Analysis IN BRIEF

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Use and Evaluation of Medical School Information Sources by Aspiring Medical Students

Medical schools are challenged to attract applicants who will best fit their stated missions, but there are few ways for medical schools to know if they are using the right methods to reach the applicants they seek. Furthermore, some information about a medical school can be difficult to manage, especially when, as with the annual *U.S. News & World Report* rankings, some messages get more amplified than do others. The numbers of medical schools (now 134 AAMC members) and seats (18,665 matriculants in 2010) are increasing. The average medical school aspirant applies to 14 medical schools, with a quarter applying to 19 or more.[1] This *Analysis in Brief* reports on *which sources* were used by *which aspirants* for learning about and comparing medical schools. These results also show *how valuable* these sources were for aspirants in making application decisions.

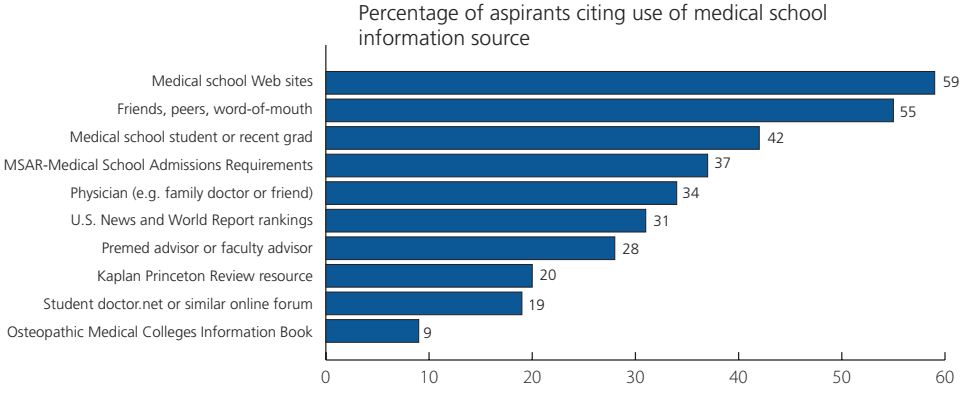
Methodology

The 2010 AAMC Pre-MCAT Questionnaire (PMQ) was offered to MCAT registrants the week before their exam. One 2010 PMQ cohort received two additional questions. The first asked, "What source or sources have you used to compare or evaluate the medical schools to which you may apply? Select all that apply from the list below." The 11 response options were: "Friends, peers, word-of-mouth," "Kaplan or Princeton Review resource," "Medical school student or recent graduate," "Medical school web sites," "Osteopathic Medical College Information Book," "MSAR-Medical School Admissions Requirements,"[2] "Physician (e.g., family doctor or friend)," "Premed advisor or faculty advisor," "Studentdoctor.net or similar online forum," "U.S. News & World Report rankings," and "Other source not listed here." An immediate follow-up question asked aspirants to assess the value of the sources they used on a seven-point scale from "POOR VALUE" (-3) to "HIGH VALUE (+3)." To diminish potential bias, the survey randomized the option order in both questions. We examined responses for overall frequencies and for variations by gender and two other dichotomous variables: socio-economic status (SES), determined by whether or not the aspirant had at least one parent with a master's degree or above; and college status, indicated by whether the aspirant was a current undergraduate (freshman through senior) or not (graduate, graduate student, not in college).[3]

Results

In terms of usage, the source cited most was "Medical school Web sites," by 59 percent of aspirants (see Figure 1). "Friends, peers, word-of-mouth" registered 55 percent, followed by "Medical school student or recent graduate" (42%), "*MSAR - Medical School Admissions Requirements*" (37%), and "Physician (e.g., family doctor or friend)" (34%). Less than a third of aspirants said they used the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings (31%). Comparing differences in

Figure 1. Aspiring Medical Students' Use of Selected Sources for Comparing Medical Schools



1 AAMC DW App Mat file as of December 31, 2010.
2 The *MSAR is* an AAMC publication to which members of Student, Applicant and Resident Research staff are partial contributors.
3 Additional methodological details are available in the supplemental information online at www.aamc.org/data/aib

Table 1. Aspiring Medical Students' Evaluations of Sources They Used for Making Medical School Application Decisions

Medical School Information Source	Distribution of Ratings: Percentage giving a value of -3, -2, -1, 0	+1	+2	+3	Mean value	Number of raters
MSAR - Medical School Admissions Requirements	7.6	21.0	37.4	34.0	**+1.96**	**423**
Physician (e.g. family doctor or friend)	7.2	24.8	35.0	33.0	**+1.93**	**391**
Medical school student or recent graduate	6.3	27.2	35.8	30.8	**+1.90**	**467**
Osteopathic Medical Colleges Information Book	7.9	28.7	30.7	32.7	**+1.88**	**101**
Medical school Web sites	8.6	29.8	36.9	24.7	**+1.76**	**675**
Premed advisor or faculty advisor	16.0	24.7	35.6	23.7	**+1.60**	**312**
Friends, peers, word-of-mouth	14.9	34.6	33.3	17.3	**+1.49**	**625**
U.S. News & World Report rankings	17.9	38.2	31.9	12.0	**+1.33**	**351**
Studentdoctor.net or similar online forum	21.3	34.1	29.4	15.2	**+1.27**	**211**
Kaplan or Princeton Review resource	22.6	38.1	29.6	9.7	**+1.19**	**226**

Note: Mean values calculated on a scale of -3 to +3. Zero-or-less values collapsed to one column to conserve space.

usage by group, women (64%) were more likely than were men (53%) to cite use of school Web sites; this was the only significant variation by gender. Aspirants of higher SES were more likely than were their counterparts to cite use of a physician (41% to 30%), peers (61% to 51%), *U.S. News & World Report* (37% to 27%), and premed advisor (32% to 25%). Undergraduates were more likely than were non-undergraduates to say they used *U.S. News & World Report* (36% to 26%), premed advisor (32% to 25%), and Kaplan or Princeton Review resources (23% to 18%).

In terms of value, the *MSAR* was rated highest for helping aspirants make application decisions (see Table 1). On the scale of -3 to +3, the mean value given the *MSAR* was +1.96; more than a third of its users (34%) gave it the highest value (+3). Physicians and medical students received the next highest mean values, +1.93 and +1.90, respectively. School Web sites, the most used source, received the fifth-highest mean value (+1.76). None of the aforementioned sources were given zero or negative values by more than one in ten users. In contrast, about one in five users gave values of zero or less to *U.S. News & World Report*, Studentdoctor.net, and Kaplan or Princeton Review. Comparing differences in value by group, we found no significant differences linked to either gender or college status. We found only one significant difference in value linked to SES: "Physician" was valued a bit more (+2.0) by those with lower SES than by those with higher SES (+1.9).

Discussion

By learning which medical school information sources applicants are likely to use and value, medical school officials and premedical advisors may better communicate with those who aspire to careers in medicine. Although the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings may be the most publicized source for comparing medical schools, we found that recent aspiring physicians both used and valued several other sources more. Meanwhile, although recent aspirants valued the *MSAR* highly, its reported use by just 37 percent of aspirants suggests the *MSAR* may currently be underused.

Gender, SES, and college status made little difference in how aspirants valued the sources they used. Still, our finding of source-usage differences by SES contributes to other work illuminating the social barriers to post-baccalaureate advancement faced by the less privileged.[4] Source-usage behavior may be one barrier that can be tackled without more degrees or money. Aspirants with lower SES could benefit from more overt instruction on how to approach people who may have information they can use, including advisors, physicians, and even premed peers they may not know well.

Medical school officials should take note that most aspiring physicians, especially women, are looking to schools' Web sites for information to help them make their application decisions. Schools' Web sites were the most used source in our study but they were not the best rated, likely due to varying quality among sites. Thus there is need to further identify what Web site details—mission statements, admission requirements, student testimonies, unique campus features, etc.—comprise the information medical school aspirants value the most.

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