

FINALS

MCAT scores mean everything

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All-nighters, chewed fingernails, Blue Books, Scantrons and sharpened pencils are tell-tale signs of exam time for Wayne State students.

And when it comes to taking and studying for exams, medical students are the experts. Applicants to medical school must take the Medical College Admission Test, which, according to the MCAT Web site, is a six-hour, standardized, multiple-choice examination designed to assess problem solving, critical thinking, writing skills and knowledge of science concepts requisite to the study of medicine.

According to the 2008-2009 Medical School Admission Requirements, in 2006, Wayne State's School of Medicine's accepted applicants had an average MCAT score of 31 out of 45. In contrast, Michigan State University's accepted applicants scored an average of 30; University of Michigan — Ann Arbor — applicants need an average of 35.

"The magic number is 30, I think, to get into an M.D. school," Justin Belsky, third-year med student, said.

Belsky also said the MCAT matters more than the applicant's GPA.

"You can get a 4.0 and get like a 25 on your MCAT, and you won't get into any schools," he said.

Jackie Leja, third-year med student, agreed.

"They're both important," she said, "but if you get a low MCAT score, they're going to throw out your application before they even look at your grades."

Since the exam is so vital, students invest a lot of time and money to prepare.

During the winter break of a student's junior year, said Belsky, "you should start seriously committing every day."

Barbara Cotter, secretary for the School of Medicine's admissions office, department of medical academics and student programs, helps students find appropriate resources.

"My favorite thing to refer students to is the AMMC [Association of American Medical Colleges] Web site," she said. "They have complete outlines of everything on the test."

She said that Kaplan and Princeton Review are two major companies students use.

Belsky, Leja and Julie Rossen, also third-year med students, all used Kaplan resources to study for the MCAT.

Belsky took an online course, Leja completed a classroom course, and Rossen ordered the books. The classroom courses last three months to four months and cost nearly \$2,000, while the online courses are completed at the student's pace and cost about \$1,800. The books individually cost about \$120, but Rossen said her purchase totaled \$800 to \$1,000.

All three students agreed that the money was well-spent.

Belsky said his score jumped up 15 points on the MCAT from a previous practice exam. Leja's score went up nine points from her first to her second MCAT.

"I took a ton of practice exams, and I would watch my score steadily increase," Rossen said.

Belsky said there's a great deal of material to cover for the MCAT.

"You go through all of these classes, like organic chemistry," he said. "Instead of studying everything known to man, it kind of focused me on what I needed to study more."

All three students, as well as Cotter, agreed that the key is taking practice exams.

"It would be the biggest mistake if you did not do at

least one, full-length practice exam," Belsky said, "not just for the content, but for the timing issue."

The battle doesn't end after the MCAT. Medical students compete for top grades in their classes.

Grading is based on percentages at Wayne State, which means the grades are assigned based on a predetermined distribution of grades. Getting into that top percentage can be challenging.

"I guess our class has the highest averages Wayne's ever had," Belsky said. "So it's impossible to honor."

Leah Robinson, a Wayne State counselor, helps students make the transition to medical school.

"It's the whole transition that's really tough for students who've been achieving and yet don't find themselves at the top of the curve," she said.

Students who have received good grades their entire lives commonly equate themselves with their grades, Robinson said. This becomes a problem when they're not doing as well as they expected.

"Maybe you have one or two exams that kicked your butt," Robinson said. "Well, then your confidence shakes."

Robinson advises students to investigate school resources.

"Students under-utilize resources," she said. "And by using resources, you have to ask for help."

Rossen said there can be seven to eight instructors for one course. Even so, she said, they make themselves available for questions, often through e-mail and Blackboard.

Belsky also said that he never had an issue with instructors answering his emails. The instructors' speedy responses are important to students who are consumed with studying.

"To be successful," Robinson said, "your focus really has to be 110 percent on your studies."