Where do you see yourself in four years?

As a prospective medical student, the answer to that is likely to be accepting a medical degree. But getting to that stage requires finding the right venue to hone your skills.

Picking a medical school may be one of the biggest decisions you make at this early juncture in your physician career. It also is one that can have career-shaping ramifications. What advice do medical students offer for those weighing medical schools? Let’s take a look.

Speak to those in the know

Damani McIntosh-Clarke, MD, is an emergency medicine resident Mount Sinai Hospital in New York who attended George Washington University School of Medicine & Health Sciences. He applied to 20 medical schools. When it came time to narrow down the list of finalists, he sought first-hand accounts from those who could best offer them.

“If you can, I’d emphasize talking to students in a less formal environment,” said Dr. McIntosh-Clarke, an AMA member. “Either through your networks or if you just want to cold email a student, they will likely be receptive. To me, that’s the best way to get information on a program.”

Consider your support system
Whether it’s institutional or external, you’re going to need help during medical school. For Avani K. Patel, MD—now a psychiatry resident at the University of Mississippi Medical Center who attended the University of Mississippi School of Medicine—that meant looking at programs close to her family.

“College is change, but med school is a life change,” said Dr. Patel, an AMA member. “There’s so much information in so little time. It’s nice to have a support system close by if you need it. That was important to me. I couldn’t imagine starting somewhere totally new and not having the support of loved ones nearby.”

Honor your deal breakers

Dr. McIntosh-Clarke grew up in Barbados, so most every location stateside would include a change in the weather. Still, he couldn’t imagine going anywhere with a harsher climate than Philadelphia, where he completed his undergraduate studies.

“I’m glad I chose to come to D.C.,” he said. “We have winter, but it’s not that bad. If I did go to school in a place like Boston, for example, I would’ve been able to manage, but I would’ve been so miserable during winter. Here the winters are very manageable.”

Align your passions with your program

Dr. McIntosh-Clarke is social justice-minded. He wanted a medical school that represented his values.

“I wanted to find a fit where people were friendly and the school had good diversity in faculty and staff,” he said. “A medical school that was interested in serving a diverse population and really valued treating everyone, [George Washington] also has a big emphasis on public health. Because I was interested in health policy, D.C. was the perfect place to go to med school.”