

A Different Kind of Match Day

It takes more than a high MCAT score to be an SIU medical student

Written by Karen Carlson • Photography by James Hawker

As happy as new students are on the first day of medical school, they were just as nervous last year, wondering if they would be chosen as medical students at SIU School of Medicine.

Only 72 students are chosen each year to come to SIU School of Medicine, and it's a tough choice for the admissions committee and just as tough for the applicants to find the right match.

"SIU School of Medicine is a small campus of just 72 students with a unique curriculum — we're not going to be a good fit for everyone," says Erin Graham, M.S., director of admissions. "We are looking at whether the student will be a good match for our curriculum and our philosophy of lifelong, self-directed learning."

The process to apply to medical school is pretty universal: after obtaining a college degree, students withstand the grueling MCAT test and ponder which medical school will be the best fit.

At SIU School of Medicine, an admissions committee of more than two dozen medical faculty, School staff, a resident and medical students are involved in the application process in both Carbondale and Springfield.

SIU School of Medicine only accepts applicants who have Illinois residency. While a majority of applicants come from the Chicago area, the admissions' eyes turn favorably on those for whom fields of corn and soybeans are a familiar landscape. "Our mission is to serve the residents of central and southern Illinois," Graham says. "And we want our students to understand the needs of the people who live here." Minorities, those from economically disadvantaged areas and rural northern Illinois applicants are also encouraged to apply. "These students are more likely to understand underserved communities and want to practice there," Graham says.

Penelope Tippy, M.D., reviews the applicants. "Our applicants are above-average students who have a lot of volunteer experience. I want to see that they have some commitment to staying in central and southern Illi-

nois," she says.

Beyond basic criteria, what makes a good candidate for SIU School of Medicine? Just as SIU School of Medicine treats the whole person, so too the admissions committee says the students' entire profile is significant.

"While academic excellence is important, at SIU School of Medicine other factors such as dedication, leadership, service are equally essential," Graham says. "We want to see how prospective students talk about what they do outside of studying - their family, for example. We take a holistic view of the applicant."

"I look to make sure the applicants are a good match, that they're in sync with our mission," notes Jacqueline Scolari, Ph.D., a member of the admissions committee. "I look for well-rounded people and look for what makes them tick."

Steve Verhulst, Ph.D., has been chair of the admissions committee for 13 years. "[Dean and Provost] Dr. Dorsey gave us five 'C's' to look for in the applicants," he says. "Compassion, Character, Culture, Communication and Competency."

Those qualities also reflect the polestar principles of the SIU School of Medicine curriculum, which is a hybrid between an organ-based curriculum and problem-based learning. "The pass/fail curriculum encourages cooperation," Graham says. Teamwork without the stress of competition is a major draw for potential students.

"Students come in with an idea of the kind of doctor they want to be," Graham says. "But while they're here, they learn things that they didn't know about themselves, skills they didn't know they had."

Self-directed learning is another vital attribute of both the curriculum and the students who study it. Graham notes, "Some applicants decide that our problem-based curriculum is just too tough."

The relative youth of the 34-year-old medical school is another appealing factor, Dr. Verhulst says. "We are a growing institution, so we're flexible and open. Classes are small, the faculty is motivated, and we are internationally recognized for education."

From hundreds of would-be medical students, the



“You get a lot of personal attention here,” Nicole Collins, (MSII) tells applicants as she leads them through SIU School of Medicine. Applicants are Christopher Starr, Priti Patil, and Rachel Miller.

committee invites about 250-300 applicants to interview and tour SIU School of Medicine. While some medical schools interview multiple applicants at the same time, SIU takes a personal approach, scheduling separate interviews with a faculty member and an admissions committee member.

Applicants are relieved to find the interviews are laid-back and casual. Former applicants writing on The Student Doctor Network Web site (www.studentdoctor.net) have noted that the interviews were more like conversations, not a list of questions. One wrote, “SIU has been the most ‘human,’ approachable, courteous, prompt, and professional school I’ve dealt with.” Another wrote that the interviews were “super laid-back, I had FUN at both the interviews, students seem to love the school.” One student in the class of 2008 said about SIU, “The people are friendly and concerned with the ‘human side’ of medicine.”

After or in between interviews, applicants tour the School, which Graham says is “probably the most valuable part of the process for the applicant. Interviewees get a feel for what SIU is like.”

The tour guides are second-year medical students, happy to share a laugh with fellow students to make the interviewees feel at home. In Springfield, applicants

weave their way through the research laboratories in the School’s main buildings, peek at the SIU Clinics and relax for a few minutes in the renovated student lounge.

In Carbondale, tours are tailored to the applicant’s interest, whether speaking to science faculty, exploring the gross anatomy lab in Lindegren or attending a sports game with a student at the SIU Student Center.

After talking with hundreds of applicants, the admissions committee ranks the potential students and decides which will thrive at SIU School of Medicine. Most of the 72 students selected each year will receive a prized acceptance letter by the end of January, though Graham notes that selection can continue up until the first day of classes.

It’s a long process, but worthwhile to help SIU School of Medicine find the right students filled with promise and possessing a hunger to serve the SIU community, especially the small, underserved community in central and southern Illinois. It’s an exciting time for faculty as they meet the new faces and for students, who are that much closer to fulfilling their dreams.

And for those considering a career in medicine, remember the five C’s and take the advice of a former applicant: “The key is to be yourself.” ■