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FAQ: Discussing marginalized identities in your medical school application




Introduction:

On June 29, 2023, the US Supreme Court issued a ruling in *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard* which ended the practice of explicit racial consideration in higher education admissions, more commonly known as affirmative action. This FAQ document is intended to provide advice and guidance to applicants around discussing marginalized identities in their medical school application in the wake of this ruling. Marginalized identities include racial and ethnic identities as well as gender identity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and disability status.

Frequently Asked Questions:

Question	Answer
<p>I'm not sure that my marginalized identities are part of my journey to medical school – should I still include them in my application? If so, how?</p> 	<p>Be honest about your journey. If you do not feel certain aspects of your life have a place in your application, you should not force their inclusion. If you feel conflicted about including something in your application, try exploring that feeling. Practicing introspection can be therapeutic and lead to important points to include in your application. Mentioning these aspects of your identity in relation to your journey to medical education is a great way to emphasize how diversity can positively impact both individuals and society as a whole.</p> <p><i>Exercise: Try free writing an answer to the question, “How did [race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, disability status, etc.] influence my decision to become a physician?” Compare this to any draft of your personal statement and note similarities and differences.</i></p>
<p>My past experiences with my marginalized identities are traumatic.</p>	<p>You may feel pressure to share every detail about your experiences, but it is best to remember that you are in control</p>

<p>How do I talk about them in my application?</p> 	<p>of what you share. If something feels too difficult or intimate to share, you always have the choice to omit it. If you feel something needs to be stated but are not comfortable sharing all parts of it, consider what level of detail you are willing to share. Admission committees are interested in learning what you <i>learned</i> from an experience and what part it played in your journey to medicine. You don't necessarily need to provide all details of the event to explain what you learned. Focus on emphasizing the lessons you learned or personal growth you endured because of your experiences rather than the personal emotions you have attached to said experiences.</p> <p><i>Exercise: Spend some time grounding yourself before writing about your traumatic experience (take a walk, go to the gym, play with your pet, meditate). Then free write about your experience without worrying about organization, structure, sounding polished, or being concise. Once done, put it away and take a break. Come back to your writing later and highlight the lessons learned and how they led you to medicine. Put that in your personal statement/secondary essay/etc. and get feedback from someone else on whether more detail is needed.</i></p>
<p>Where in the application can I talk about my marginalized identities?</p> 	<p>You are welcome to include discussion of your marginalized identities anywhere in your application, including in your personal statement, descriptions of extracurricular activities, and/or secondary application.</p>
<p>What are ways that marginalized identities have led others towards medicine?</p>  	<p>There are countless ways that individuals' marginalized identities may lead them towards medicine. Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desired future patient population • Core values such as equity, access, fairness • Learning more about health outcomes for patients sharing marginalized identities

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Own/family experiences with healthcare • Volunteer activity, club, area of study that led them to medicine • Understanding the shared experiences of others in relation to these personal characteristics
<p>If a marginalized identity directly impacted my ability to study for the MCAT, obtain certain grades, or limit any other opportunity, should I write about that? If so, should I write about it in my personal statement?</p> 	<p>If you think there is a clear link then it is reasonable to mention it in a personal statement or secondary application essay where applicable. Remember that admissions committees want to hear about lessons learned and what brought you to pursue medicine, so use this lens to discuss the matter.</p> <p><i>Exercise: Think about a situation where your identity affected your journey and then write down the impact it had on you. Take a break. When you return to your writing, consider all the ways you grew from the experience, what you learned, and how it affected your drive to pursue medicine. After reflecting on all of these aspects, decide what fits best into a personal statement or secondary application essay.</i></p>
<p>Will my application be negatively impacted if I choose to discuss my race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc? How will admissions committees keep from being unbiased during the application review process?</p> 	<p>While we can't speak for all admissions committees, we know that many require their members to undergo implicit/unconscious bias training. Although these measures cannot eliminate all bias in the application process, our observation has been that sharing one's lived experience through the application does not have a significant negative impact on admissions outcomes.</p>

Student-submitted examples of addressing marginalized identities in medical school applications:

- Growing up, I often served as an interpreter for my parents. I saw firsthand the barriers for immigrants, like my parents, to fully participate in their care. This inspired me to learn about health outcomes in Spanish-speaking communities and ultimately cultivated a passion for serving these communities. I want to be the doctor that can communicate directly with my patients, the kind of doctor that my family did not have growing up.

- *Note that the bulk of this passage is about how the experience led to wanting to be a physician. The writer did not need to describe the experience in detail to get their point across.*
- Growing up, my multiracial identity fueled my curiosity for the lived experiences of others—I wanted to know more about others so I could find where I fit in. As I grew older, this curiosity became linked with a desire to advocate for other people of color—my experiences with discrimination and intersectionality informed my allyship with marginalized groups. My identity motivates my desire to become a doctor—I want to advocate for underserved communities in medicine.
- I was not wounded by how I grew up; on the contrary; it inspired a drive in me. The hardships I faced growing up made me want to be a physician. This is not an uncommon scenario, and you have undoubtedly seen it before. In childhood, I frequently felt helpless to control what was going on around me. I heard my first gunshot when I was in kindergarten. We lived with roaches, bedbugs, and poverty. Even if they were difficult, through these experiences, I learned resiliency, self-sufficiency, and accountability. Call it reaction formation or human nature, but the feeling of helplessness growing up made me want to help others.