Best medical schools? It's more about the right fit than rankings

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If you are an aspiring physician beginning to research where to apply, you might ask the question, “Which medical schools are best?”

Numerous publications rank medical schools. A recent commentary in the journal Academic Medicine—“America’s Best Medical Schools: A Renewed Critique of the U.S. News & World Report Rankings”—highlights the flawed science behind those rankings.

Problems in ranking

Medical school rankings are attempting to quantify something that is subjective. Looking at the US News & World report rankings as an example, the formula for calculating the rankings includes:

- Research activity.
- Assessment score by residency program directors.
- Research activity.
- Student selectivity.
- Median MCAT [Medical College Admission Test] total score of first-year class.
- Median undergraduate GPA of first-year class.
- Acceptance rate.

While those factors may go a ways toward offering a picture of how prolific those institutions are in producing research or how selective they are in their admissions process, they don’t, the Academic Medicine essay argues, offer much direction on which schools are best.

“The formula used to determine medical school rankings reflects opinions about the schools and what makes them ‘America’s Best,’ not facts grounded in empirical evidence,” says the commentary, written by William C. McGaghie, PhD, a professor of medical education and preventive medicine at
Mission in medical education

When pondering the best medical schools for your future, you may want to consider a school's mission. This aspect is overlooked in medical school rankings, McGaghie argues.

Medical school missions include quality education and clinical competence assessment, service to underserved patient populations, preventive health and health advocacy, among many others. The best school for you as a medical student is likely to be the one that has a mission that aligns with your values.

A school's mission can also help a student find the institution where they can be most comfortable and find projects that reflect their passions.

“Oftentimes, students are looking to get into ‘name-brand’ schools only,” said Imaima Casubhoy, a medical student at the University of Missouri Kansas City (UMKC) School of Medicine, and an AMA member. “While getting into those schools is not an easy feat, it is important to not overlook other schools. ... Every medical school is equipped to provide you with the tools you need to succeed as a future physician.”

Casubhoy said it’s key to “focus on qualities of the medical schools that appeal most to you personally,” adding that it is “important to remember that you will flourish the most in the school that is most suited to your interests and needs.”

Who produces the best residents?

That’s the question that anyone researching medical schools will come to early on in their research. And the answer is: it depends.

The commentary points to a recent study of first-year residents the University of Michigan Health System, “Assessing Residents’ Competency at Baseline: How Much Does the Medical School Matter?” Researchers evaluated performance data from nearly 1,800 new residents over a 10-year period. That study found that where residents attended medical schools is “weakly correlated with clinical competency as measured by a standardized objective structured clinical examination.”

Each medical student is different. Those who enter school with the highest grades and test scores aren’t guaranteed to become the best physicians.

As McGaghie writes: “What really matters for individual student success in professional education
(and life) is individual aspiration, effort, and grit that lead to successful attainment of education goals, not one's medical school pedigree.”