnegie Mellon are all schools that have reputations for placing difficult academic demands on all of their students. Succeeding academically at one of those schools is a good sign that you'll be able to handle the rigors of medical school.

Rigorous and prestigious do not necessarily equal the same thing, by the way. Brown University is an Ivy League school. It's prestigious. But they take some flack for letting students invent their own majors and take nearly unlimited classes with the "pass/no pass" option. Harvard is still battling the charge that they inflate the grades of their students. And if you think that a prestigious college can't also be known as a party school, well, you've obviously never visited Duke.

I'm not saying students from those schools don't get into medical school—they do. But it's inaccurate and risky to assume that just attending a prestigious college gives you academic street cred with medical schools.

You can also attend the most widely recognized party school in the

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nation and still go to medical school. But you're going to need to demonstrate that you made academics a priority, and not just with a strong GPA. Ask the college if there are opportunities to take occasional courses at other colleges (like a study abroad program without leaving the country). Work closely with a professor and co-publish a research paper. Win academic awards like the dean's list or Phi Beta Kappa. Just understand that you're going to need to show that you didn't just succeed; you dominated academically.

2. What kind of premed advising is offered?

Just because a campus tells you they have a "premed advisor" doesn't mean the service is comprehensive. A biology professor who holds office hours once a week as a premed advisor is not considered a comprehensive service.

To evaluate your chosen colleges' premed advising, I think it's helpful to have something to compare them to. Here are three examples of schools that offer exceptional premed advising.

Oberlin College

Oberlin has a full-time health careers advisor and six professors from whom students can seek premed advice. They offer premed informational meetings, workshops and guest speakers, and premeds can sign up to receive emails from the health careers advisor reminding them of these events. The health careers advisor also maintains a list of former Oberlin students who have gone on to medical school so that current students can contact them to learn about their experiences.

Oglethorpe University

Oglethorpe has a health professions advisor who meets individually with each premed to help create an appropriate schedule regardless of your major. The school offers its own MCAT preparation class, as well as workshops to assist students with the medical school admissions process.

Juniata College

Juniata's premeds have access to a full-time director of the health professions advising program. No matter what they choose to major in, every premed has two academic advisors—one for his major,

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and one from the Health Professions Committee. There are annual group advising meetings, MCAT classes, and workshops on both personal statements and interviews.

You can tell a lot about the strength of a school's premed advising by how proudly they speak of it on their website. When I did a search of UCLA's website for premed advising, all I could find was a 1-page PDF description of FAQs. If there's a full-time department for premed advising on campus, it's not easy to find.

Contrast that with Franklin and Marshall's health advising section of its website. They come right out and explain what makes their program unique. They offer special study abroad programs just for premeds that ensure you won't fall behind in their science requirements. They have a special honors society that promotes mentoring, research and internships for premeds. They list the majors of some of their recent medical school admits, from English to music to Greek to Hispanic world cultures. It's obvious that this is an organized community with full-time programming and professionals behind it. Tufts and Samford (no, not Stanford) have similar descriptions of what seem to be comprehensive advising services for premeds.

Colleges are in the marketing business, and they don't like to admit their weaknesses. But they will absolutely brag about their strengths. If a college has good premed advising, you can expect they're not going to hide it.

Lots of students from UCLA go on to medical school. But the fact that they barely mention their premed advising is a good example of how you can't just assume that a famous school is "good for premed." Those students from UCLA who get into medical school have to do it without the same level of premed advising that other colleges offer. If consistent premed advising is important to you, UCLA might not be the best choice.

If you're a student who likes getting advice, who will probably have a lot of questions about medical school and who might even like some encouragement or support along the way, you should look

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for colleges that have more formal and comprehensive premed advising like those mentioned here. If you're more independent and like to take care of things on your own, you might be fine without it. But you need to know whether or not you need it, and if your college has it, before you attend.

3. Will you be able to take liberal arts classes, even if you major in a science?

Med schools like diversity in academics. Dance, music, writing, history, political science—you should have a wide array of choices, no matter what your major.

This is a good example of how schools can be strong in one desirable category but not in another. Caltech is one of the most rigorous educations you can find in the universe. For our category #1 above, it's tough to beat Caltech. But they don't have a wide array of choices outside of the sciences. Harvey Mudd, on the other hand, offers both the rigorous rep and easy access to liberal arts classes. In fact, Harvey Mudd requires that their students take 1/3 of their classes in the humanities.

Colleges that offer some academic freedom like to mention it. A school that promises to offer a "broad education" or "training for analytical thinkers of tomorrow" is probably a place that will encourage, if not require, you to take liberal arts classes. Schools that promise "a highly-specialized education" may not.

4. Does the college offer opportunities for scientific research?

As with the other qualities, there is no perfect college for this category. A lot of large, public universities make research their academic mission, so you know there's research happening on campus. But are students able to get involved? Are opportunities made available? Sometimes they're not.

Smaller liberal arts colleges make no claims to be research factories. But Oglethorpe University has relationships with—and helps their premeds land internships at—the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the National Institutes for Health, and

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Sloan-Kettering Cancer Research Center. Oglethorpe has already developed the relationships. The premeds just have to ask for the opportunity.

Pay attention on schools' websites, especially the sections where successful students share their experiences. What kinds of research are they doing? Are the students majoring in subjects outside of the sciences? Do their experiences seem varied, or is everybody working with the same professor (who is then probably one of the few who does research)?

When you tour a college campus, ask about opportunities to do research. Get a sense of what students are doing and whether or not they're excited about the projects. A school could have ten Nobel Prize winning professors and labs in every corner of campus. But if all they offer for students is the job to open up the lab and lock up at night, that's not so great for the premeds.

5. What is the premed community on campus like?

What if you were the only premed on campus? Would you feel lonely?

What if there were lots of premeds, but they were so competitive that they didn't associate with each other? Is that the kind of environment where you'd like to spend four years?

I think it's important to get a sense of the premed community—if there is one—on campus. Some students would be fine as the lone premed. Others would actually feed off the competition of a large premed population all gunning for the same prize. But you should think about what type of environment would be best for you before you actually get there.

Check to see if there's a premed club or some kind of premed honor society at the colleges you're considering. If there is, email the presidents of those organizations and ask if they'd be willing to share their thoughts about life as a premed. Even better, when you plan to visit schools, ask those presidents if they might consider letting you attend one of their club's meetings.

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What to do with all of this information

Colleges don't get premeds into medical schools—students have to do that for themselves. The reason that just about all colleges have graduates who go to med school is that successful premeds stand out wherever they're attending college. Typical premeds do not.

But choosing a college is a little bit like picking the right gym. Some people know they need personal trainers and classes even if it's more expensive. Others might hate paying that much when they could do it themselves with dumbbells and a bench.

When you're searching for colleges, you should play to your strengths and be mindful of your weaknesses. For example, if you know you're shy and it's hard for you to be assertive, do you want to be in a large university setting with a competitive premed population? That's the perfect situation for some premeds, but maybe you'd be better off at a smaller school where you won't have to work so hard to get noticed and people will be a little more supportive.

Are you the kind of person who asks a lot of questions and enjoys when people are willing to help you? If you are, a school with a comprehensive premed advising program is more important for you than it would be for a student who prefers to figure things out on her own.

What might be the perfect premed environment for one student could be a terrible fit for another. And, since no college is going to offer everything for premeds in perfect quantities, the key is to identify which of the desirable college qualities are most important for you, and which you'll be more comfortable working around.

Let's get biased

I do not believe there is a perfect premed college. And I would never send a student to a school that didn't fit no matter how strong the premed offerings were. But I do have a bias. I love small liberal arts colleges. And to be honest, so do medical schools.

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The three schools I mentioned with great premed advising—Oberlin, Oglethorpe, and Juniata—are great choices for premeds who fit. So are Goucher, Hendrix, College of Wooster and Earlham. Hampshire College, Evergreen State, Colorado College, and Lewis and Clark also make my list. So do Kenyon, Bryn Mawr, Grinnell, Smith, Carleton, Macalester, and Mt. Holyoke.

Small liberal arts colleges have interesting kids who do interesting things. Their students meet with their academic advisors, find their favorite subjects and professors, and dive into their studies. They take advantage of opportunities to study abroad in Spain, do research on plants in the Everglades, or take a summer job as a river rafting guide. They get involved in clubs and organizations that have absolutely nothing to do with medicine or medical school. They're not afraid to take a philosophy class that looks interesting, volunteer at a homeless shelter in town, or tackle a thesis project on the ever-growing hole in the ozone layer.

Small liberal arts colleges also have something that makes me like them even more when I'm advising a future premed—typical premeds won't go to them.

When I mention Oberlin, Kenyon or Grinnell to a junior in high school who's showing signs of name-brand-itis, a kid I can just tell wants to robotically follow whatever path will lead to medical school, he won't even consider them.

Even when I print up the material about Juniata's premed advising program, the future typical premed is unimpressed. It's not famous enough. He says wants to go to the "best" college he can get into because he's sure that will give him the best chance of admissions to medical school. He just can't imagine a world where a student from a school called Juniata, Earlham, or Hendrix could possibly beat out a medical school applicant from Stanford, Yale or Duke, even though it happens all the time.

At small liberal arts colleges, there aren't any typical premeds to copy. You can't follow what everybody else is doing because they're all too busy pursuing their own varied interests. And the

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students who attend are the kind of students who couldn't imagine doing it any other way. Small liberal arts colleges encourage the kind of behavior that makes premeds stand out. That's why I love these schools for the right students.

You can get into medical school from virtually any college, including one that's loaded with typical premeds—you just can't allow yourself to become one of them. Pick colleges that feel right for you. Use the guidelines I outlined to size them up. You now know what you're going to need to do to be a competitive applicant to medical school, and you know what you need from your colleges to help you get there. It's up to you to pick the right schools for you to help you do it.

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If you've read the other chapters, all of what I'm about to say will make sense. You now know not only what you have to do while you're in college, but also what skills you'll need to do those things. Given how competitive life as a premed is, I always advise future premeds not to wait until they get to college to hone those skills. Start now.

It's worth mentioning that nothing I describe here will hurt your college aspirations if you eventually decide not to become a premed. Any college would be impressed by any student who took these measures

1. Before you commit to being a premed, think hard about why you want to be a doctor.

Life as a premed isn't easy. You're going to work a lot harder than many other students in college and it's going to be much harder to succeed if you're not passionately committed to this career choice. If you want to be a doctor because it seems prestigious, or you heard they make a lot of money, or your family wants you to be a doctor—none of those alone are good reasons to become a premed. Think about why you're really drawn to a career in medicine and make sure it's for the right reasons, whatever those are for you.

If you're not totally sure you want to be a doctor yet, that's fine. Just be honest with yourself. You could still take the steps detailed in this chapter to learn more about whether this is the right path for you. If you're still not sure when you apply to college, go as an undeclared major and test out life as a premed before committing to what you'll be doing for the next 40 years. You've still got time.

And make sure this is really your decision—not your parents.

When we meet parents who want this more than their kids do, it's glaringly obvious. Premeds who are doing it just to please their parents are rarely successful in the long run. They often end up quitting, or they stumble through the four years and ultimately don't get accepted to medical school.

So, if your parents are more interested in you being a doctor than you are, it's better to be honest with them than to reluctantly

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immerse yourself in life as a premed (and have to tell them the truth later).

2. Take the most rigorous science courses that you can.

The best way to prepare for the required premed science courses is to take biology, chemistry and physics while you're in high school. If you can take honors or AP for any or all of those classes, do it. If you can't, I would strongly suggest that you take one or more of those science classes at a college or a community college over the summer. The college equivalent of AP level biology, chemistry or physics is at an introductory level and not the same courses you'd take as part of the premed science sequence. You could easily complete one or two of those classes in a summer and get a taste of what you'll be doing once you get to college.

3. Read a book. In fact, read lots of books.

Here comes my suggestion about serial killer novels.

Reading makes you smarter. There are few interests that will make you think more analytically, argue more persuasively, and write more clearly than reading will. And the more you read, the higher you'll score on both college admissions tests and the MCAT. Typical premeds don't read unless it's assigned to them in a class. Standouts read a lot.

Don't cop out and claim you don't like to read. It's fine if you're not crazy about the books assigned in your English class, but you don't have to read the classics to get the benefit. You have other interests that you'd like to know more about. If you love football, why not read a book about how to coach defense, or about your favorite team, or a biography of your favorite quarterback? If you love computers, read a book about programming, a biography about Steve Jobs or Bill Gates, or about how Facebook was created.

And yes, you could read biographies about serial killers if you wanted to. Believe me, the hours you'd spend doing it will get you closer to medical school than watching TV or napping will.

You can't wake up in your junior year of college and decide to get

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serious about reading to help you get into medical school. It will be too late. Start now and you'll have a huge advantage later.

4. Work hard to improve your writing.

It's hard to find a successful applicant to medical school who doesn't have some writing chops, too. Good writing doesn't just lead to good papers. It helps you write better emails, better application essays, and better thank-you notes to people who help you. It opens doors for you. So work hard in your English classes. Take honors or AP English if you can. If you like to write, work on the school paper, start a blog, or keep a journal. The more you develop that skill now, the better you'll be able to apply it as a premed (and beyond).

If you don't like to write, don't blow it off as unimportant. That's a trap a lot of typical premeds fall into—they assume that anything that doesn't have to do with science or medicine doesn't apply to them. You know now that's not true. The need for good writing isn't going to go away. So you might as well improve as much as you can. And if you can turn it into a strength, you'll have another way of standing out from the typical premeds.

5. Find opportunities to learn more about medicine or science.

There's no better way to explore and feed your interest in medicine than by actually learning about it. Get certified to teach basic first aid. Take a summer college class about the treatment of psychological disorders. Find a summer research project at a local college you can join. There's no reason to wait until college to do these things.

We once worked with a high school student who got her certification to be an emergency medical technician during the summer. She wrote her college essay about doing chest compressions on a 19-year-old motorcycle accident victim in full cardiac arrest during her first night on the job. That victim died at the hospital, and two minutes later, she and the paramedics were responding to another call. That essay got every reader's attention. And it was hard not to believe her when she talked about why she wanted to be a doctor. And it all started with her just signing up for an EMT class.

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6. Practice the art of initiative.

Part of being a successful premed is being able to make things happen for yourself. Nobody's going to just offer you a research position, an opportunity to volunteer, or a great letter of recommendation. You'll need seek people out, knock on doors, call and email people. And you'll need to ask for help when you need it. High school is the perfect time to start practicing the art of taking initiative.

Raise your hand in class and ask questions. Visit the teacher after class if you need help. If there's something you want to do or get involved in, send an email, pick up the phone, or knock on a door to pursue that interest. And most importantly, don't ask your parents to do it for you. Mom and Dad won't be there with you in medical school. In fact, they won't even be there in college. This is the time to start getting things done on your own.

7. Help those who need it the most.

There's no need to wait until college to demonstrate your interest in helping others. But remember that typical premeds do what everybody else does without leaving their comfort zones. The standouts go where people need them most and where they make a real difference.

Look around your high school and notice what students are doing for community service, especially those who are doing it just because they think it will help them get into college. Chances are they're in the Key Club, doing National Charity League with their mothers, or volunteering occasionally at a senior center or a day care. There's nothing wrong with what they're doing, but joining them isn't going to make you stand out. Why not use your initiative to secure opportunities where you can get real contact with the people who need the most help?

You could work at a non-profit that helps homeless people find jobs. You could tutor illiterate adults and help them learn to read. You could get certified to teach classes to teen mothers, read stories to kids with cancer, or give your time to an organization that counsels families dealing with Alzheimer's disease.

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Do you see the difference between those commitments and the Key Club?

If you can push yourself to help populations that are really in need, you'll make a difference in the world. You'll learn just how deep your commitment to serve really is. And you'll hone some of the skills necessary to find and secure other opportunities. There isn't a college in the universe that wouldn't be impressed by a student who does these things.

8. Explore other interests.

It's great if you love science and medicine (future doctors should). But medical schools like students who also have non-science related interests, like playing the drums in the marching band, being on the basketball team, or writing for the campus paper. One of the reasons typical premeds all look the same is that they don't pursue any interest outside of preparing for medical school. So don't start falling into the typical premed trap. Do things you like doing even if they have absolutely nothing to do with being a doctor. You'll be a more interesting person because of it, and you'll enjoy high school a lot more.

9. Get really good at studying and time management.

Just because you have a high GPA doesn't necessarily mean you're good at studying and time management. If other people can get the same GPA or higher and do it in half the time, they're much better at it than you are. And you'll have a hard time keeping up with them if they become premeds, too.

If you want to be a standout premed, you'll need to become one of those people who can get more quality studying done in two hours than the average student can get done in five. This is actually a skill you can learn, and high school is the perfect time to start. I'm going to blatantly plug an author here because his work deserves it. Cal Newport is a Phi Beta Kappa grad from Dartmouth who also got a PhD in electrical engineering from MIT in 2009. He's written three books about study skills, time management, and how to be successful in both high school and college. I've never met the guy, but Cal has spent years refining his system—one he uses himself—

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and he shares it in his books. I've read all three, and any future premed should, too.

Visit his website at <http://calnewport.com/>. And check out his blog at <http://calnewport.com/blog/>, too (especially his entry "The plight of the premed").

10. Interact with other people.

Doctors are in the people business. So don't let your drive to succeed turn you into a hermit. If you spend the entire semester dividing your time between classes, homework, and SAT prep classes, your work ethic is great, but your people skills will suffer.

Play on a team. Join a club. Get a part time job. Be a cheerleader. Captain the physics Olympics team. Get out there and interact. Everyone has to know when to swear off outside fun and just get your work done. But you also need to be a contributing member of the world around you—school, family and community. That's what you'll need to demonstrate to be a standout premed in college. Why not use your high school years to start practicing?

Concluding thoughts

One of the reasons that medicine is such a noble and respected career is that it's difficult to get there. Patients have the security of knowing that not just anybody can become a doctor. If you're seriously considering medical school, you should be proud of your ambition.

But remember that while the path to become a doctor is a difficult one, it should never feel like a burden. With the exception of preparing for and taking the MCAT (which nobody likes to do), the standout premeds enjoy what they're doing. They like working on research. They're fascinated by the sciences. They want to help the people who need it most. They're not suffering through their premed years, repeating to themselves that this will all be worth it when they can put an "MD" after their name. They're happy and fulfilled premeds—you should be, too.

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If you ever find that you like the idea of being a doctor but hate every day it takes to get there, be honest with yourself. You don't necessarily have to be a doctor to be successful, to help people and to make an impact on the world. Every profession needs standouts.

As long as you're excited to get out of bed most days and take another step toward your goal of becoming a doctor, you're on the right path. You can take that enthusiasm with you to medical school and later into your medical career.

I hope what you've learned in this guide will help you make good decisions for yourself before and during college. Now go out there and become a standout. And have a great time in college.



About the Author

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About Collegewise

Collegewise is a private college counseling company founded on the belief that the college process should be enjoyable and that the most selective colleges don't have the market cornered on great college experiences. Founded in Irvine, California in 1999, Collegewise now has additional offices in New York, New Jersey and Washington, and we also assist students all over the country and the world through our online college counseling program. We've helped nearly 3,000 kids find, apply and attend the right colleges for each student.

To find out more about us, visit www.collegewise.com. Our online store has books, videos, and other guides like this one, and you can find more information about our in-person and online counseling programs.

You can also read our blog at www.wiselikeus.com where we give away free advice for students, parents and counselors.