

Choosing Your Schools

“

Applying to medical school can be both exciting and stressful. For me, one of the more exciting parts was that I had a choice about where I applied. There were three key things that I looked at when I was exploring my medical school options. First, I met with current medical students to get to hear their perspective of the medical school. Second, I read through each school's website and their mission statement. Third, I looked at the location.

Hearing about students' experiences from medical schools I was interested in gave me a lot of perspective and insight about the culture, curriculum, student life, and values of the institution. I was also keenly aware of the deficit of doctors in my home state, and I wanted to attend a medical school that sought to ameliorate this problem. I specifically looked to see if that was included in the school's mission statement. Finally, I'm a homebody; I like my home state and love being close to family. My school is about 45 minutes from where I grew up. It's close to my family, church, and friends.

You may think that you need to apply to a long list of schools, but doing your research can help you narrow your choices down to the schools that are the best fit. Look at mission statements but don't neglect meeting with current students to hear about their experiences there. And don't forget to look within yourself. Your values, needs, and choices are a key factor in deciding where to apply and where to attend.

”



Weston Eldridge
MD Candidate
University of Mississippi
School of Medicine
Class of 2021

The Overall Mission of the School

Many of the differences among medical schools are obvious. Some schools are located on the East Coast, some on the West. Some are private; others, public. Some have a large entering class; others, small. Some have multiple campuses by way of regional campuses. And, as explained in Chapter 3, medical schools vary in the content of their courses, in the way they teach, and even in the way they grade and evaluate students.

These are all factors you'll want to consider as you narrow your selection, and we touch on them in the following pages. But the differences go even deeper, and at a very core level, medical schools have diverse missions and priorities. Because of these distinctions, what is significant to one school may be of only moderate importance to another, and these qualities naturally carry into the selection process.

Deciding where to apply requires that you become aware of the differences among schools, which is crucial, but it's also important to analyze yourself—your skills, experiences, career goals, and so forth—to identify the most appropriate matches. Take, for instance, an institution that places a strong emphasis on primary care. Is that the career path you intend to follow? If so, and especially if you can demonstrate your interest through extensive experience related to that area, you become a more attractive candidate on that basis alone.

That's one example. Other schools may be actively seeking students from specific geographic or rural areas. Others may be looking for students with a high potential for a research career. Still others may want to increase the number of doctors who plan to practice in their state (often a goal of public institutions). The differing missions among schools are reflected in their admission policies and standards.

If you need help with this self-analysis, think back to the various experiences you've had over the years. The ones you found especially rewarding or inspirational are likely to correlate with a specific area of interest and, by extension, a career goal.

Did you volunteer for two summers at a clinic in a **rural, underserved area**? Perhaps that's the direction you'd like to take your career in. If so, you'll want to seek out medical schools that place a high priority in that area.

Were the part-time jobs you had while doing research particularly gratifying? If you'd like to pursue a **research career**, look for schools that have a strong reputation in that area or are known for graduating a large percentage of medical students pursuing research careers.

Your interests and career goals are also demonstrated in other ways. Did you spend your junior year tutoring freshmen and sophomores in entry-level biology or chemistry? Perhaps you'd like to join a **medical school faculty** and educate the next generation of physicians. If so, find medical schools that have a relatively large percentage of graduates in teaching positions, and check whether the schools are affiliated with teaching hospitals.

Once again, keep in mind that applying to medical school is a two-way street. While you're looking for a match, so are the schools. Your experiences will provide good insights for the admissions officers and help them determine whether your interests and their missions are congruent. If you don't know which medical career path you want to pursue yet, that's okay. Aim to get as many rich and diverse experiences as possible so you will be a well-rounded applicant.

Kicking Off Your Research

There are several ways you can research schools to identify the ones that best match your own strengths, interests, and goals. Here are some factors to consider in making your selection:

- Research reputation and opportunities
- Community-based experiences and opportunities
- Geographic location
- School's teaching methods
- Program of elective courses
- Faculty mentorship
- Placement of recent graduates in specialty residencies
- Residency programs at hospitals affiliated with the school

The Medical School Admission Requirements™ website: Start your research with the medical school profiles on this site, aamc.org/msar. Here, each institution includes a clear mission statement and a description of its selection factors.

School websites and literature: You'll also want to review information provided by schools themselves. Although the specific content varies by school, each includes detailed material for prospective students.

Advisors: Your prehealth advisor or career counselor will be able to recommend specific schools likely to be a good "fit." These advisors have a lot of insight about the application process, so don't overlook this resource. Also, make sure you attend health career fairs to speak with admissions staff from medical schools and participate in premed or prehealth student organizations.

The Educational Program

It's easy to get caught up in a specific region or location, or you may recognize the name of a prestigious school and want to go there simply because it sounds impressive. You'll want to consider all your options, though. As you weigh your decision, you'll also want to consider the differences among the educational programs themselves.

There's likely going to be a strong relationship between a school's mission and its **curriculum**. You'll be able to gauge whether an institution's objectives align with your interests by analyzing course requirements and elective programs. A medical school with a mission to graduate more primary care doctors may, for example, have a track that provides additional training in that area. A school that emphasizes research may require their students to write a thesis or devote an extended period of time to scholarly pursuits.

As you do your research, also consider what **teaching methods** you find most effective. Do you tend to do well with self-directed or participatory learning exercises, or do you prefer a learning environment with the more traditional, lecture-based style? Although most medical schools use an educational model that combines a variety of methods, every program adapts their own design. Are you looking for classes that promote small-group discussions and problem-based learning exercises? Or are you more comfortable with a traditional teaching approach? Eventually, these are great topics to discuss with current students, but a good starting point for your exploration is a school's website, as well as the AAMC's curriculum directory (aamc.org/initiatives/cir).

There are many other factors you might want to think about. How will you be evaluated? At what point must students pass the first two steps of the United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE) before advancing in their education? What level of academic support is available? Is there a mentor system, for instance? What about cultural organizations and support services for minority and first-generation students—are they available? Questions such as these will undoubtedly enter into your final decision making.

How Do GPA and MCAT Scores Factor In?

Don't choose schools based solely on where you think your grades and MCAT® scores will be accepted. While there's no question that your educational record is important and that admissions officers seek candidates who are likely to succeed academically in their programs, it's important to realize that academics alone do not predict who will become an effective physician, and admissions officers know that all too well.

The fact that there are many instances in which a "high-scoring" applicant is not accepted to a medical school—and in which an applicant with lower-than-average grades and scores is—tells you that admissions officers must be looking at other factors.

Admissions officers are taking a more holistic approach to evaluating applicants. Through this practice, admissions officers assess candidates more broadly, looking not only at their “metrics” (GPA and MCAT scores) but also at their experiences and personal attributes.

You can read about the holistic approach to admissions in Chapter 8, “The Admission Decision.”

Attending Medical School in Your Home State

State residents enrolled in state-supported medical schools pay lower tuition than nonresidents. In addition, in-state residents are often given preference for admission (compared with out-of-state residents) for at least some of their spaces because the school receives state government support. With this in mind, you may want to give strong consideration to the public institutions in your state as you decide where to apply. Note that residency requirements are established by each state. Check with individual medical schools for policies regarding qualifying for in-state or residential status.

Nationally, 61% of 2017 matriculants attended schools in their home states.

International Students

There’s only a small number of international students—those who are not U.S. citizens or permitted to reside permanently in this country—at U.S. medical schools. If you are an international applicant, know that private medical schools are more likely to accept international students than public schools, and that most medical schools require completion of premedical coursework at a U.S. college or university. For more information, see the Aspiring Docs® fact sheet on applying as an international applicant at aamc.org/aspiringdocs.

Public or Private?

You may also be deliberating between public and private institutions. Typically, the most cost-effective option is to consider a public medical school in the state where you live. (If you’re from out of state, the cost differential between a public and a private school virtually disappears. See Table 10.1 in Chapter 10.) But don’t automatically assume, even if you’re interested in a state school near your home, that the private route will be more expensive under all circumstances. Some private institutions have large endowments that allow them to provide significant scholarship aid to qualifying students. These scholarships lower the “effective” tuition rate and permit those students to graduate with less educational debt than they would have if they had attended a public medical school in their home state.

Cost is only one consideration, though. Another element to be aware of when investigating the differences between private and public institutions is the school’s mission—and how it might relate to your own aspirations and interests. Although all medical schools—public or private—have different missions, certain public institutions may have specific goals related to their state, such as increasing the supply of physicians. (If the school is in your home state and you’d like to live and work there after graduation, that will be a factor from both your perspective and the school’s.) Other public institutions were founded by state legislators with an emphasis on the needs of a particular patient population—such as elderly, rural, or underserved groups—which should enter into your evaluation if that objective corresponds to your own career intentions.

Additional Factors to Consider

There are many other factors that may be important to you as you search for a good “fit,” including these:

Location. Perhaps you simply prefer a specific geographic region. Do you want to be close to family and friends? Do you prefer a warmer (or cooler) climate? Are you a fan of the East Coast ... or the South ... or the West? What about a bustling city environment versus a rural one? These factors play to your comfort

level, and all are valid considerations. Beyond that, though, location can also relate to your career goals, as well as to a school’s mission. If you hope to specialize in geriatrics, for example, a medical school located in an area with a higher-than-average proportion of older adults may be your best choice.

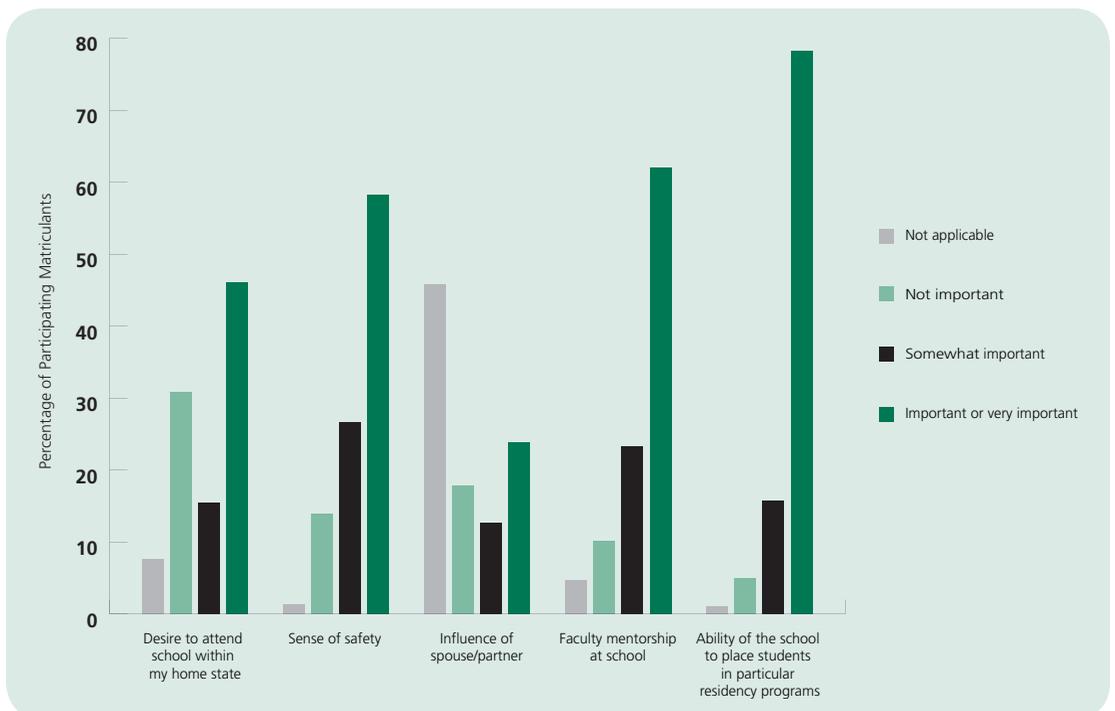
That’s looking at it from your perspective. Consider, for a moment, the school’s perspective. In some cases, a school may be seeking students from particular geographic regions in order to bolster its diversity, and you’ll want to consider the impact—if any—that your own state residence might have on your application to medical schools in other areas. On the other hand, there are schools that look for local, in-state students who will continue to work and contribute to communities in that state. Review each school’s mission statement to see what they’re seeking in their applicants.

Size and Demographics. The size and demographics of the medical school—both in terms of its student body and its faculty—may be a consideration for you as well. The school entries in the Medical School Admission Requirements website contain data on the prior year’s entering class, including the number of students by gender as well as by self-reported identification (aamc.org/msar).

Costs. Medical education is expensive, and the expenses associated with particular institutions will no doubt be a factor in your decision. You won’t know what your actual costs will be (or the degree of assistance you will receive) until a school sends you a financial aid package in conjunction with its acceptance offer. Still, in looking through the school entries in the Medical School Admission Requirements website, you can get a general idea about the relative expenses of each institution, and you can take those numbers into consideration as you narrow your selection.

“Additional” doesn’t mean less important. Figure 6.1 shows what matriculating students felt about specific factors in deciding which school to attend.

Figure 6.1. Matriculating students’ responses to this question: In choosing the medical school you now (or will) attend, how important were the following factors?



Source: AAMC’s 2017 Matriculating Student Questionnaire (MSQ).

Special Regional Opportunities

Finally, you should be aware that some states without a public medical school participate in special interstate and regional agreements that give their residents access to a medical education. Currently, there are five interstate agreements:

- The Delaware Institute of Medical Information and Research

dhss.delaware.gov/dhss/dhcc/dimer.html

1-302-577-3240

1-800-292-7935

- The Finance Authority of Maine's Access to Medical Education Program

famemaine.com/fi

1-800-228-3734

- University of Utah School of Medicine Idaho Contract

medicine.utah.edu/students/programs/md/admissions/residency-non-residency.php

1-801-581-7498

- The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education

wiche.edu/psep/medi

1-303-541-0200

- The WWAMI (Washington, Wyoming, Alaska, Montana, and Idaho) Program

uwmedicine.washington.edu/Education/WWAMI/Pages/Medical-School.aspx

You can learn more about each of these regional opportunities by visiting their websites or calling their program offices.



Worksheets at the end of chapters in this guide are available in fillable PDF format at aamc.org/msar-resources.

WORKSHEET 6.1

Factors to Weigh Before Applying

Use this form to identify and assess the schools where you may apply.

The Medical School Admission Requirement website allows you to filter your search for different medical schools by things such as class size, location, and community service requirement (aamc.org/msar). Every medical school has a different curriculum and style. This worksheet can help you determine which factors are important to you.

School name: _____

Factor	Ideal fit	Good fit	No opinion	Unsure	Not a fit	Notes
Course offerings						
Class size						
Location						
Research programs						
Technology						
Interviews and/or meetings with faculty						
Reputation						
Technology						
Tuition and financial aid						
Programs for minority or disadvantaged students						
Teaching methods						
Combined-degree offerings						
Campus tour						
Rural or community offerings						
Residency placement						

Impression of school: Favorable Undecided Unfavorable

Likelihood of applying: Will apply Undecided Unlikely to apply

Follow-up questions to ask: _____