

Pre-Med? Consider English

So, you are thinking about going to medical school. You have heard over and over from family and friends that in college you need to be practical in how you go about choosing a major...We agree! But what is the practical way of going about making this decision?

Not only has the admissions process for getting into medical school changed in recent years, so have medical school and practicing medicine. In almost any health care setting in which today's future physicians are likely to find themselves, they will have to render care for the patient before them attentively and relationally. These skills require listening and an understanding of who the patient is and where he or she is coming from. Caretakers encounter all comers. At the same time, those who fall ill must negotiate a health care



system which year after year is becoming more technologically sophisticated and bureaucratically complicated - all before being diagnosed and embarking on a treatment plan. To many, this initial hurdle is as overwhelming as the thing from which they are ailing.

Medical school admissions committees across the country are aware of our changing world, and

in the last few years they have begun to recognize the need to recruit and train physicians who are humane, flexible, compassionate in their craft, and able to empathize with people who come from all walks of life. The MCAT now asks several questions requiring test takers to reason through complicated ethical dilemmas, presented in the form of a story - and humanities majors achieve the highest MCAT scores of any of the major groups. Interviews for clinical professionals involve an assessment of a candidate's aptitude for exhibiting a communicative bedside manner and an understanding of different cultures and racial and ethnic backgrounds. The contemporary physician must reason critically and work through difficult, non-no-brainer scenarios.

As a result of these shifts in emphasis, the humanities have surprisingly come to be regarded as vital to future careers in medicine. Whereas in the past a conventional major in the sciences might have been most suitable for a career in medicine, today medical school admissions committees proactively seek those who will have acquired the skills in college of perspective taking and utilizing the imagination to arrive at resolutions to real world problems. These are precisely the learning objectives with which one emerges having majored in English at Stony Brook University.

Our major features courses where, through what might be described as an immersion experience in literature, you will learn to cultivate your imagination and subsequently use it as a resource to help you understand the plight of the individual you might not otherwise have encountered in life, but who as a physician you are guaranteed to encounter. Our courses emphasize active engagement with the unfamiliar “other,” as depicted in fiction, film, the digital humanities, the media arts, and in other forms of narrative. New courses include “Literature, Medicine, and Ethics” and “What is Public Health? A Humanities Approach.” (We also encourage internships.) The practice of medicine often boils down to helping the one who is sick face the challenge of having to choose between relatively tragic options. In our courses you will encounter texts which force you to make hard choices, ones you will encounter as a reader, viewer, and hearer of the plights of others. In these settings you will acquire the intellectual and moral virtues with which to be trusted by your future patients.

This critical link between the humanities and the health sciences isn’t mere opinion. Medical schools and elite fellowship programs across the country are more frequently identifying English as an ideal discipline from which to recruit candidates. If you have further questions about what might be the best major for you, or how a major from Stony Brook in English might prepare you for a career as a physician, or what sorts of courses might take combining the humanities and the health sciences as a major in English at Stony Brook, we are here to answer them.

