

Where Should I Apply to Pharmacy School?

One of the first choices when applying to pharmacy school is deciding how many programs you should apply to and where you should apply. In general, I encourage students to apply broadly to multiple pharmacy schools and spend time researching the PharmD programs to determine their fit. I know that many students, especially Oregon residents, have only ever considered applying within the state. However, there are two main reasons to consider applying more broadly:

1. Regional Differences in Competitiveness
2. The Hidden Cost of Reapplying

Regional Differences in Competitiveness

Just like in economies, supply and demand influence the competitiveness of pharmacy schools. The Western region of the U.S. has fewer pharmacy schools than other areas of the country. For instance, Oregon has two pharmacy schools while Tennessee and Illinois each have six, Florida and Ohio have seven, and New York has eight. These regional differences in supply and demand of applicants mean that some pharmacy schools can be more selective on who they admit, particularly in terms of GPA. Take the following example from Fall 2013 entering PharmD class.

	Science GPA	Overall GPA	Acceptance Rate
OSU students accepted to the OSU College of Pharmacy	3.42	3.50	53%
All students accepted to any U.S. pharmacy school	3.25	3.38	70% (estimated)

As you can see by the numbers, the students that the OSU College of Pharmacy accepted had higher GPAs on average, particularly science GPA, than the national averages. Also only 53% of OSU students applying to the OSU College of Pharmacy were accepted, while nationally 70% of applicants were accepted to pharmacy school.

Take Away Message:

It is advantageous to apply broadly to multiple pharmacy schools to increase your chance of acceptance, particularly by applying to programs outside of the Western U.S.

Applying broadly is especially important if your GPA is at or below the average of accepted students. I recommend selecting between 3 and 5 pharmacy schools where you match or exceed the statistics of the previous entering class in terms of average GPAs, average PCAT scores, and desired experiences. It is okay for one of your schools to be a bit of a stretch where you don't quite measure up to the program statistics, but the majority of the schools you select should be realistic in terms of competitiveness. Program statistics are available on pharmacy school websites and the PharmCAS School Directory. Nationally, the average number of pharmacy schools per applicant is 5.6. Carefully research the pharmacy schools' curriculum, mission, practical experiences, dual-degrees (if applicable), and other opportunities to make sure the school is a good fit for you. Do not apply to any school that you would not be willing to attend if that school was your only acceptance.

Keep in mind that the NAPLEX, the licensure examination students must pass to practice pharmacy in the U.S., is a national standard. Students graduating from any accredited U.S. PharmD program can become licensed to practice pharmacy in any state, making it easy to attend pharmacy school in one state and then practice in another.

The Hidden Cost of Reapplying

Many applicants' primary concern about applying broadly is the higher tuition costs at out-of-state and private pharmacy schools. Depending on state residency, you likely only have one (Oregon, Idaho) or two (California, Washington) pharmacy schools where you would be eligible for in-state tuition. However, given regional differences in competitiveness (see above), these schools are more competitive in terms of grades than the national average. Although private and out-of-state school tuition is considerably more expensive, students should also factor in the year of pharmacist wages they would lose by taking a year to improve their application to be competitive for admission to an in-state school. Let's compare two scenarios to illustrate this point.

Student A

Student A applies to one in-state pharmacy school. She is not accepted. She takes an additional year of undergraduate coursework to improve her GPA and reapplies in the next application cycle to the same in-state school. She is admitted this time and completes the 4-year PharmD program paying in-state tuition rates.

One year additional OSU tuition & fees <i>In-state, undergraduate</i>	\$9,000
PharmCAS application fee for reapplication	\$150
Four years tuition & fees at in-state school <i>\$20,000/year</i>	\$80,000
Student A's Pharmacy Education Costs	\$98,252

Student B

Student B applies more broadly by adding two additional schools besides the in-state pharmacy school. She is not accepted to the in-state school but is offered admission at one of the others. She attends the out-of-state or private school where she is accepted. She completes the 4-year PharmD program paying out-of-state tuition (or private school) tuition rates.

Apply to two additional schools on PharmCAS	\$110
Travel to Interview	\$500
Four years tuition & fees at out-of-state school <i>\$35,000/year, average of all private and out-of-state public schools (range \$24,00 to \$47,000)</i>	\$140,000
Travel <i>Two \$500 flights home per year</i>	\$4,000
Student B's Pharmacy Education Costs	\$147,495

So, Student A is better off financially, right? No so fast!

Although Student A has lower pharmacy education costs, she graduated with her PharmD degree one year later than Student B, and therefore missed out on one year of earnings as a pharmacist. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, early career pharmacists make an average annual salary of \$89,000. So when Student A's lost income from that year is included, Student B actually comes out ahead by around \$40,000.

Student A		Student B	
Costs	\$98,252	Costs	\$147,495
Income	- \$0	Income	- \$89,000
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	\$98,252		\$58,495

Take Away Message:

Although attending an out-of-state or private pharmacy school is more expensive, students who do so can come out ahead financially if they graduate and start work a year sooner.

You might consider running calculations like this for your own specific situation to see how the numbers add up. The figures may be different depending on tuition costs at specific schools and for 3 year accelerated PharmD programs.