

LOOKING AT YOUR GRADES

Are you thinking about applying to health professions schools this year? Before making that key decision, you should fully understand what the schools want and whether or not you are going to meet their standards. Your grades reflect your success in contrast to others at your institution and should be reviewed every semester.

Professional schools want exceptional grades in the sciences; 3.5 and better for most health professions programs. This does not mean that you should not apply with a 3.3 or 3.4 GPA. It means you have to acknowledge the benchmark and see if your unique situation, mitigating circumstances such as full-time work, family obligations, or previous poor educational preparation, will be considered by the schools as a REASONABLE rationale for a lower GPA. Be brutally honest as you determine whether or not you can justify lower grades. You might also want to talk with your pre-health advisor and ask for their honest reaction to your story. You may not hear what you want from them, but you will gain valuable information about how an outsider feels about your situation!

But let's get back to your actual grades. While a 3.7 science GPA seems ideal, this number does not give the entire picture. Schools want that GPA to either be consistent from semester to semester or has consistently climbed. A student who starts out with the 3.92 in their first two years of science courses, but then drops to 3.7 as the coursework gets harder, is not necessarily a "shoo in" for consideration. Rather, the more competitive applicant would be one who started at the 3.3 range and improved each semester, ending with that 3.7. However, grades alone do not make you a competitive applicant. How those grades are earned, when they are earned, and where, makes a significant impact on your competitiveness.

How you earn your grades seems like a silly question. But think about it. Did you take one science class with lab every semester, or two, or three? Did you take your sciences in a 12 credit semester or in a 17 credit semester? Were you just studying or were you involved in research, an RA in your dorm, president of the student government? So you see, how you earned these grades is an important factor.

When did you get great grades? As we saw above, starting off strong and tapering off is a negative indicator. But starting off slow and picking up as the work became more challenging is a positive. Also, did you earn these grades in a regular semester or in the summer? If you take too many of your prerequisite courses in the summer, that will have a negative impact on your application. Why? Because schools want to see how you juggle your priorities. Summer school allows you to focus on one or two classes and nothing else. It does not show how well you can manage conflicting priorities, multiple responsibilities, and most importantly, you cannot be compared to others at your college.

How many credits were you carrying each semester? And how many challenging courses were you taking simultaneously? Professional schools will evaluate your grades against the strength or weakness of the answers to these questions so be aware!

Lastly, are you someone who manages their time well? If you only study and get good grades you are a less appealing candidate than the student who has good grades and has a full and robust set of activities going on at the same time. For example, a student playing varsity sports with a 3.5 science GPA is a much stronger candidate than the 4.00 student who only gets involved on campus after they've completed all of their science requirements. But one also has to be careful about perceptions that might reflect you have poor time management skills.

You are president of the student government, you are an RA, you are conducting research on campus and you tutor biology. But your science GPA is a 3.00. Will schools overlook this lower GPA because of your other activities? Afraid not! Why? Well, let's look at it from the point of view of an admissions officer. They will ask, why so many activities? RA in the dorm equates with saving money, so that activity is justifiable. Tutoring biology shows you are exceptional in this area and that you have the ability to teach and the willingness to share your success and knowledge with others. Great! Research indicates your critical thinking skills. And president of the student body shows leadership. All prove you have wonderful attributes. But the truth is that most schools would shake their heads and ask, why so much? This person seems unable to focus on one thing. This applicant seems overly involved and does not take their education seriously enough to justify interviewing them for a space in our class. This person shows a lack of maturity in that they have their priorities all wrong—grades are the key piece here, not how busy you are. Your job is to be the best student you can be first; all your extracurricular activities have to take a backseat. While you cannot be a "one trick pony", meaning you can't just spend all your time studying, you also cannot be seen as avoiding your commitment to learning.

So there you have it! Pull out that transcript and review. If you like what you see, show it to someone else, preferably your pre-health advisor! If they like it also, in combination with what should be a robust resume, then you are ready to apply. If there are concerns, on your part or theirs, consider waiting a year and begin a plan that will let you enhance your credentials.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Lolita Wood-Hill".

Lolita Wood-Hill, MS
Director of Pre-Health Advisement

Updated: September 9, 2016