



Pursuing Post-Bacc Programs

A GUIDE FOR UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS

January 2024



Introduction

Pre-Health Dreamers (PHD) created this document on post-baccalaureate (post-bac) programs to help guide you through the decision about whether or not a post-bac is the best option for you. Post-bac programs can benefit students who want to strengthen their Grade Point Average (GPA), have decided to change their careers, or need additional support to enhance their medical or graduate application. Post-bac programs are possible to pursue. However, PHD understands through personal experience that post-bac programs come with obstacles for students who are undocumented.

We hope that the information in this resource helps you make an educated decision before investing time, money, and effort into completing a post-bac. Post-bac programs are helpful and can serve as a stepping stone to ultimately reach your career goals. Regardless, we strongly advise students to reflect on their reason for pursuing a post-bac. There may be other options to supplement a perceived shortcoming as you advance in your educational journey.

Some students may lack self-confidence in their academic abilities due to their GPA, imposter syndrome, or external factors. Taking time to check in with yourself, reflect on your journey, and confide in a trusted individual can reveal other less costly alternatives. Additionally, we strongly encourage you to consult your school's academic advisors, pre-health advisors, and/or admissions advisors from a health graduate program to see if a post-bac is necessary.

We want to emphasize the importance of students maintaining a strong and consistent GPA, especially in their prerequisite classes, while in undergrad. The options of repeating courses, grade forgiveness, and academic renewals are more obtainable and inexpensive than graduate programs. Additionally, we encourage students to complete all or most graduate prerequisite courses during their undergraduate degree. PHD has witnessed students needing more support to complete a graduate program with less financial help and fewer available resources.

Pre-Health Dreamers is here to continue to support undocumented students throughout their journey. This document will discuss ways to minimize and overcome common obstacles students face while completing a post-bac program. We encourage you to keep persevering and not let your legal status limit you from continuing to dream. Schedule a meeting with the PHD team to discuss your reasons and other options.

Contact rocio@phdreamers.org for an appointment.



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Q1. What is a post-baccalaureate (post-bac) program?

Students pursuing a graduate healthcare program can pursue a post-bac to strengthen their medical school application once they complete an undergraduate degree.

Post-bac programs can strengthen or supplement targeted areas of improvement, whether boosting an undergraduate Grade Point Average (GPA), completing additional academic experiences, or building confidence in academic abilities.

There are many reasons why students choose to complete a post-bac program; however, understanding how post-bac programs work is essential before pursuing one. Post-bac programs can vary in structure, length, and cost. This document will help you decide when, if, and what kind of post-bac program best fits you.

Being undocumented will also play a factor in your decision. We will dive in on commonly asked questions PHD participants have asked when deciding to pursue a post-bac. We will also provide feedback based on the experience of students who have completed a post-bac degree.

AAMC describes post-bac programs as—

“[O]ne way to help strengthen your application during a gap year [after undergraduate graduation]. Enrolling in a post-bac program may offer you a chance to strengthen your transcript and knowledge base before you apply to medical school and can be a good bridge between completing your undergraduate studies and entering medical school. (AAMC).¹”

Q2. Can undocumented students complete a post-bac?

In short, yes, they can. Where and what kind of post-bac you complete depends on whether the program accepts students regardless of their immigration status and if the school is ready to provide resources for your success.

Based on the [AAMC tool](#):²

an estimated 147 out of 319 post-bac programs accept applications from DACA recipients. The number of post-bac programs that take TPS recipients and individuals without Social Security Numbers (SSNs) is unknown. Please consider that this does not mean that the program does not accept students without DACA and TPS. The program may have yet to update its info for the website, or it may not have enrolled its first undocumented student without DACA.

We advise students to contact school administrators of the prospective programs they plan to apply to and inquire about their process when reviewing applications of students without SSNs who are not international students.

Here is some context you can add to an email to program administrators as you seek help: "I would like to know if your school would consider my application domestic, in-state, out-of-state, international, etc.). Are there any documents I need to submit to the campus for residency, financial aid, and tuition purposes?"



Q2. Can undocumented students complete a post-bac? (Continue)

"A pressing concern is my availability and eligibility for need or merit-based financial aid. Does your school offer institutional fellowships or loans for students who are not citizens/permanent residents? Also, are there campus scholarships that I can apply for? What is the likelihood of receiving aid? Do you have a financial aid counselor familiar with undocumented students you can refer me to? Does your program depend a lot on federal funding for financial aid?"

The schools' response will give you insight into how well-equipped the program is to admit and support undocumented students. Undocumented students can select the best school for them based on the school's answers. Other variables to keep in mind while deciding on which post-bacc program to complete are:

- Type of post-bac that you are seeking
- Whether it is degree-granting or not
- Amount of support during the application cycle.

Students who are undocumented may want to seek the financial aid and supportive allies available at the institution. Some programs will add friendly content and language for students who are DACA recipients or students who are undocumented without DACA. When searching to see if the school has resources for undocumented students with or without DACA, you can use the following words to search for help on the school's website: DREAMERS, DACA, and Undocumented. Contact the individuals listed on these websites, if available, for more support.

Q3. Why do students complete a post-bac?

The most prevalent reason students complete a post-bac before applying to a health-related program, such as medicine, is to strengthen their undergraduate GPA, especially in their [science courses](#).³ Please see Academic Enhancers in Q4.

Students also enroll in post-bac programs because they have decided to change their careers and must complete prerequisites for a graduate program that is an entirely different area or subject from the one they previously studied. Please see Career Changer in Q4.

We have attached a list of prerequisite [classes](#)⁴ medical schools recommend taking before applying if you have decided to change your career and must complete the science requirements. Always verify the classes you plan to take to fulfill course requirements from your prospective schools with your school's academic counselor. Formal pre-med or pre-health post-bac programs may include holistic advising and support for students applying to their future programs. Support includes but is not limited to application guidance and submission, test-taking skills, help with writing personal statements or statements of purpose, seeking recommendation letters, test preparation, and research experience.

Some students will decide to complete a post-bac to receive the guidance and support mentioned above through their medical school application process. Many formal programs have specialized, knowledgeable, and experienced faculty and staff that can help students showcase their abilities and experience on their application. Post-bac committees can also write a committee letter for a student, elevating your medical school application. This can be useful if you do not have strong letters from previous professors. However, keeping a positive relationship with your faculty and committee is essential to ensure a strong recommendation from them.



Q4. Can an upward trend help me get into medical school?

An "upward trend" is when your GPA increases consistently by receiving high grades (mostly A's and a few B's) in contrast to previously lower grades you may have received. Upward trends strongly indicate your academic and personal growth while completing undergraduate classes. Showcasing new work with a higher GPA demonstrates your ability to learn and implement better study, time management, and prioritizing techniques for admission committees. An upward trend in your GPA can help guide your decision to complete a post-bac before applying to medical school.

It is common for students to need help in adjusting to the transition from high school to university and university to graduate school. The good news is that medical school admission committees will recognize and value upward trends and recognize your ability to learn from past mistakes. It is essential to keep a few things in mind before applying to a post-bac, such as whether your upward trend is strong enough to bypass a lower-than-average GPA. The best factors to consider are:

- Is your upward trend consistent with minimal/no dips?
- Does the upward trend last for longer than a few semesters? There may need to be more than an upward trend in your final semester of college to show consistent growth.
- Did you take the science classes you needed to meet the prerequisites? Please note that your **BCPM**³ (Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Math) GPA will be calculated separately from your total GPA. Make sure both GPAs are showing an upward trend.
- Am I consistently achieving a strong MCAT score during practice exams? A strong MCAT score will demonstrate your mastery of sciences and supplement a lower-than-average GPA.

If you answer "no" to one or more of these questions, you may want to consider an academic enhancer post-bac program. Completing a post-bac can increase your GPA and create an upward trend in your GPA. To calculate your GPA and view your current GPA trend, use the AAMC grade calculator. [Download it here](#).⁵

Q5. What type of post-bac programs exist?

The [AAMC](#) describes the different post-bac types as “programs which are designed to address a particular need, such as academic record enhancement, career change, MCAT® exam prep, as well as programs for underrepresented students.” ⁶

There are multiple post-bac types that vary in cost, length, and resources offered. In the next section, we will give a breakdown of post-bac programs. Reflecting on why you are pursuing a post-bac and then creating a list of what you expect to get out of it will help guide you to what program will benefit you the most. Categorizing the different post-bac types into a formal or informal program helps explain your options.

Formal Post-Bacs

Formal post-bacs are structured programs that can:

- Award a certification of completion or grant a master's degree;
- Be considered undergraduate or graduate-level coursework; and
- Provide additional resources that "informal post-bacs" do not.

Resources that formal post-bac programs provide include but are not limited to:

- MCAT preparation
- Committee letters
- Research opportunities built into the curriculum
- Smaller class sizes
- Advisors with specialized knowledge of the medical application cycle
- In-depth application review
- Possible linkage to their medical school/ health profession school

A formal program is best suited for students who need structure, additional support while applying to their professional program, and organization to complete their classes successfully.

Formal programs also tend to be:

- Expensive (~\$30K+/ year)*,
- Limited/no financial aid support
- Must apply to the program– applications may include a personal statement, letters of recommendation, GPA requirement, and MCAT/GRE.

* Program costs will vary. Verify tuition costs directly with the institution.



Informal (DIY) Post-Bacs

Since the courses you complete during an informal post-bac will be calculated into your undergraduate GPA, an informal post-bac is the most cost-effective way to improve your GPA or complete prerequisite classes for medical school. If completed successfully, an informal post-bac can show an upward trend (see Q 3 for more information regarding upward trends), making you a more competitive applicant. Unlike a formal post-bac program, DIY post-bacs will categorize you as a “Non-Degree Seeking” student and will not grant a degree/certificate. As a non-degree-seeking student, you will also be low in priority during class registration; applying early and staying current on class registration dates is essential.

You can complete a DIY post-bac at a community college or 4-year university. The most significant difference between both options is cost; upper-division classes are only offered at a 4-year institution. To visualize the difference in cost between a community college and a 4-year institution, I will use California as an example. Completing one unit credit at a [community college costs around ~\\$46](#)⁷ instead of a [4-year university ~\\$320](#).⁸ An informal post-bac would be the best option for someone who has to retake a few prerequisite classes due to receiving a C- or below or for someone with a solid upward GPA but needs to complete a few more prerequisite courses.

A common mistake students make during informal classes is not correctly articulating courses. Articulating courses means -- assessing if the course you take at one institution is transferable and fulfills the course requirement at another state, public, or private institution.

Choosing the correct course is especially important when selecting classes that fulfill prerequisites. Understanding which courses meet the requirements for medical school or other graduate programs can be a daunting task. Courses may be titled or structured differently at each institution. The complexity of matching classes can result in lost time, money, and motivation for students. Avoid this by talking to an academic advisor at the institution you plan to attend and verifying the classes will be accepted at the medical school you are applying to. Advisors are trained in reviewing and matching courses to prepare you to transfer. AAMC has a [list of science](#)³ classes they take.

Informal (DIY) Post-Bac Programs	Formal Post-Bac Programs
Record Enhancer	Record Enhancer
Career Changer	Career Changer
	Degree Seeking (Masters or Certificate Program)

Career changer

Suppose you completed an undergraduate degree that did not fulfill medical school prerequisites and are deciding to pursue a healthcare career. In that case, a career changer post-bac may be the right choice. For example, let's say you graduated with an English major, and after graduation, you choose to pursue medicine. A pre-med post-bac program can provide the science courses required to meet medical school requirements without completing another undergraduate degree.

Post-bac programs can help anyone interested in medicine (MD or DO), dentistry, veterinary medicine, pharmacy, podiatry, and more.

Record enhancing programs

Record-enhancing programs are intended for students who have completed their prerequisite classes but need to strengthen their GPA.

The AAMC will categorize your undergraduate GPA in two ways: BCPM GPA and overall GPA. Maintaining a high GPA in both areas is essential to medical school admissions. BCPM stands for Biology, Chemistry, Physics, and Math. Most prerequisite classes for medical school will count towards your BCPM GPA. To see what classes fall in this category, check out the complete list of [BCPM classes here](#).³ Most students will pursue a post-bac because of low grades in this area.

Remember, if you are still in undergrad and had a semester with low grades, it is vital to see if you qualify for academic renewal. Academic renewal or other grade forgiveness processes may boost your GPA. (see Q7 for more information regarding Academic Renewal).

Record-enhancing postbac programs can be completed through a formal program or DIY style.

Master's Program

An advantage of completing a program that awards a master's degree as opposed to a program that awards a certificate of completion is the ability to pursue additional career options if you ultimately decide that medical school is not a good fit for you. Other benefits of choosing a master's program geared for pre-health students are:

- MCAT preparation
- Committee letters
- Research opportunities built into the curriculum
- Smaller class sizes
- Advisors with specialized knowledge of the medical application cycle
- In-depth application review
- Possible linkage to their medical school/ health profession school

Remember that your undergraduate GPA will remain the same since you will be completing graduate-level coursework. If you can complete your program with solid grades, your upward GPA trend will demonstrate your ability to complete rigorous coursework.

*Health professional programs may prioritize undergraduate GPA over graduate GPA; other programs may not have a preference and put more value on an upward trend. It is best to ask an admissions counselor what they recommend if you have a target medical school.



Q6. What common obstacles do students face when pursuing a post-bac program?

Though completing a post-bac is possible and beneficial, it may be hard academically, financially, and emotionally. This decision must be taken seriously and viewed as a "2nd" and potentially last chance to apply to medical school. Prerequisite sciences classes don't have an "expiration date," but some medical schools prefer that science courses not be more than five years old. This may be a factor if there is significant time between completing your science classes and applying to medical school.

Completing a post-bac can be time-consuming, and many students have expressed how isolating this time in their educational journey can be. Even more, some students lose motivation. Applying to medical school is time-consuming, and you will have to eventually skip significant life events due to prioritizing studying. Setting boundaries early on and expectations with family, friends, and partners is essential. These conversations are challenging, but I ask you to explore healthy boundary-setting with a mental health professional.

Below are some mental health resources to help begin to start your process

- [United We Dream](#) ⁹
- [Undocumental Health](#) ¹⁰
- [Immigrants Rising](#) ¹¹

Scheduling time for self-care will make your journey more manageable. Whether that be:

- Going to the gym
- Scheduling a phone call with a loved one
- Taking a walk
- No screen time for 30 minutes in the morning
- Watching an episode of your favorite show before starting work
- Getting coffee/ dinner with a friend

However, self-care looks to you. Intentionally scheduling time to decompress from the day is valuable and will set you up for success in the marathon you have ahead.

Historically, the biggest obstacle undocumented students face when completing a post-bac will be finances; cost and tuition must be considered when making this decision. Also, being unable to work and the potential loss of income due to completing a post-bac will make formal post-bacs unachievable for some students. Consider a DIY post-bac and taking evening classes if that is your case. We will discuss tuition later on in the document.

Q7. What is academic renewal?

Academic renewal is the process of removing previously substandard academic grades from your record. Academic renewal is used when a past substandard grade does not reflect your current demonstrated ability. Medical emergencies or other personal issues for which you may have medical records, police reports, or further proof may be a reason to apply for academic renewal.

Every institution has its own rules and processes for academic renewal, but here are some things that you can ask your records office or academic advisor:

1. What is the academic renewal process at my campus?
2. How many times can I apply for academic renewal?
3. Do I have to be enrolled in an undergraduate degree program, or can I come back to file an academic renewal if I have graduated?
4. Do I have several units or a certain GPA before academic renewal can be applied?

Q8. Should I reveal my undocumented status?

Talking about your status is your decision. You can be selective of the information you include in your personal statement. Your experiences, immigrant stories, and skills learned through those experiences may help you stand out from other applicants, especially if you explain why those experiences make you a great candidate for the program.

Here are examples to help you if you choose to speak about your status.

Being undocumented:

- Made you a well-rounded student;
- Made you culturally competent and sensitive to serve diverse populations;
- Helped you stay focused, motivated, and passionate about medicine; and
- It allows you to contribute significantly to the diversity of a medical school and teaches you how to persevere in difficult situations.

When choosing which experiences to discuss, select those relevant to your medical interest. Being undocumented and the journey of this community can be triggering to talk about. You do not have to focus on areas you don't feel comfortable with. Please do not feel that you have to share your entire life story or provide any experiences that were traumatic and that do not tie into your choice of pursuing medicine.

However, if being undocumented has significantly influenced your desire to pursue medicine, discussing relevant experiences in your statement can be advantageous. You can thoroughly explain what experiences have shaped you and allowed personal growth. You can also explain how these experiences have prepared you for a career in medicine.

Suppose you are concerned about revealing your status. In that case, you can talk about hardships related to your status, such as not qualifying for financial aid in college, having to support the family in various ways, and not having access to health insurance. However, you do not have to explicitly state that you underwent these challenges because of your status. Based on the staff and administrators you meet and based on your comfort level as time progresses, you can then decide who and when to start telling individuals who can provide support about your status.



It is also important to note that any information you include in your statement will open the door for the readers and interviewers to ask follow-up questions. If you are not used to discussing your experiences as undocumented, you may feel uncomfortable expressing your feelings during the interview.

Things to keep in mind:

- You can freely talk about difficult experiences during interviews by being open and honest in your statement. If you've practiced talking about those experiences on paper, then talking about them in person might be more comfortable. Also, whether or not you bring the topic up yourself, someone might ask you questions such as "How do you intend to finance medical school?" and "Are there any present obstacles to completing your medical degree?"
- Also, if your interviewer doesn't know you are undocumented, they may ask questions that may put you in a challenging situation. If these questions take you off-guard and you have yet to practice an appropriate response beforehand, this could throw you off during the interview. Come prepared to answer questions related to your status, even if you have yet to reveal it within your statement.
- Revealing your status can increase the visibility of undocumented students interested in the medical field. Many medical schools have yet to work with their first undocumented student. Staff and administrators may have limited resources to offer you and feel they cannot establish resources, especially financial support. This will leave you feeling as if you either can't continue in your medical school journey OR feel that you have to be the one to advocate.
- Advocating and educating faculty and staff about the needs of undocumented students can be burdensome on top of all the work that applying to medical school requires. However, you will be paving future students' paths by talking about your status and the policies and issues relevant to you, either in your statement or reaching medical schools. The labor for each student will decrease over time, and it will be because of your leadership.
- Your application may be placed on hold or denied if it presents more questions than answers for the admissions committees. These administrators will often think ahead and think cautiously about the implications that an individual's undocumented status produces. In our experiences, schools raised concerns about whether or not completing clinical rotations, residency training, and obtaining a physician's license is possible. This can also vary based on state policies regarding professional licensure for undocumented individuals.
- Talking about a sensitive topic is emotionally, mentally, and spiritually taxing. Sharing your experiences as undocumented, especially when you feel vulnerable, can be challenging. We recommend you have the support to help you through the process.

We recommend you speak to educators and deans or meet with Pre-Health Dreamers staff to learn how programs and institutions work. Understanding "who is who?" and who has leverage to provide support is essential, especially when seeking financial support. Financial aid counselors may often not have the resources to support other than providing a list of possible scholarships.

Q9. Is there financial aid available for post-bac programs?

A post-bac program is usually not classified as a secondary undergraduate degree, meaning no degree will be awarded after the program. Most states that offer financial aid to undocumented students during undergraduate studies have limited to no financial assistance for post-undergraduate educational programs, including post-bac programs.

Your best action is to contact programs (financial aid office, program directors, diversity and inclusion office, etc.) you are interested in early to ask if they offer financial support to undocumented students.

Your institution may also offer additional resources, such as:

- Tutoring Services
- Undocumented Student Club
- Undocumented Student Task Force
- Dream/Resource Center
- Lending Library (book vouchers, etc.)
- Transportation Services (bus, etc.)
- Housing Services
- Food Pantry (resources for food insecurity)

Additionally, the following are [Scholarships for PostBac](#)¹² students.

Q10. Are there any tips on how to succeed in a post-bac program?

- Apply for a program that will review your application holistically.

The best indicators of this will be viewing their mission and vision statement. How the administration responds to questions, such as, "Does your program accept undocumented students? Is there any financial support or resources available for undocumented students?" will also indicate how knowledgeable and accepting the program is to undocumented students.

In 2014, in a national post-baccalaureate premedical programs database, 71 of the 200 programs (36%) focused on groups underrepresented in medicine and/or economically or educationally disadvantaged students.² Post-baccalaureate premedical programs with a special focus on diversity, sustained through consistent institutional funding, may be an effective institutional strategy to promote greater health professions workforce diversity, particularly physician-workforce diversity.

- Seek a support system before applying:

There needs to be more support for undocumented students in post-bac programs. Research the program and speak with deans, administrators, and counselors to create your long-standing support while completing your program.

- Research the institution early on.

Post-bac programs can be expensive. Programs are available at public and private institutions. Additional support varies from school to school, and you may find additional support that is not advertised if you research the program early on.

- Build boundaries with loved ones.
- See question 6 for some mental health resources.

Final Word

Pre-Health Dreamers understand the complexity that comes with pursuing a career in health care and being undocumented. Paying homage to dreamers who came before us, we urge you to continue being curious and dreaming. Whether you pursue a post-bac or not, know that a whole community is rooting for your success. Being undocumented does not define your ability to complete your education and work in your desired field. It may be time-consuming, requiring extra steps, self-advocacy, research, and a strong community network. Deciding to go down this path comes with financial, mental, and academic burdens, but it can also propel you to begin your career in healthcare. PHD can not decide for you, but we are here to act as an educational tool and a soundboard while you review each program's pros and cons. Please meet with one of our staff members to discuss your options or where you are in your journey.

You can also visit www.phdreamers.org/resource-post-bac for more information.

En Comunidad,

Rocio Muñante, Network and Training Manager & the Pre-Health Dreamers' Team

Contact Information

For any questions or clarifications, please contact the project lead:

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