

4 questions to consider when researching medical schools

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For prospective medical students researching medical schools, the volume of information available is vast. Narrowing your focus while choosing which medical schools to apply to and, ultimately, attend requires some idea of what you are looking for.

Medical students interviewed for this story shared what they wish they had known while applying to medical schools. Based on their insight, here are four questions prospective medical students should ponder.

Do you understand all the opportunities available? Imaima Casubhoy is a first-year medical student at the University of Missouri Kansas City (UMKC) School of Medicine. She said her biggest priority was identifying a program that would allow her to enter the workforce quickly. Casubhoy has been involved in volunteering at a local free clinic as a laboratory manager and has been an active member in UMKC's surgical interest group.

"One thing I wish I would have known during this process would have been to focus also on the extracurriculars and research opportunities offered by the school," she said. "Luckily, my school has a host of extracurricular and research opportunities available for students, but I did not give much thought to them until after I had enrolled. Looking back, I would definitely say that it is important to consider whether the opportunities provided by the school are best suited to you."

How do you want to be evaluated? The standard grading metrics students are evaluated on in their education prior to medical school may not be for everyone at the med school level. For Judy Fustok, a first-year medical student at Tulane University School of Medicine, the value of being in a pass-fail program has been significant.

"With a pass-fail school, you take away the stress of needing to get good grades and focus on just learning the material," she said. Fustok added that USMLE STEP exams are widely considered a "standard assessment to compare all medical students, so grades in the first two years of medical school seem arbitrary."

Are you considering the big picture? On the surface, medical school is four years. In reality, it is a launching pad. Looking at that school's track record may give you some indication of your career trajectory.

"Residency placement by graduates of a med school is extremely important," Fustok said. "Look at where residents are placed, geographically, [and consider the] competitiveness of the programs and competitiveness of the specialties."

Once you reach the point at which you may consider your future in greater depth, the AMA's Specialty Guide simplifies medical students' specialty selection process, highlights major specialties, details training information and provides access to related association information. It is produced by FREIDA™, the AMA Residency & Fellowship Database®.

Are you underrating personal fit? A medical school's clout is meaningless if you don't see yourself thriving there, Casubhoy believes.

"Oftentimes, students are looking to get into 'name brand' schools only," Casubhoy said by email. "While getting into those schools is not an easy feat, it is important to not overlook other schools as well. Every medical school is equipped to provide you with the tools you need to succeed as a future physician. Rather, it is important to focus on qualities of the medical schools that appeal most to you personally. It is so important to remember that you will flourish the most in the school that is most suited to your interests and needs."