

Evaluation of a Dedicated, Surgery-Oriented Visiting International Medical Student Program

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PURPOSE: Programs dedicated to the successful integration of international medical graduates into the U.S. surgical residency training are scarce and foreign students are often unaware of their availability. In 2007, the Department of Surgery at the University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio developed the Visiting International Students in San Antonio (VISSA) program designed to bring international senior medical students to rotate at our institution. The program has enrolled 55 students who rotated through various general surgery services. The purpose of this study was to assess prior participants' professional statuses, career selections, and satisfaction with our program.

METHODS: A 21-item anonymous online survey was distributed via e-mail. Demographic information, current professional status, residency specialty selection, assessment of satisfaction, and personal experience with the VISSA program were collected.

RESULTS: We obtained an 84% (46/55) response rate among participants. Most respondents were men (75.6%) and younger than 25 years of age (82.6%). Students from 14 nations have visited our institution, mostly from Latin America (56.5%) and Asia (36.9%). Before visiting our program, 80.4% considered applying to a residency program in the United States, which increased to 88.9% after rotating at our institution. Of our respondents, 42.1% applied to a residency program in the United States and 17.4% were accepted to a general surgery position (50% categorical and 50% preliminary). Respondents agreed or strongly agreed that being part of the VISSA program helped them obtain a general surgery residency position (90.4%) and considered our program as their first option (77.8%). Independently of their current professional status or residency selection process, 100% of respondents would

recommend participation in our program to colleagues at their medical schools.

CONCLUSION: A dedicated, surgery-oriented visiting foreign medical student program has a positive effect in residency selection, application, and professional development. (J Surg 71:325-328. © 2014 Association of Program Directors in Surgery. Published by Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.)

KEY WORDS: international medical graduate, medical student, career development

COMPETENCIES: Medical Knowledge, Professionalism, Interpersonal and Communication Skills, Systems-Based Practice

INTRODUCTION

In 1948, the Association of American Medical Colleges created the Committee on International Relations in Medical Education. Two years later, federal laws were created allowing international medical graduates (IMGs) to enter the United States to fill positions that remained open. Since then, IMGs have occupied various positions in the American health system and currently represent 25% of the U.S. physician population.¹ In the field of general surgery, a prior survey reported that IMGs account for 10% of the current academic surgical faculty in the United States.²

IMGs who desire to pursue general surgery residency training in the United States must follow a series of confusing steps for those not familiar with the American educational system. Successful completion of the 3-step United States Medical Licensing Examination is required to obtain an Educational Commission for Foreign Medical Graduates certificate. This document allows the IMG to interview for available general surgery positions across the nation. Subsequently, candidates rank their programs of

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TABLE 1. VISSA—Visiting International Students in San Antonio Survey

1. What is your sex?
 2. How old were you when you participated in the VISSA program?
 3. What is your country of origin?
 4. In which year did you begin your participation in the VISSA program?
 5. How many rotations did you complete during your VISSA program?
 6. Which rotations did you complete?
 7. How did you find out about the VISSA program?
 8. Before the VISSA program did you consider applying to a residency program in the USA?
 9. After finishing your VISSA program experience did you still consider applying to a residency program in the USA?
 10. How many letters of recommendation from UTHSCSA faculty did you obtain as part of your VISSA program?
 11. If you already graduated from medical school in your country of origin, did you apply to a residency program in the United States?
 12. If you already received your M.D. degree, to which residency specialty were you accepted?
 13. If you matched into a general surgery program, which position were you offered?
 14. If you matched into a general surgery program, when were you offered a position?
 15. If you are currently in a general surgery program, what is your designated category?
 16. Do you think being a participant of the VISSA program helped you obtain a general surgery residency position?
 17. Would you recommend that the medical students at your institution apply to the VISSA program?
 18. How would you rate your experience in the VISSA program?
 19. Do you believe being a participant in the VISSA program enhances/enhanced your possibilities of matching into a general surgery residency in the USA?
 20. Would you consider applying to the general surgery residency program at UTHSCSA?
 21. If applying to the general surgery residency program at UTHSCSA, would you consider this your first option?
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interest using the National Resident Matching Program. Residency training position assignments are formally announced in mid-March and a new academic year begins every July 1 with brand new interns eager to excel in their new duties as house officers.

Upon entering surgical residency in the United States (usually under J1 visa sponsorship), IMGs face unique challenges in cultural and professional spheres. In addition, overcoming language barriers becomes paramount for the proper development of interpersonal and communication skills. These adaptive challenges can be overwhelming and stressful for the newly immigrated physician.³ This transition could be potentially smoother in the event the new trainees had former experience in the American medical system.

The most current reports state that the United States is heading toward a large physician shortage of more than 90,000 physicians by the year 2020, a number that will increase to more than 130,000 by 2025.^{4,5} This forecasted physician shortage has led to the expansion of existing U.S. medical schools and establishment of new ones.⁶ However, the number of residency training positions has not similarly expanded and may contract as a consequence of decreases in graduate medical education funding. In the 2012 match, 8.4% of the 2367 general surgery positions were filled by non-U.S. IMGs (4.9% of those for categorical and 12.7% for preliminary positions).⁷ Interestingly, only 3 of the 1146 available categorical surgical positions were not filled in this match, which shows the current limiting factor for this expected shortage is the number of categorical positions and not the number of available applicants.⁴

Most U.S. medical schools offer visiting programs directed toward the fourth-year American medical students,

which serves in part as a recruiting mechanism for potential residents. However, there are only a few programs that have designed curricula for those students visiting from abroad. In a recent publication,⁸ the Mayo Clinic reviewed their “visiting medical student clerkship” between 1995 and 2008. Of the 4908 participants, 33% were international students. During this period the percentage of IMGs who participated in this program and subsequently applied for a residency position at the Mayo Clinic was significantly lower than the percentage of U.S. medical students (20% vs 85%; $p < 0.001$). However, the percentage of IMGs vs U.S. medical students who applied and were appointed to Mayo residency programs did not differ (33% vs 30%; $p = 0.23$). Unfortunately, the authors did not provide information regarding electives selection or specialty chosen by the visiting students when applying for a residency appointment.

Programs dedicated to the successful integration of IMGs into U.S. surgical residency training are scarce and are often unknown by foreign medical students. Since August 2002, the University of Washington at Seattle has offered an IMG certificate program where participants enrolled in a formal 8-week clinical rotation experience duties, responsibilities, and evaluations similar to their fourth-year American medical student counterparts.⁹ The most recent review reported that 15 of the 29 participants enrolled through 2006 joined their residency program as preliminary interns given their performance and evaluations.¹⁰

Starting in 2007, the Department of Surgery at University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio developed the “Visiting International Students in San

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