Highly competitive doesn’t begin to describe the

Applications to medical school in Tucson reach record high

By Stephanie Innes Arizona Daily Star    Mar 16, 2018 Updated Mar 16, 2018

UA medical student Tiffany Poulard, center, leaps into the arms of fellow student Tijana Milinic after learning she'll do her residency at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles. Milinic was matched to the University of Colorado College of Medicine.

Mike Christy / Arizona Daily Star
The acceptance rate for the UA College of Medicine — Tucson’s incoming first-year class is anticipated to be less than 2 percent, college officials say.

A record 9,600 applicants competed for about 120 spots in the class that will begin medical school this summer and graduate in 2022.

“We have doubled. In the rest of the country it was up 3 or 4 percent, so something utterly remarkable is happening in Tucson,” said the school’s dean, Dr. Charles B. Cairns.

“People are looking at us because we’ve really been at the forefront of discussions of how we interact better with communities, and how we take on the issues of diversity and outcomes.

“We have become very nationally prominent because of our research,” he said.

Since college officials don’t know what the exact class size will be — 120 is a goal — they are unable to give an exact acceptance rate just yet. The number of applicants for the class of ’22 was nearly double the number received for the class of ’18.

And the class of ’18 was certainly competitive as well, with 4,862 applications for 120 spots. That’s an acceptance rate of 2.47 percent.

MATCH DAY

The class of ’18 was in the spotlight Friday, taking a rare break from work and study for Match Day — a...
Match Day is getting increasingly competitive, too, Cairns said.

Students in their final year of medical school must select institutions where they want to train and interview for a residency spot. Students later rank their residency location preferences, while institutions rank students they would like to have as trainees, UA officials say.

Medical residencies are post-graduate training and required before getting a license to practice medicine.

“It’s really a challenging time for medical residencies,” Cairns said. “There is an enormous shortage, not just nationally, but particularly here in Arizona.”

Of the class of ’18, 114 members matched Friday morning in the UA Memorial Student Union. Graduating students sat at tables decorated with plants holding placards that said, “Stay humble, work hard, be kind.”

The students counted down the seconds to 10 a.m. Arizona time before opening their match envelopes. Fourth-year medical students across the country all learned their match results at the same time.

Thirty-eight of the UA College of Medicine-Tucson students found out they will complete their residencies in Arizona — 26 in Tucson, eight in
Phoenix and four in Scottsdale. Most Arizona residencies are in Tucson.

“The UA is doing a good job of advertising its medical school and the way it takes care of students. It really prepares us for residencies,” said California native Weston LaGrandeur, 26, who matched with his first choice Friday — a three-year residency program in family medicine at Tucson’s Banner-University Medical Center South, where he’ll spend the next three years.

LaGrandeur isn’t certain where he’ll end up permanently. But Tucson is a possibility. LaGrandeur, who earned his undergraduate degree from Stanford University, hopes to eventually practice adolescent or sports medicine.

Long-term data show that 80 percent of future physicians who go to medical school in Arizona and complete a residency in the state will stay here to practice medicine.

And that’s important because Arizona is a state that needs more doctors.

By 2030, the U.S. population under age 18 is projected to grow by only 5 percent, while the population age 65 and over is projected to grow by 55 percent, the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) says.

And the over-65 population is growing more in Arizona than in most other states, research from Arizona State University’s Morrison Institute for Public Policy says, and senior citizens have higher
per-capita consumption of health care.

ARIZONA RANKS LOW
The AAMC ranks Arizona among the lowest states in the country for both its rate of active primary-care physicians and its rate of total residents and fellows per 100,000 population.

Nationwide, a record number of 37,103 active applicants were competing for 33,167 U.S. residency positions, data from National Resident Matching Program say.

“We really work hard to make sure our students are well-positioned in the match because the overall numbers are fairly daunting,” the UA’s Cairns said. “It takes a lot of work and structure and counseling.”

Better preparing students for a residency match is also one of the key changes in a revamp of the UA College of Medicine-Tucson curriculum.

Cairns said the match rate there is running between 94 and 97 percent.

“We want them to be competitive candidates in an increasingly competitive environment,” he said.

Cairns said he’s not sure if there is one single reason for the jump to 9,600 applications this year for the class of ’22, but word is getting out about the UA’s focus on student experience, its emphasis on underserved populations and the access that students have to unique and diverse patients in the community, he said.
Its graduates also match with prestigious residency programs. On Friday, matches included Johns Hopkins Hospital, the Mayo Clinic, Stanford University, the University of California-San Francisco and Yale New Haven Hospital.

Maria Fernandez, who is going into family medicine and matched with her first choice — the University of Nevada-Reno — said Friday that she was drawn to the UA College of Medicine because of its commitment to underserved communities.

A native of Mexico, Fernandez grew up in San Diego and earned her undergraduate degree from Stanford.

Fernandez, 30, volunteered at numerous community clinics throughout medical school here, including one for teen parents and another for refugees.

“It is a great program. More people are finding out about it,” she said.

Tiffany Pouldar, 27, matched with Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles, which was her first choice. She’ll be doing a four-year anesthesiology residency.

Pouldar considered several medical schools but decided on the UA after her in-person interview. For Pouldar, a graduate of the University of Southern California, the UA’s environment and faculty was the sell.

“I felt comfortable here,” she said.

Contact health reporter Stephanie Innes at 573-4134 or email
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