Test scores not the only measure of medical student success

Numeric data, as measured in MCAT scores and GPAs, are certainly an indicator of a potential medical student’s ability for success, but it is the intangible factors that weigh equally when considering potential candidates for admission to the University of Nevada School of Medicine.

“Those with the highest MCAT scores and GPAs aren’t always accepted because other things are needed to be a good physician,” said Ann Diggins, School of Medicine director of recruitment and student services.

According to Diggins, those other “non-cognitive” traits are dedication and drive to be a physician, desire to want to help sick people, ability to communicate in difficult situations and be able to think on one’s feet and solve problems even in pressing circumstances. In addition, a student should have a sense of leadership, yet maintain the ability to work within a team.

A tall order? Perhaps. Yet the School of Medicine is rife with examples of successful students in each class. Sadeeqa Qureshi ’04 (chemistry professional) and current student Chris McDonnell, have found success despite having chosen nontraditional paths to earning their medical degrees.

Qureshi, a native of Hawthorne, Nev., matriculated with the Class of 2008, but decided to pursue a doctorate degree alongside her medical degree. She will graduate this spring after seven years of medical school. Diggins said there are several intangible characteristics that make Qureshi successful: “She has humbleness and has held on to that. She is very enthusiastic about her research. It is rare the student who comes along, loves research and is clinically sound.”

Qureshi worked in the lab of Brian Perrino, associate professor of physiology and cell biology, for three years using animal models to investigate the mechanism of motility disorders of the colon in inflammatory bowel disease.

Perrino said Qureshi was a successful researcher on several levels: “She made novel observations that other labs are now using. We have continued her work to expand the field after she left.” He added that Qureshi made scientific presentations at national meetings and received positive feedback.

Perrino also attributes Qureshi’s discipline, determination and her commitment to put in the necessary time to complete the work for her success in his lab, as well as her enthusiasm.

Qureshi said, “I want to learn and am motivated and enjoy learning.” In addition, she credits her success to strong family support: “My parents and my husband have also been the focal point of my success.”

She also notes that support received from faculty and professors over the years in the academic, research and clinical settings contributed greatly to her achievements. Qureshi stresses the importance of finding a work/life balance and not losing one’s self in the process of becoming a physician.

She achieves this balance by becoming involved in the Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure, volunteering at the Food Bank of Northern Nevada, working with the Student Outreach Clinics, putting in time with the outreach branch of the American Geriatric Society for Students and serving as founder of the Medical Research Student Interest Group.

She enjoys running and visiting Lake Tahoe for relaxing and snowboarding when she is not in labs or clinics.

McDonnell also credits family, especially his wife, Jennifer, as well as his classmates for his success at medical school.

“Jen has had to put up with my pulling all-nighters, living in different cities for the first year, and dealing with the financial impact.”

Camaraderie at school has been a huge help, he adds: “If it wasn’t for my classmates sharing lecture notes, I would have never survived.” On the advice of a friend, he created a strict study schedule and sticks with it even though it means getting up at 4 a.m.

He said figuring out how he learns best and making adjustments, as well as putting in a lot of hard work have been his tickets to success.

He helped organize a group of classmates to take turns recording lectures and uploading
them to a class website.

“This allowed me to listen to lectures at my own pace. I started to study from question banks and used textbooks only as references,” he said.

Like the admissions committee, McDonnell sees altruism as the driving force needed to be successful as a physician. It helps to enjoy helping people.

McDonnell continues to demonstrate the characteristics that impressed the admissions committee with his service on the Student Advisory Committee, a peer-selected group of students who provide support for students experiencing academic or personal challenges. Peggy Dupey, School of Medicine associate dean for admissions and student affairs, said, “Chris is an exemplary member of the committee due to his easygoing nature, his integrity in maintaining confidentiality and his exceptional compassion toward others.”

McDonnell sees his future in service to those with medical needs. “I’d like to open a clinic in Central America,” he said, adding, “… or somewhere with a need that matches with somewhere I want to go. I’d like to find others of like-mind and maybe start up a network of health care volunteers.”

Successful medical school applicants must demonstrate communications skills, altruism and empathy

The School of Medicine admissions committee waded through more than 1,400 applications this year, carefully weighing the many tangible and intangible factors that go into choosing each new cohort of Nevada medical students. Some 330 were chosen for further review.

It takes up to a year for the committee to screen applicants for each matriculating class of 62 new students. The 21-member committee looks at a potential students’ entire life experience, including leadership in clubs or organizations, time already spent in the health care setting, evidence of altruism and empathy, how well candidates communicate in face-to-face interviews, their personal statement and letters of recommendation from professors and physicians, in addition to numeric data from test scores, grades in undergraduate prerequisites and GPAs.

Beverly Neyland, a professor of pediatrics who sits on the admissions committee, elaborates: “Potential students must show an interest in volunteering, their interest in medicine must be real and they have to understand the long-term experience of what they are getting into,” she said. “The MCAT scores are an indication of how a student will do in the first two years, but not how they will fare in the clinical years.”

Neyland describes the successful medical student as someone who has a curiosity about people, a broad range of experience in different aspects of life, a willingness to learn from everyone they come in contact with, empathy and the ability to get along with people from different backgrounds.

In addition, the committee looks at the class as a whole. Ann Diggins, School of Medicine director of recruitment and student services, noted: “It is not about the numbers, but more about shaping the class. We are looking for the traits needed to be a good physician, as well as the diversity—in age and background—to reflect the face of physicians we need in Nevada.”

—Anne McMillin, APR