

INTERVIEW WITH A DO STUDENT

Understanding Osteopathic
Medicine and Navigating
the Application Process

INTERVIEW WITH A DO STUDENT UNDERSTANDING OSTEOPATHIC MEDICINE AND NAVIGATING THE APPLICATION PROCESS

Donald Gusfa is currently a second-year student at the Michigan State University College of Osteopathic Medicine. After completing his undergrad at Michigan State in Microbiology, Gusfa worked on building his application profile and applied only to DO schools. In this interview, he discusses what attracted him to the DO philosophy, what the hardest part of attending medical school is, application tips, and more.

What first attracted you to applying to DO schools?

For me it was that my undergraduate institution had a DO school. So, when I was actually looking for how to even start applying, the first person I talked to was an advisor for DO students at Michigan State.

Was it something that the advisor told you that drew you to those programs?

A whole lot of factors drew me to the programs. The philosophy made sense, especially for me. My stats weren't the best, so MD schools were less likely to accept me. DO schools tend to admit students with lower MCAT scores and GPAs. So that was what first made me consider that there are things to love about DO schools, especially where I ended up.

There's a lot of hate for DO schools, but I definitely enjoy my experience here. I think the osteopathic medical treatment does bring a lot to the table, especially the attention that's paid to the muscular system. It has opened a lot of doors for students who graduate from DO school. For every field where there is a DO version of that field, you can be a part of both MD and DO. To later be matched with an MD residency, DO students will have to take and perform well on the USMLE. You can then get licensed to practice, do surgeries and prescribe medication in all 50 states.

For anyone who doesn't know, what is the DO philosophy and how is it different from MD?

For starters, the fact that there is a philosophy is a difference. Any good MD or DO will pretty much agree that all three parts are ripped out in practice at DO school. A lot of material is taught in the light of the philosophy. If you want it broken down - the body is a unit of mind, body, and spirit. Self-regulation is related to structure and function. So, if a bone's out of its socket, it probably won't heal that well or move that well. That's where a DO comes in.

Is it significantly different from MD because there's a binding philosophy behind it?

MD is almost purely science driven. Whatever the most research points to is going to be the answer 100% of the time. And if someone chose that research direction, there might be some grey areas. The DO philosophy helps those grey areas in the sense that if the instruction is not so clear - maybe whether you're supposed to cut or not cut, or whether or not you should go in hospice care - the philosophy starts to come into play.

What is it like studying at a DO program?

That is really dependent on the program, and for MD too as you know. My institution is largely online. A lot of schools have mandatory attendance. So, what ends up happening is I go through the material as fast as I can and use the resources that they give me. Other schools are different. It all depends.

What are the differences in the application process between MD and DO schools?

They have separate applications. Since I only applied to DO schools, I wasn't too concerned about the MD side of the application. But they are separate, meaning that you're going to want a separate essay on the philosophies for the DO side, for example. Moneywise, DO applications have a startup cost followed by a cost for application. Then you do \$50 to \$100 for the schools you send it to.

How can you tailor the personal statement towards DO schools?

If you look at a lot of the message boards, there's a running joke of being holistic, which is basically, admissions offices want to look at you as a whole applicant and not just a piece of you. On the flip side, your application reflects your whole personality and not just the numbers, even though the numbers are very important. When you write DO essays, approach it in terms of thinking about the body as a whole, and so relating it to the philosophy - or at least I chose to do it this way. I said, "Hey, I want to focus on prevention in this essay because I know that they are very much about self-regulation and disease prevention in DO school." In my secondary application, I focused on a story about the year ahead - here is me as a person and here are the lessons I learned this year.

What are the kinds of people that are a good fit for DO programs?

When I did interviews, I realized there's a lot of variation between school to school. Liberty University definitely had more people that focused on the spiritual side of things. And when I talked to a few students, I heard rumors that MSU preferred older candidates. They preferred applicants that maybe had a job, people that used to be nurses or used to fly helicopters – a bunch of people that lived a real life and are now going back to school, going back to the holistic thing. So, the patterns I noticed were that a lot of admitted students were people that were different, and definitely a large portion of those admitted were older.

What is the timeline like for DO applications?

The process is that you submit the primary application, then they send you a secondary application, which is just more essays. Then you get invited to an interview, that's when they say, "you can come back." Most of my primary applications were submitted the day it was allowed to go out that year. The secondary applications came almost immediately - within a few weeks. All of them in late June, early July. Interview-wise, I was getting most of my interview invites throughout September. A couple in August and a couple a little after that. Acceptances usually came two weeks after the interviews.

You interviewed with a lot of different schools. What was that process like?

It was mainly group interviews. Usually, I was part of a group of 20 people that came in for the day. They always tour you around the school, make you want to go there. Then they serve you lunch and usually after lunch you'll do the hard part, which is the interview. They end with semantic things like financial aid meetings. Most of them are like that.

I did have one MMI. That was Michigan State - it was very interesting. Usually it's people that work at the school, and they bring it back to you. "What do you like to do?" "What are you like?" MMI was a weird test to gauge specific things. I'm not allowed to say specifics about questions. They'll usually do a few things - it's either in-person or a couple problems to solve.

Here's an example. You know those camp games where everyone holds hands and campers have to untie the knot they made themselves? They'll do that with a bunch of people in professional attire. You'll be in a suit jacket and they'll say, "Okay, untie yourself." Or a lot of them will say, "You're in a situation now," and then have you provide rapid responses. It tests your problem-solving skills and social ability. It's like a gauntlet of "guess what happens next." The answer is always "don't just try to solve the problem. Try to be a good person while you do it. If you are doing that untie the knot game and you figure it out, they don't want to see you take charge and yell at people to make it happen. They want to see you work with the people next to you. The point isn't to solve the problem. They want to see that you're a good person who could handle a patient well. Usually what they tell you to do isn't what they are looking for.

What was the most difficult part of the application process?

The waiting periods between the primary, the secondary, and the interviews. Honestly, the emotional part is what hits the hardest. At the end of the day, writing an essay is not that hard. If you're interviewing, once you do one or two, you get more comfortable. Then there are people who can just walk in and be a great interviewee because they are social butterflies. But, not knowing for three weeks at a time, it wears you out. It can sometimes be months if you're waiting between a secondary and an interview. The interview invite can come a lot later. It's the time in between that's rough.

What was the most surprising aspect about either applying to or attending a DO school?

Honestly, the caliber of people. When you get into school, the people you're standing next to are very smart and very, very nice people. Your fellow students are the kind of people that you almost don't like because they're so good. It's everyone around you - from the teachers to students. I got there and I genuinely had a culture shock - this is the best group of people I've ever been around. Everyone you talk to is known for something. When you absolutely try your best at something and get 25% in the class average, it's like oh, I couldn't have put more into this but also - everyone's better.

What advice would you give to students who are pre-med students right now or currently preparing to apply to DO schools?

First of all, don't be me. Applying is like getting past hurdles so that admissions officers can eventually look at you and see if they want you to come. So for me, someone who had some lower stats, I was getting filtered out of places because my MCAT was a 503. First step, don't be me. Second step, if you are me, really pay attention to what schools want. A big step is getting past these filters - there are some very easy things that you didn't think would matter that do. And no matter what you do in other areas will not compensate if you got eliminated before they even saw you.

The first year I applied, I didn't have enough shadowing experiences. Even though I had enough of pretty much everything else, I'd only shadowed one or two doctors. And that was enough for almost none of them to interview me out of 17 schools, and that was the main difference between the two years that I applied. Any time you're applying, make sure that you're covering all bases. If you can beat the filter before they look at you, then you're doing well.

What is the hardest part about medical school?

Volume, the sheer volume. I took a test this morning where the course pack was a thousand pages covered over the past two weeks. Almost nothing is conceptually that hard, 20% is actually hard to understand. The problem is, it's just way more information in medical school in terms of material, even if you took some hard science classes in undergrad like I did. You need to both know it and know it well enough to apply it in scenarios. Using the pancake analogy - it adds up. You need to make sure you're chipping away every day, and that you're not falling behind too far before the test date comes.

Do you have any specific ways that you study or keep up with the volume of material?

This may not help the kids coming in because of the change in the STEP system last week. I am a person committed to Anki, a flashcard app that does space repetition, aka if you get it right today you see it tomorrow, if you get it right tomorrow you can see it in two days, if you get it right then you see it a week later. The interval increases and the idea of that is to know all the knowledge by the time the first two years are done.

Can you talk a bit more about what STEP is and the recent change?

STEP 1 is the MD version of boards and Level 1 is the DO version. I have to take Level 1 to be a doctor. The reason I'm taking STEP is to compare myself to the MD students. You do a total of 3 STEP tests. Because the first one is basic sciences, a lot of residency directors use it to compare you to other students because it's a national bell curve. It's a universal equalizer. It's basically assessing how well you know things.

About 3 days ago though, the STEP became pass/fail. There's no score. Previously, it was a scored system, with an average of about 230 and a standard deviation of 20 points. So, if you're at a 250 you were the 85th percentile kid. If you're 210 you're in the 50th. It was a curve that was used to compare you to all the students nationally. They made the switch out of the blue. Now the incoming class doesn't get reported at all and it's just pass/fail. So now, all you have to do is pass it. This completely changes things, probably due to the fact that this is how they view the students. So, I don't know how useful Anki would be in the long term.