

March 19, 2020

Dear HPAO Students,

As we continue to navigate the uncharted territory, we know there are many questions and this email may not provide answers to all of yours, but it is an attempt to help you understand the magnitude of the challenge so that you can decide what is right for you.

As you consider the decisions that are being made that affect you right now, realize this pandemic is affecting everyone on a global level. Medical schools are dealing with the challenge of what to do with their medical students who are doing clinical rotations...do they cancel those? MCAT testing sites were cancelled globally for March 27 and April 4th. So, it may take a little time to resolve how to handle your decisions in the near future.

MOVING THE MCAT DATE

For those of you who are having to move your MCAT date, one of the most frequent questions we are getting is, “What is the latest I can take the exam and it not have an impact?” As with any year, we have always and will always continue to recommend late May through June as a good time to take the MCAT, but also realize that you want to take it when you are most prepared, and getting a good score from a test date in July is better than a mediocre score because you took it early. There are no BONUS points for being at the front of the line. That being said, it is most ideal that you have your scores in earlier than the latest possible time. If you are considering taking the exam in August, that is starting to get on the late end. How the timeline for the 2021 cycle will be impacted, we are not sure, but there is always the option of preparing all summer and planning to take a gap year which gives you the most time to maximize your studying which ultimately is the most important thing.

CONSIDERING THE PASS/FAIL OPTION

For students who have not begun the application process:

With the recent decision for Vanderbilt to offer our students the option to switch to Pass/Fail, we realize you may wish to convert one of your premed courses to pass/fail which may include, but is not limited to: ***General Chemistry, Organic Chemistry, Biological Sciences, Physics, Biochemistry, and Statistics***. This could also include English writing courses and Genetics.

Here's what we know now. The Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) has a committee meeting in the near future to discuss recommendations to medical schools, and then medical schools will have to make their own decisions regarding what they will and won't be willing to accept. Regardless of their decision, if some of our students choose to opt-in to the P/F option and some do not, it still has possible implications, so students need to be aware of that. For example, if a student still gets an A or B in the class, that may be better than just a “P” since that could also be interpreted to be a grade of “C” or “D”.

Students need to consider this when making a decision, but realize it is a single class, so in the grand scheme of things, it may not significantly impact your application, but as with every

decision, this could be very student independent. **Until recommendations come out from the AAMC and/or medical schools, however, we would advise students to proceed with the graded courses.** You have until April 10th to convert your grade to the P/F option. Ultimately, you will be taking the MCAT, and these courses give you the foundation you need to prepare you to do well on that, so you should continue to put in the same effort you would have regardless of whether you are planning to convert to the P/F option. This may be an opportunity for students to realize unique strategies that help them be more successful in learning. Language from Dr. Cynthia Brame, Senior Lecturer in Biological Sciences and Associate Director of the Center for Teaching, is included below:

This is an opportunity for students to use evidence-based learning strategies, such as retrieval practice, self-explanation and elaboration, and generation. Specifically, recalling information has been shown to be one of the most effective ways to promote learning, and using recorded videos or posted notes to check for completeness and accuracy can serve as valuable feedback. Self-explanation and elaboration of concepts in blog posts, discussion boards, online office hours, or virtual study sessions with friends generates conceptual networks that allow for rapid retrieval and processing when information is needed. Generation is the process of predicting outcomes, and like the other strategies described here is a powerful approach to learning. All of these strategies can be checked by posted materials and through interactions with the instructor, providing the feedback that solidifies the value of these approaches.

For students who are currently in the application process:

You MUST check with the schools to which you have been admitted before switching to the pass/fail option for any of your required courses. Technically, if anything changes in your application, you are required to notify the schools to which you have been admitted and/or are under consideration with, so before you change anything as it relates to your required courses, please make sure to check in with your schools prior to going to the pass/fail option. As a general guideline to keep things easy for everyone, because you have already applied, we recommend that you keep required courses as graded since this semester's overall grade will not be considered in your admissions decision. We do believe they will care less about non-medical school required courses and they likely will not care about switching those to pass/fail.

Meetings with the HPAO

We do realize that everyone might be in a different situation, and we are sensitive to that and here to answer your questions. We will be taking advantage of the Zoom licensing agreement that Vanderbilt has procured for the entire university to host meetings in the near future and/or develop a version of "walk-in" hours so that you all can benefit from others' questions. We will be announcing more on that soon, but for now, please do not hesitate to send us emails and/or schedule meetings in Doreways as we have continued to do. Those will be conducted by phone or Skype until we are up and running with Zoom. We are here for you during this challenging time. Please be patient with us as we are dealing with a higher than usual volume of emails while also continuing to conduct business as usual with the Committee Letter Review Meetings.

We wish you all the best as this is a challenging time and hope that at the very least you are appreciating the time you have to be closer to your loved ones.

Sincerely,

The HPAO team
Michelle Grundy, Lauren Rains, and Chris King