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Overcoming adversity: the resilience of first-generation medical school applicants

Surmonter l'adversité : La résilience des candidats de première génération aux facultés de médecine

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Introduction

The path to medical school is often depicted in the 'premed' experience as a symphony of personal commitment and family support. Inside this story is a lesser-known tale of courage and the unwavering pursuit of a dream in the face of overwhelming obstacles. "First-in-family" (FiF) describes the community of individuals who navigate medical school admissions without the educational, social, and economic capital afforded to applicants with family in the medical field. As successful FiF applicants, we share our stories with hopes of providing insight into the challenges faced by FiF applicants, inspiring ingenuity within future FiF applicants, and highlighting the path forward for our medical education system.

Collectively, we agreed that navigating Canadian medical school applications was a daunting task, with thousands of students vying to distinguish themselves. As we sat before our computer screens, grappling with the challenge of crafting the perfect application, we felt overwhelmed by uncertainty and self-doubt. Across our various application cycles, we shared the experiences of not having a wealth of familial knowledge to draw upon.

Stephanie Zhou: Class of 2018

In a leap of faith, I turned to online platforms to learn about the application process. I watched MCAT preparation videos on YouTube and sought out mentorship and community from Premed101. This was an anonymous forum consisting of premeds, medical students, residents and some physicians. Through this community, I called strangers on the internet and learned their stories as we prepared for the MCAT, worked on applications and if some of us got interviews, practiced together. Many of these individuals were FiF to apply to medical school like me. I remember meeting a single mom fitting in her application writing after work, an Indigenous nurse looking for a change in career, and a firefighter father with two children. Through weekly video-chats, I caught more than a glimpse into their lives—it was a deeper opening into their most vulnerable moments referencing experiences with disease, divorce, failures, and the hardships of life. These individuals were 10-20 years my senior, but the richness of their experiences helped me immensely as they provided me with advice on writing an application or interviewing despite us applying for the same spot. Through interacting weekly with this group and implementing their feedback, I saw my narrative voice flourish. I was able to draw unique meaning from my experiences and convey them with confidence that only comes from years of practice and

experience. The support of my preparatory group was invaluable.

Krish Bilimoria: Class of 2022

Reflecting on my pre-medical years, I initially felt anxiety due to my lack of traditional extracurricular experiences that adorned the resumes of my peers. However, I was privileged to be enrolled in an undergraduate degree with alumnus and senior students familiar with the process. With the guidance from my peers and online resources provided by figures like Dr. Anees Chagpar and Dr. Rishi Desai, I learned to reframe my unique experiences. For instance, my involvement in religious and cultural activities, such as cleaning idols at our local temple, emerged as a testament to my commitment to community and leadership. Armed with this newfound perspective, I embraced the diversity of my journey as a strength in my medical school application, overcoming my fears of inadequacy and presenting a more cohesive and compelling narrative. Through the invaluable support of my mentors, I not only bridged the knowledge gap but also emerged more prepared and self-assured at each step of the application process.

Vijithan Sugumar & Darshana Seeburruth: Class of 2025 & 2026

The backspace key became my constant companion as I struggled to convey the essence of my past four years in a way that would captivate admissions committees. Questions plagued my mind: What exactly were medical schools looking for, and did I measure up? Each draft I attempted felt uninspired and incomparable to the polished essays of my peers, leaving me trapped in a cycle of frustration and discouragement. Amidst this turmoil, a glimmer of hope emerged when I discovered mentorship programs offered by the Tamil Association of Residents and Medical Students and the University of Toronto's Community of Support (COS). These organizations provided a lifeline, connecting me with FiF mentors who understood the intricacies of my cultural and social background. We were able to find common ground in our experience, chatting about the difficulties of finding research opportunities to grappling with the expectations of unpaid volunteer work. Our similarities made their advice more poignant and with their support, I learned to navigate the challenges of the application process. Their support provided validation amidst a process that often felt dismissive of my identity, empowering me to present a more confident and authentic application.

The path forward

Medical schools should seek to create compassionate and resilient physicians. FiF applicants have a breadth of unique experiences that could distinguish themselves within the autobiographical sketch, essay, and interview features of the admissions process. Some of the rich stories from our FiF classmates, such as one with lived experience taking care of a sibling with a developmental disability, another who serves as the sole breadwinner for their family, and another with a previous career in hospitality: all offer useful aptitudes to the guild of medicine. However, without the right guidance these stories are often left untold and their value unrealized. As illustrated by our experiences, the lack of formal mentorship networks leaves FiF applicants feeling disheartened and questioning their competitiveness in pursuing a medical career. Acknowledging the differences mentorship made for us, we encourage medical schools to support institution-associated mentorship programs, citing the successful example set by the University of Toronto's COS. This program not only provides practical guidance but also offers a sense of belonging, and support. It empowers FiF applicants by showcasing successful individuals who have overcome similar challenges.

Acknowledging and supporting the valuable experiences of FiF applicants enriches medical education with diverse perspectives.¹ This cultural shift promotes accessibility and diversity, while nurturing a generation of physicians with varied backgrounds and insights that will serve them well in practice.²

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