

# Helping students choose medical schools: A resource for students and non-resident tutors

## Rankings:

- Be skeptical of the *US News and World Report* rankings
  - They largely measure prestige (based on survey of deans and senior faculty), research funding, and faculty size. This may not have much bearing on the quality of training.
  - Score difference between schools often small, and may be statistically insignificant
  - The US News rankings are designed to sell magazines, not to be rigorous research

## What factors are important to you?

- **Location:**
  - Where do you want to live for 4 years?
  - Is it important to you to be close to friends and family?
  - Is climate important to you?
- **Learning style:**
  - Do you want weekly exams to “keep you honest”? Or do you want a more flexible, hands-off curriculum?
  - Do you prefer a more traditional, lecture-based curriculum, or a curriculum focused on small-group, problem-based learning?
  - Is it important to you to go to a school that has a pass/fail grading system?
- **Clinical opportunities and patient population:**
  - Do you prefer an urban hospital or a more rural setting? Is a larger patient population important to you (typically available in a large city)?
  - Is diversity of the patient population important to you?
- **Other opportunities:**
  - Do you want early clinical experience?
  - An emphasis on research?
  - Joint degree opportunities?
  - International opportunities?
- **School culture**
  - Do students seem happy? Is there a sense of community? Dating options? Diversity of student body? Age distribution of students?
- **Costs and funding**
  - What are the options for in-state schools (and therefore in-state tuition)?
    - Important to check residency requirements ahead of time!
  - Level of financial aid available
  - Funding for away electives and international experiences
  - Cost of living

## Assessing selectivity

- “Safeties” are difficult to predict – no guarantees
- The **Medical School Admissions Requirements** database (available for purchase online) and **Harvard applicant data book** (available from OCS) can give you a sense of GPA and MCAT scores for accepted students at each school
  - Harvard data may be more useful than MSAR when comparing GPA
  - Remember that personal characteristics will affect an applicant’s competitiveness as well
- **Most Harvard students** apply to approximately **20 schools**
  - Strongest applicants may be able to apply to fewer; applicants with lower GPA or MCAT may wish to apply to more. However, the mix of schools included is more important than the total number!
  - Other individual factors may play a role – e.g., California residents may wish to apply to all UC schools as well as out-of-state schools, meaning they might apply to more than 20 schools in total.

## International students

- See OCS website, and speak to OCS premed advisers or resident tutors for more information

## Nuts and bolts – a potential process to cast a wide net

1. Buy a subscription to the **Medical School Admissions Requirements (MSAR)**, which has a 2-page description of all allopathic (MD) medical schools. If you are interested in osteopathic (DO) programs then you’ll need to research those in addition to using the MSAR.
2. Flip through all the schools in the MSAR, eliminating the state schools that only admit in-state students, schools in locations where you definitely do not want to live, or other schools that you are sure do not interest you.
3. Make a list of the remaining schools that you are potentially interested in – this can be a list of 40-50 schools.
4. Read through the MSAR entries more closely for those 40-50 schools. Think about the factors listed above, and eliminate additional schools that don’t seem to fit for you.
5. Now that you have a working list, start to think about selectivity. While many individual-level factors play a role, making a spreadsheet of the average MCAT (in the MSAR) and Harvard GPA (from the Harvard applicant data book) for admitted students at each school will give you a rough sense.
6. Use this to create a list that contains a mix of “reach” schools (where admitted students have, on average, higher MCATs and GPAs) and “non-reach” schools (where your MCAT and GPA are around or above the average for admitted applicants).
7. Review the list with your NRT (or a resident tutor).

## For more information

- Check out the OCS resources on school selection as well:  
<http://www.ocs.fas.harvard.edu/students/careers/medicine/applicationprocess/selecting.htm>