

Staying local for medical school: Students detail pros and cons

MAR 10, 2022

Brendan Murphy

Senior News Writer

When it comes to picking a medical school, should you stay close to home? There's no one right answer to that question for every future physician, but two medical students took time from their busy schedules to share their perspectives on the pluses and minuses on the question of how far to travel to attend medical school.

Pro: Potential to save on tuition

A 2017 Association of American Medical Colleges study (PDF) found that the median cost of attendance for students paying in-state tuition over four years was \$232,800.

That figure compares with the \$306,200 four-year median cost of attendance for medical students attending private institutions—a savings of \$73,400. It is worth noting that this saving only applies to in-state tuition on public medical schools, however.

Niki Patel is a fourth-year medical student at the University of Mississippi School of Medicine in Jackson. She grew up in rural Mississippi, with her family now living in the Jackson area. Her cost comparisons were stark.

“When looking at schools out of state, the out-of-state tuition was at least double compared to the in-state tuition,” said Patel, an AMA member.

Find out how much you can save by staying in-state for medical school.

Con: Being home can be distracting

Medical school is time-consuming and can often be an all-encompassing endeavor. For Victor Lopez-Carmen, a third-year medical student at Harvard Medical School, putting a bit of distance between him and the distractions of home made for increased focus.

“When I am home, I try to be fully present in my roles as a brother, son, uncle and a member of my tribes,” said Lopez-Carmen, an enrolled member of the Crow-Creek Sioux Tribe. “At school, I get to be the best relative and community member by being fully present as a medical student learner. Separating medical school and home geographically allows me to be fully present in all of my roles and gives me the best chance to be in environments where I can give maximum focus to the different aspects of them.”

Pro: Closer to your support system

Being physically closer to your loved ones can provide a badly needed support system given the stressors of medical school.

One major reason “to pick a school near your hometown would be ... the strong support you receive from your family,” Patel said. “Medical school is a big adjustment. It is very hard but rewarding. You want to surround yourself with people who care about you, as they will help you get through those tough four years.”

Pro: You never get homesick

Lopez-Carmen left Arizona for some cold Boston winters. He remembers that every December.

“It can be difficult to be far from family,” he said. “When there is a significant weather change, that is also a challenge. If you love warm weather like me, a part of you wants to pack up and fly South as soon as it drops below 50.”

Push: Effect on practice location

According to the AAMC’s 2021 *Report on Residents*, more than half (57.1%) of the people who completed residency training from 2011 to 2021 are practicing in the state where they did their residency training. How does medical school factor into that?

Patel said that by staying home for medical school she has found that, “from an M4 perspective, it can be disadvantageous when applying to residency programs, especially if you’re looking to move to another state or region of the United States. Many programs may have the idea that you will not want to move since you chose to attend school close to home.” She did add that these experiences are anecdotal and different residency programs and different specialties are going to view each residency candidate’s medical school experiences individually.

Having done his medical school—and potentially his residency training—away from his home state of Arizona, Lopez-Carmen has a different way of looking at it.

“The chance to experience learning in some of the world’s top-rated hospitals, which draw some of the most complex and challenging patients, was a huge factor for me [in picking Harvard] because I want to bring that experience back to my communities as a future physician.

“At some point, I want to be a physician for the Pascua Yaqui Tribe, and I know that will bring me back to Arizona at some point in my career.”