

Questions to ask when finalizing your medical school choice

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As spring arrives, medical school applicants have some idea of what their options are. Finalizing your medical school pick may be the biggest life decision you've made to date.

How should you pick the institution that will shape the opening stages of your journey in medicine? Asking the questions below may shed some insight on the question of where to begin your medical school career.

Should you stay local?

When it comes to public schools, in-state tuition costs are always lower for residents, but the amount will vary.

That math was a factor for Avani Patel, MD, when she decided to attend the University of Mississippi School of Medicine in Jackson. "I'm someone who doesn't like the idea of debt," said Dr. Patel, now a resident in the psychiatry program at Mississippi. "If you're getting a very similar education, why would you pay more—unless you want to pay more for the name or prestige?"

How much does name matter?

Looking longer term, your residency placement is more likely to depend on your body of work than where you accomplished it.

Or as William C. McGaghie, PhD, a professor of medical education and preventive medicine at Northwestern University's Feinberg School of Medicine, wrote in a 2019 essay on medical school rankings, "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."

How do you want to be assessed?

As you ponder medical schools, one of things you may want to consider is how your performance will be evaluated, and the accompanying pressures that may come with the assessment of your performance. The pass-fail grading system is becoming increasingly common in the pre-clinical years of medical education. That typically changes when students reach clinical training, however.

Does a school's mission fit your values?

Damani McIntosh-Clarke, MD, is an emergency medicine resident at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York. When he decided to attend medical school at George Washington School of Medicine & Health Sciences in Washington, D.C., it was in part because of his commitment to social justice.

"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."

Medicine can be a career that is both challenging and highly rewarding but figuring out a medical school's prerequisites and navigating the application process can be a challenge into itself. The AMA premed glossary guide has the answers to frequently asked questions about medical school, the application process, the MCAT and more.

Have peace of mind and get everything you need to start med school off strong with the AMA.