

Well-Rounded Docs

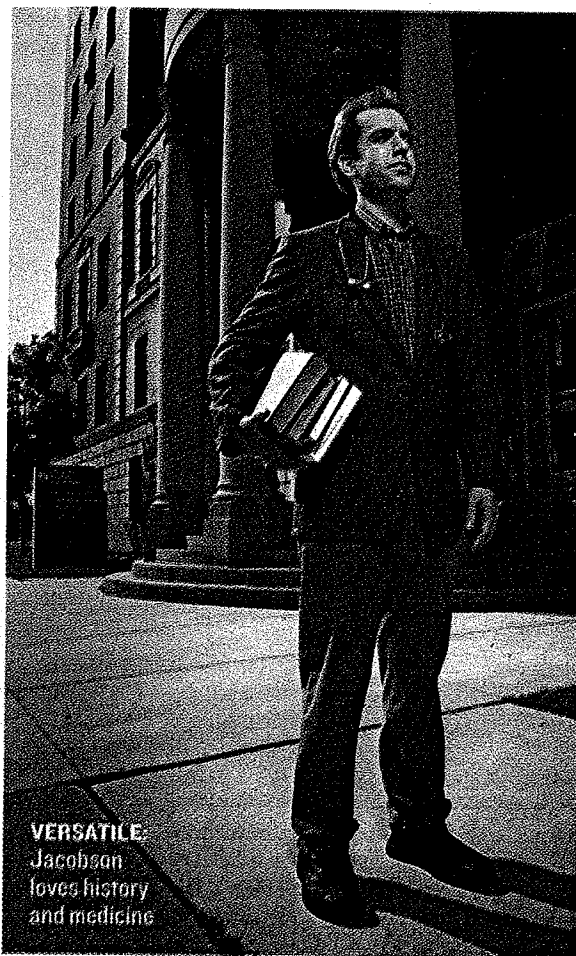
That's the goal as medical schools seek out and admit more nonscience students. English majors welcome.

BY SARAH KLIFF

ONE WEEK INTO HIS PREMED classes at Washington University in St. Louis, Ryan Jacobson was rethinking his plan to become a doctor. His biology and chemistry classes were large, competitive and impersonal—not how he wanted to spend the next four years. “Sitting in a chemistry class, I knew it wasn’t the right place for me,” he says. Jacobson found the history department, with its focus on faculty interaction and discussion, a better fit. But he had no intention of leaving his medical aspirations behind. So Jacobson majored in history while also taking the science and math courses required for medical school. When he graduated last spring, he won the departmental prize for undergraduate thesis for his work on the history of race relations in Tulsa, Okla. He started medical school at the University of Illinois last month. “Historians are supposed to integrate information with the big picture,” he says, “which will hopefully be useful as a physician.”

Even as breakthroughs in science and advances in technology make the practice of medicine increasingly complex, medical educators are looking beyond biology and chemistry majors in the search for more well-rounded students who can be molded into caring and analytic doctors. “More humanities students have been applying in recent years, and medical schools like them,” says Gwen Garrison, vice president for medical-school services and studies at the Association of American Medical Colleges. “The schools are looking for a kind of compassion and potential doctoring ability. This makes many social-science and humanities students particularly well qualified.”

The number of science majors applying to medical school has been steady for the past decade—about 65 percent of applicants major in biology or another physical science. What’s changing is who gets in. When Gail Morrison, who runs admissions at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, sorts through the school’s 6,500 yearly applicants, she is not looking for students who spent their undergrad years hunched over biology and



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physics textbooks. “It doesn’t make you a better doctor to know how fast a mass falls from a tree,” she says. Approximately 40 percent of the students that Penn accepts to its medical school now come from non-science backgrounds. That number has been rising steadily over the past 20 years. “They’ve got to be happy and have a life outside of medicine,” says Morrison, “otherwise they’ll get overwhelmed. We need whole people.”

In 1999, a national survey of first-year medical students found that 58 percent

took a social-science class for personal interest. In last year’s entering class, the number was more than 70 percent. Humanities students also fare better on the MCAT, the standardized test for medical-school admissions. Among the 2006 applicants to medical school, humanities majors outscored biology majors in all categories.

Michael Sciola, who’s been advising premed students at Wesleyan University for the past 13 years, has seen liberal-arts majors become more attractive to medical schools. And he’s not surprised that those who stray from science are finding success. “Medical schools have really been looking for that scholar-physician in the past few years,” he says. “We’re living in an increasingly complex world, and the liberal arts give you the skills to understand that better.”

The Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York has a program designed to attract nonscience majors. Each year, Mount Sinai accepts about 30 college sophomores from around the country through its humanities and medicine program. The students do not have to take the MCAT, but they are required to pursue a humanities major as undergrads before starting at Mount Sinai. “The students who come in with a humanities background see patients more as a whole patient,” says Miki Rifkin, the program’s director. She says that these students often outperform their peers, with higher rates of competitive residency placements.

Andrea Schwartz, a third-year medical student in the Mount Sinai program, attended Columbia University and the Jewish Theological Seminary and has a dual degree in history and Bible studies. “Having such a varied experience has given me the opportunity to appreciate different angles,” says Schwartz, who is interested in geriatrics. “The intense text study I did as an undergrad helps me when I’m taking patients’ histories. It taught me to be a better listener.” That sort of training may be just what the doctor ordered. ■