

Research

A lot of applicants have started to hear that research is becoming a “soft requirement” that almost everyone is expected to fulfill—and the reality is, that’s true, especially for more competitive programs. But here’s the important part: it’s not about having your name tied to the most prestigious PI or lab, or walking in with a Nature publication. What really matters is showing commitment and passion for the work you did, and being able to clearly talk about the impact you had and the lessons you learned along the way.

Research can take many different forms on the path to medical school. It might mean bench science in a lab, working on clinical trials with healthcare teams, doing community or public health research, or anything in between. What makes the experience valuable isn’t the setting, but the skills you develop—critical thinking, analyzing data, collaborating with others, and learning how to contribute to science and, ultimately, medicine. Medical schools want to see that you’re curious and dedicated to asking questions, digging into the “what” and the “why,” and pushing through the obstacles that research inevitably brings.

As a first-gen student, getting involved with research can feel overwhelming, as it very much did for me, without family or friends to guide you toward the right opportunities. And that’s perfectly okay. You don’t need to have it all figured out right away. Start small: ask your professors if they’re involved in research, check for local labs that take undergraduates, or even reach out to healthcare workers who might let you help with data entry or shadow a clinical study. It’s less about the specifics of what you do, and more about showing initiative and getting involved.

At the end of the day, research doesn’t have to be your ultimate passion, and medical schools know that not everyone will become a physician-scientist. For some students, it sparks a lifelong love of clinical trials and academic medicine. For others, it becomes a way to learn resilience and teamwork. No matter what, the willingness to step into research shows that you can push yourself into new fields and discovery—a testament to your effort and proof that you have the curiosity and persistence to thrive in medical school.