

Dental School Preparation and Admission Guide

Making the decision to become a dentist involves maturity, commitment, and perseverance. Individuals accepted to dental school demonstrate a calling to serve others, an aptitude in the health sciences, and an ability to work well with his/her hands. Dental school is becoming more and more competitive because of lifestyle and career satisfaction associated with the profession. At Wabash, typically 4-6 students will apply to dental school each year. The application process itself is quite involved and begins nearly two years before matriculation. SO...what are some issues you should be focusing on now, as an undergraduate, if you are considering dental school?

- Do I have what it takes to gain admission and succeed in dental school?
- What co-curricular and extra-curricular activities should I become involved in?
- What does the application process consist of, and when should I start?
- Why do I want to be a dentist?
- What if I don't get in?

Do I have what it takes to gain admission and succeed in dental school?

More than ever, admission to dental school is competitive. And dental schools have become quite good at selecting students who have the desire and ability to be a dentist. A competitive candidate for dental school needs to demonstrate excellence in 4 areas:

1. Academic Performance (**minimum** undergraduate GPA of 3.3, with a strong science background)
2. DAT performance (academic average of 18 or higher, with no one score below 17. Special attention is paid to the PAT section, perceptual ability testing)
3. Community involvement with a commitment to serve
4. Professional exposure (this is REALLY important)

In short, dental schools want their students to be well-rounded and possess self-understanding. With this in mind, undergraduates should be thinking early on about your college careers. This doesn't mean that you'll have to decide every course you will enroll in over your 4 years of study in your first semester*. In fact, you don't even need to declare a major until the end of your sophomore year. But you need to commit to learning and performing your academic best when you arrive at college. Certainly dental schools have accepted students who start out slow in college (and they definitely acknowledge those students who underachieve early on, but later demonstrate academic excellence) but it is challenging to bring your cumulative GPA up to a 3.5 when your first several semesters hover around a 3.0.

(*The IU school of dentistry requires one semester of physiology. Because Wabash offers physiology only every other year, and it is an upper-level biology course, this is one class you WILL need to plan early for. See your pre-health advisor to make sure you are on track to get in your prerequisites.)

In the same way, use your undergraduate years, including summers, to become involved in your school and greater community (see below), along with growing your understanding of the dental profession (again, see below). Don't expect to cram activities and internships in at the end of your senior year. Not only will this be obvious to the admissions' committees of dental schools, but it might keep you from developing your "humanitarian" side.

What co-curricular and extra-curricular activities should I become involved in?

When you're not studying, in lab or class, you should carefully consider how you're spending your time. We want our future dentists to understand the world around them, right? Dental schools like to see candidates who are involved in their communities.

- Wabash community (sports, newspaper, clubs of interest, research, etc)
- Crawfordsville community (volunteering, working in local schools, Red Cross, health clinics, etc)
- Home town (service projects and volunteerism)
- World/global community (service abroad/study abroad)

Consider your interests when choosing how you want to spend your “free” time. Doing something you’re personally invested in will demonstrate maturity and commitment, and it will make you a more appealing person.

If you’re lucky, your volunteerism and service will somehow involve dentistry and healthcare, or research. If not, that’s alright too, but BE SURE that you obtain some professional exposure along the way. At the very least, you must have some shadowing opportunities with dentists or other healthcare providers. Internships or service projects in a dental setting are even better, as they allow you to develop a deeper understanding of what it means to be a dentist and help those in need of healthcare. Having exposure to the practice of dentistry is an unwritten prerequisite to getting in to most dental schools, and if you need assistance in finding professionals to work with, your pre-health advisor can get you started.

What does the application process consist of and when should I start?

The **short answer** is this: applying to dental school begins at the end of your junior year (if you wish to matriculate the summer after your senior year). See aadsasinfo@aadsasweb.org for specific information on the timeline for applying to dental school. Almost all dental schools use a centralized application (AADSAS) so that you apply only one time, regardless of how many dental schools you are applying to.

The application has sections where you:

- List your grades and request transcripts from all colleges you’ve attended
- List your undergraduate activities, organizations, awards, services, internships, shadowing
- Discuss your manual dexterity skills
- Compose a personal statement

Additionally, the Wabash Pre-Health Professions Committee writes a letter of recommendation for you. This letter is generated after you solicit 5 faculty members who can evaluate your academic performance. Make sure to get to know your faculty. Professors generally appreciate working with students and getting to know you in and out of class. The better they understand your character and strengths, the more meaningful their evaluation letter will be. Once your letter is complete, we will send it to AADSAS, who will distribute it to the dental schools you have applied to (you will never see the letter). The process of soliciting faculty begins the spring of your junior year.

Finally, you must take the DAT before your application is complete. We recommend you take the DAT at the end of your junior year. Your pre-health advisor will discuss with you different options for preparation.

Once your AADSAS is complete, your letter of recommendation submitted, and your DAT taken, you will be asked to submit a “secondary” application to many of the dental schools you’ve applied to. Qualified applicants will be invited for an interview. IT IS VERY IMPORTANT TO HAVE ALL YOUR APPLICATION MATERIALS IN TO THE IU DENTAL SCHOOL BY MID-JUNE in order to be reviewed for an early interview slot (September), especially for in-state applicants. Late applications have been responsible for qualified applicants not gaining admission their first year. Applicants will be informed of their acceptance no earlier than Dec. 1.

Now for the **long answer**...in order to (1) fulfill the prerequisites for dental school, (2) be prepared to take the DAT, and (3) have the extracurricular activities to be competitive for dental school, you need to start working early to become a competitive candidate. Most dental schools require the following coursework:

1 year general biology (BIO 111,112)

1 year general chemistry (CHEM 111,211)

1 year organic chemistry (CHEM 221, 321)

1 year physics (PHY 111,112)

****1 semester anatomy (BIO 221)**

****1 semester physiology (BIO 315)**

1 semester Biochemistry (CHEM 361)

1 semester psychology (PSY 101)

(A 3-D art course or a ceramics course – ART 121, ART 123 - is recommended to demonstrate manual dexterity)

(required at IU dental school only)**

See www.wabash.edu/academics/medicine/ for more information about prerequisites and Wabash courses.

When should you take these courses? This is where the careful planning comes into the picture. In order to sit for the DAT by late spring following your junior year, you will need to have at least one year of general biology completed along with one year of general chemistry and one year of organic chemistry. Therefore, you need all of these courses in your first three years at Wabash, so plan accordingly.

Finally, you will be filling out your application to dental school early in the summer between your junior and senior years. Therefore, you will need to have enough service and professional exposure experiences to demonstrate your commitment to dentistry. Internships, research experiences, service projects, and the like will all be part of your application, so you will need to invest your time into community and professional activities early on.

WHERE should you apply? Most pre-dental students will apply to 4 or 5 schools. Where you apply depends on many factors and your pre-health advisor can discuss these with you when the time comes. There is one hard and fast rule, though: **you should absolutely apply to your state school!** And if your state of residence is not Indiana, you should also consider applying to the IU dental school, because of your state ties as a Wabash student.

Why do I want to be a dentist?

This is really the most difficult question of all, and it's one that you need to be prepared to answer. For one, you will undoubtedly be asked this when you interview. And you will certainly need to speak to your motivation in your personal statement on the application. Even more, who wants to put their oral health in the hands of somebody who is ambivalent about their professional calling? Becoming a dentist is one of the biggest decisions you will make in your life so we want you to be thoughtful and mature in the process.

Here are some questions to ponder to help you answer this question:

- What have I done to serve people over the past few years and how has it affected me?
- Who have I observed or worked with whom I admire and why?
- What have been the most gratifying experiences of my college career, and my life?
- In my academic and co-curricular achievements, what personal qualities have helped me to be successful?
- Who do I want to be in 10 years?

It's clear, after reflecting on these questions, why dental schools ask you to be well-rounded. The experiences, activities, achievements and professional exposure you should have when you apply will help grow and define your character and clarify your vocational calling.

AND NOW FOR THE QUESTION WE KNOW YOU'RE ALL THINKING ABOUT:

What if I don't get in???

Of course there will be those of you disappointed. And there are **many** opinions and options out there (some better than others). Before getting to those, this is a good time for some honest self-examination:

- Do you feel you have the academic ability and curiosity to be a competitive candidate?
 - If you performed in the mediocre range on your DAT, struggled to get B's and C's in your science classes and feel lucky to graduate above a 3.0, you may want to think about other career options, because the academic pressure only gets harder in dental school.
 - On the other hand, if you were a slow starter and didn't invest your mind or your time fully on dental school, but your DAT was competitive and you're ready to give it your all, consider reapplying after strengthening your application (see below).
- What is your "plan B?" Everyone should have one, and now is the time to look at your other career choice(s). If you still feel that dental school is where you want to be, consider re-applying after a year (see below). If not, look at this experience as a time for reflection and move ahead in other directions. Career Services is a great place to start if you need suggestions.

How do you go about reapplying the next year? Generally speaking, dental schools don't like to see the same application twice, so if you don't get in the first time around, you'll need to do something after graduation that enhances your candidacy. Consider meeting with your pre-health advisor as well as a member of a dental school admissions committee. You'll want to have a frank conversation about the weak points of your application.

- The most standard route to take is to enter a "post bac program." These are one or two year curricula designed to enhance your GPA (or help you meet the prerequisites of dental schools). You will take rigorous science courses, allowing you to demonstrate to dental school admission's committees your ability to handle challenging coursework. There are many post-bac programs out there, and be wary! It is important to consult with your pre-health advisor and do your homework before applying to these programs.
- If your DAT was the weak link, you should consider additional preparation and a re-take.
- Students who lack experience and volunteerism may choose to spend a year doing research, working in a dental setting, or performing service work.

If you are competitive and have the desire to be a dentist, don't give up. Dental schools like to see perseverance and commitment, and reapplying certainly demonstrates this!

If you have questions about pursuing dental school or other health professions, please contact Jill Rogers, the Wabash Pre-health Professions Advisor, at rogersji@wabash.edu.

