International Study in Premedical Education

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ABSTRACT

This study surveyed medical school admission deans about the desirability of international study. Most agreed that an international study program in the premedical years was beneficial, but most were neutral concerning science courses taken in international programs. Acad. Med. 2001;76:1158.

Interest in international study among students seeking bachelor's degrees is increasing.1 Students enrolled in undergraduate premedical programs frequently inquire as to whether international programs are beneficial, and they ask how medical school admission committees view these programs. We surveyed medical school admission deans of U.S. allopathic and osteopathic schools to learn their opinions about the desirability of international study by premedical undergraduates.

METHOD

We mailed a questionnaire to the admission deans of the 126 allopathic and the 16 osteopathic medical schools in July 2000. The questionnaire requested their opinions about the merits of a medical school applicant’s spending an undergraduate semester abroad and taking science courses during a semester abroad. The survey also asked for an estimate of the number of first-year medical students at the institution who had spent at least one undergraduate semester studying abroad. A pre-addressed metered return envelope was provided for an anonymous response.

RESULTS

A total of 111 of the 126 deans of allopathic medical schools responded, and all of the 16 deans of osteopathic medical schools responded (total response = 89.4%).

Sixty-five percent of the respondents stated that an international study program in the premedical years was beneficial, while 33% evaluated it as neutral. None stated that it was detrimental. Seventy-three percent of the respondents were neutral in regard to science courses taken in international programs, while 15% indicated that such courses were beneficial and 9% indicated they were detrimental.

The percentages of first-year medical students (0–10%, 10–20%, >20%) who had spent at least one undergraduate semester abroad were 63%, 25%, and 5%, respectively.

DISCUSSION

Thirty percent of the deans estimated that 10% or more of their current medical students had at least one semester of international study as premedical undergraduates, which reflects a significant interest in international study by medical school applicants. And, that a majority of medical school admission deans regarded international study programs as a beneficial part of premedical education appears to indicate their support for a broad-based premedical education.2 Our survey also suggested that there was less enthusiasm by admission deans for participation in international science courses, possibly reflecting their concern for the quality or intensity of international science programs. A possible solution to these concerns may be science courses taught by the sponsoring U.S. institution with international science facilities provided by either the sponsoring institution or the host institution. Alternatively, science courses offered by hosting international institutions could be screened by the sponsoring U.S. institution.

The results of this survey should provide premedical undergraduates and their advisors information about how medical school admission deans view international study programs.

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