

Advice on Applying to Residency Programs

Navigating medical school, from memorizing biochemical pathways during the preclinical years to rounding on the wards, is a difficult process with a steep learning curve. Yet after working to gain the knowledge and skills necessary to advance to their roles as resident physicians, medical students are faced with the task of applying to residency, which can often be a daunting process.

The AAMC-OSR Communications Committee is proud to offer *Advice on Applying to Residency Programs*, a comprehensive guide based on feedback from recently matched medical students. The final year of medical school is exciting and goes by quickly, but it can easily become overwhelming and costly if students are not prepared. This guide is written as a set of frequently asked questions and answers on a variety of topics that students may encounter in their final year of medical school. All information found in this document comes from advice received in response to a questionnaire sent to medical students who graduated and matched in 2011 and 2012. Additional resources regarding applying to residency can be found at the end of the document.

Please note that this document is intended as a guide and that medical students should confer with their medical school student affairs offices throughout the process of applying to residency.

Colleen Kays, National Delegate cek2129@columbia.edu
Judith Wilber, Northeast Regional Chair Judith.wilber@umassmed.edu
Naseem Helo, Past National Delegate
Leland Husband, Southern Regional Delegate lhusband@umc.edu
Laura Muscianese, Western Regional Delegate lmuscian@hs.uci.edu

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Away Rotations

During the final year of medical school, students have the opportunity to fill their schedule with electives, during which time many students choose to do one or more electives rotating at hospitals and schools away from their home institutions. The reasons for doing an away rotation (also called an externship or an away elective) vary and not all students choose to do so. A listing of available away rotations can be found at <http://services.aamc.org/eec/students/>

Why do an away rotation?

Networking

Many students see away rotations as an opportunity to network at an institution to which they are interested in applying for residency. During an away rotation, students meet and work beside faculty and residents; if the faculty and residents are impressed by the student, they may later advocate for the student during the residency application process. This can be especially advantageous for students applying in competitive specialties. In some of the most competitive specialties, completing an away rotation can be seen as an “audition” for a residency position. Students should try to work closely with one or two faculty members while on an away rotation, and should not feel uncomfortable asking for a letter of recommendation at the end of the elective (please see section on Letters of Recommendation).

Even for less competitive specialties, some students use away rotations to get to know faculty and residents at a program, especially if they think their application is otherwise weak. This can allow the program to create an informed opinion of the student’s clinical performance. However, students should be advised to use caution if they think that an away rotation is guaranteed to help their application. An away rotation used as an “audition” is only helpful to students who are able to impress the people with whom they work and can be detrimental to students who perform poorly or are difficult.

Exploring

Students also do away rotations in order to get to know a new part of the country or to get a better idea of what it’s like to work in a program in which they are interested but not familiar. In fact, rather than “audition” for a program, an away rotation can be a chance to have the program “audition” for you! Additionally, away rotations can sometimes provide educational experiences that may not be available at the home institution. For some students, an away rotation gives them the chance to spend time with friends and family with whom they otherwise do not see frequently.

Or not at all!

Many students don’t do away rotations. Talk with faculty and residents to see if an away rotation may be necessary or helpful for the field or programs in which you are interested.

Where should students do an away rotation?

Deciding where to do an away rotation depends on many factors, including the reasons for the elective and the specialty to which the student is applying. Students are advised to research based on their goals for the away elective/rotation. Speak with faculty and residents, as well as with students from the year ahead of you who may have just completed similar rotations.

Considerations in deciding where to do an away rotation include:

- Some competitive programs guarantee an interview to visiting students.
- Finances – some students look at programs where there are friends and family to stay with or where scholarships are available.
- Autonomy during the rotation.

- Unique opportunities that a particular program may have to offer.
- While away rotations can help students at an institution that may otherwise be out of reach, it may be even more helpful to consider an away rotation at an institution that is less competitive and where they are more likely to gain a greater advantage.

How do students apply for an away rotation?

All students from U.S. LCME (Liaison Committee on Medical Education) medical schools and independent academic medical centers that are members of the Council of Teaching Hospitals and Health Systems (COTH), as well as students from many Commission on Osteopathic College Accreditation (COCA) accredited American Association of Colleges of Osteopathic Medicine (AACOM) member schools, can use the Visiting Student Application Service (VSAS) to apply to away rotations:

<https://www.aamc.org/students/medstudents/vsas/>

For schools that do not accept applications through VSAS, visit the program's web site to learn how to apply for a rotation at that institution.

Make sure to do your research in advance. Some programs require additional application materials, which may include:

- Documentation of immunizations, including blood antibody titers
- Two-step PPD
- Additional essays
- Letters of recommendations
- Background checks
- BLS certification
- Insurance coverage

Students should also be aware that their school may be on a different rotation calendar than the away institution, which may affect how they schedule their electives.

What does it cost to do an away rotation?

A VSAS application costs \$35. Some schools require an additional application fee, which may be up to \$200. Additionally, don't forget to factor in the cost of travel to the away institution, as well as living expenses while at the away site, including housing, food, and parking. Many students use <http://rotatingroom.com/> to find and share sublets with other medical students on away rotations.

USMLE Step 2

The USMLE Step 2 examination consists of two sections. Step 2 CK (clinical knowledge) is a computer based, multiple-choice examination, while Step 2 CS (clinical skills) requires students to interact with standardized patients. As of 2013, the fee for registering for Step 2 CK will be \$560 and the fee for registering for Step 2 CS will be \$1200. More information can be found at <http://usmle.org> and www.nbme.org.

When should students take Step 2 CK?

There is no consensus among students regarding the optimal timing to take Step 2 CK and each student should consider their application and goals. However, many students recommend completing Step 2 CK before beginning to interview for residency, in order to allow for a flexible schedule while traveling for interviews. Additionally, many states now require a passing grade on Step 2 CK prior to beginning internship. You should check with your medical school regarding required or suggested timing to take the exam. Many students take Step 2 CK with regard to the following:

Performance on USMLE Step 1

Many residency programs do not require students to have completed Step 2 CK in order to apply for a residency position. Some students determine when to take Step 2 CK based on their performance on the USMLE Step 1 exam. Students who score highly on Step 1 may try to delay taking Step 2 CK, out of concern that they will score poorly on Step 2 CK and become less competitive as an applicant. Conversely, students who score lower than they would have liked on Step 1 often choose to take Step 2 CK soon after finishing their required rotations, with a goal of demonstrating an improved score on Step 2 CK when they apply for residency.

Immediately after completing third-year rotations

Step 2 CK covers a diverse range of subjects, including internal medicine, surgery, pediatrics, obstetrics-gynecology, and psychiatry. Many students find they are most prepared to take Step 2 CK while these subjects are still relatively fresh in their minds. Additionally, some specialties may require Step 2 CK scores as part of the residency application; applicants to these specialties should be sure to research programs and time their exam appropriately.

Fall semester of fourth year

Some students choose to do away rotations and sub-internships immediately after finishing their third-year rotations, so that these experiences are reflected on their residency applications. These students often wait to take Step 2 CK after they have completed these more demanding rotations.

When should students take Step 2 CS?

The timing of Step 2 CS is perceived to be less significant than that of Step 2 CK. Many students try to take Step 2 CS as early as possible, as scheduling the exam can be difficult (Step 2 CS is only offered in Atlanta, Houston, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles). Some students recommend taking Step 2 CS following a primary care or family medicine rotation, or after completing a practice standardized patient examination offered by the school.

Keep in mind that Step 2 CS can take many months to score, so make sure to visit <http://usmle.org> to ensure deadlines are met. You should check with your medical school regarding required or suggested timing to take the exam.

Special Hotel Rates for Step 2 CS

To assist students with their travel costs for the Clinical Skills Exams, the AAMC has negotiated a special rate for examinees at hotels within close proximity of each of the exam sites. Each hotel will provide transportation for examinees from the hotel to the exam site. Hotel and transportation information for each location is below:

https://www.aamc.org/meetings/153904/clinicalskills_mtgs_homepage_teaser.html

ERAS: Electronic Residency Application Service

ERAS is the online application service, provided by the AAMC, through which students transmit their application to residency programs. This is distinct from the National Resident Matching Program (NRMP) and San Francisco matching program, which facilitate the appointment of students to residency positions. ERAS can be found online <https://www.aamc.org/students/medstudents/eras/>

Key Dates

- July 1 – ERAS opens to students
- September 15 – ERAS applications can be submitted to American Council of Graduate Medical Education (ACGME) accredited residency programs
- October 1 – Medical School Performance Evaluation letters (MSPE, also known as the Dean's Letter) are released to ACGME accredited residency programs
- https://www.aamc.org/download/251998/data/residency_timeline_print.pdf

Note: Dates provided here are up to date for the 2012 application cycle but may not be applicable for future years. Students should visit <https://www.aamc.org/students/medstudents/eras/> for the most up to date information.

Personal Statement

It is advised that students begin to write their personal statement 3-4 months in advance. This gives students time to have more than one draft, with multiple people reading it for input. At the very least, students should aim to finish their personal statement by the end of August.

Figuring out what to write can be difficult. A good place to start is by looking at successful personal statements. Talk to residents and to other students who have successfully matched. Many schools have resources available to help students with writing personal statements. You can also seek guidance from faculty and program directors at your school or from the Dean of Student Affairs. As you write about your experiences in medical school, keep in mind that your personal statement isn't your CV in paragraph form.

Curriculum Vitale (CV)

You will not upload your CV directly to ERAS. Instead, you will use your CV to fill in ERAS sections on prior education, research, activities, publications, employment, awards, etc. In order to make this process as simple as possible without any accidental omissions, keep your CV updated throughout medical school so that is ready and complete when needed.

Letters of Recommendations

Letters of recommendation are uploaded to ERAS. In general, most programs want 3-4 letters of recommendation. Make sure to review the web site of each program to which you plan to apply; some programs have specific requirements as to who should write each letter and how many letters to include and may even have a standardized letter of recommendation form. Many of these requirements can be found at FREIDA, an online collective database:

<http://www.ama-assn.org/ama/pub/education-careers/graduate-medical-education/freida-online.page>

Who should write a letter of recommendation?

Letters of recommendation should be written by someone who knows you well. Personal letters have more impact than generic letters and a weak or poorly written letter can be worse than no letter at all. When you approach a potential letter writer, be sure to clearly ask if they are able to write you a positive, helpful, good, and/or supportive letter of recommendation. Letter writers can usually be from a variety of specialties, not just the specialty to which you are applying (please review each program for specific requirements). However, most letters should refer to your specialty choice; if you are applying in multiple specialties, you can ask for different versions of the letter. Potential letter writers include:

- Attendings from third or fourth year rotations
- Department chairs
- Program directors
- Research mentors
- Deans
- Faculty involved in extracurricular activities
- Faculty from away rotations

Avoid asking residents to write you a letter of recommendation if possible. Students who ask for letters from faculty at away rotations direct those letters to every program to which they apply, or only to that specific institution.

When should students ask for a letters of recommendation?

In general, students should plan to ask for letters of recommendation at the end of their third year of medical school, between April and July, and no later than August or September of their fourth year. Some students ask for a letter as soon as they finish a third year rotation. If the rotation is more than six months before the letter is needed, many students will speak with the faculty member at the time of the rotation and send a formal request for a letter at the end of third year. At a minimum, make sure to give letter writers at least 3-4 weeks to write the letter.

Asking for a letter of recommendation can sometimes be uncomfortable for students, but remember that almost everyone you ask has written letters in the past and understands the process. Be sure to clarify that you are looking for a strong letter of recommendation! Most faculty are honest and will tell you if they cannot write a good letter for you. When asking for a letter of recommendation, it's helpful to provide your CV and personal statement. Make sure to be very clear about what you need and when you need it. Give a deadline that is several weeks before the actual deadline and send friendly reminders the week before the letter is due. Letters do not need to be submitted at the same time as the application; instead, it is often recommended that they be submitted by the time the MSPE is released. Check individual program web sites for exact details regarding when letters of recommendation are expected.

Choosing Programs

How do students know to which programs they should apply?

There are many things to consider when exploring potential residency programs. Students should take into account the location of the program and whether they are interested in training at an academic or a community based center. Students should also attempt to gauge their own level of competitiveness; this can be done by speaking with faculty, exploring the program's web site, and by looking at "Charting Outcomes in the Match," a biennial publication from the NRMP which explores the factors that contribute to Match success in each specialty. "Charting Outcomes in the Match" is available online:

<http://www.nrmp.org/data/chartingoutcomes2011.pdf>

Even with these resources, it is still often difficult for students to ascertain their level of competitiveness. Most students recommend applying to any programs in which they are interested – you may be surprised!

Many people can be helpful as students explore potential residency programs. Talk with advisors, current faculty, the Dean of Student Affairs, and private practicing physicians. Residents are helpful as well, as they have often interviewed at places that students are considering, may have friends at other schools, and may be willing to talk about why and how they ranked different programs. Make sure to seek advice from people who are actively involved in the residency application process. Residents, faculty, and private physicians who are not actively involved in the residency application process may not have up-to-date advice. When identifying a faculty advisor, look for someone who is pleasant, available, and experienced in the residency application process.

Other resources include:

- www.aamc.org
- FREIDA Online: <http://www.ama-assn.org/ama/pub/education-careers/graduate-medical-education/freida-online.page>
- Individual specialty organizations (such as the American Academy of Family Physicians, the Association of Professors of Gynecology and Obstetrics, etc.)

To how many programs should a student apply?

This is specialty specific. In general, however, it is wise to apply to more programs than you think you will need. The NRMP surveys applicants and publishes specialty specific data, which includes the median number of applications submitted by applicants who matched and did not match:

<http://www.nrmp.org/data/index.html>

How much does it cost to apply?

The cost of applying through ERAS is available online:

https://www.aamc.org/students/medstudents/eras/residency/69732/fees_and_billing.html

Interviewing for a Residency Position

Preparing for the interview is an important part of applying to residency. Although it is common to be nervous, try your best act normal and be genuine. Programs are looking for applicants who will be a good match for them.

The Interview Day

Be friendly to everyone – other applicants, current residents, program support staff, and even restaurant wait staff. Everything you say and do is potentially part of your interview so don't be caught complaining. Instead, focus your energy on being enthusiastic and respectful.

Many programs hold a dinner for applicants on the day before (or day of) the interview. This can be one of the most useful parts of the interview day, as it provides the opportunity to talk with the residents and learn more about the program. Make sure to actually talk to the residents and not just the other applicants! Residents are often asked to give feedback about students who attend the dinner, so make sure to stay professional and polite throughout this part of the interview as well.

When the interview day is over, take notes that will help you when you're making your rank order list. Write down what you thought about your experiences with the residents, the program leadership, the city itself, and any other qualities that are important to you.

The Interview

Practice beforehand! Many schools offer mock interviews and faculty are often willing to help. Even though your interviewer will have questions prepared for you, make sure to identify in advance what you'd like to communicate about yourself. State why you're interested; research the program in advance so that you know how your interests relate to the program and its mission. Students find that it's helpful to be able to describe your "ideal program" and to use that to highlight aspects of the program at which you are interviewing. Additionally, identify specific qualities in yourself that you want to present and prepare stories to highlight these. Anecdotes from medical school, especially those related to patient care, are particularly important to be able to discuss. Finally, prepare questions to ask. Sample questions can be found online:

<https://www.aamc.org/download/77936/data/residencyquestions.pdf>

Learn from each interview – critique yourself and move forward from any mistakes you may have made.

Five DON'Ts for the Interview

1. DON'T say that you want to go somewhere else
2. DON'T show up late
3. DON'T check your phone, text, or send emails during the day
4. DON'T speak negatively about other programs, other applicants, or other schools
5. DON'T be arrogant with other applicants

How should you be in contact with a program after the interview?

Soon after the interview, thank each program for meeting with you. Thank you notes can be emailed, hand-written, or done over the phone. Although there are many people whom you will meet on the interview day, thank you notes should be sent to interviewers, program directors, and/or program coordinators. Ask your interviewers for their business card so that you'll have their contact information after you leave. Some students send thank you notes to all of the programs at which they interviewed, while others only send thank you notes to their top programs. Writing the thank you note during the interview day saves time and energy later!

As the year progresses, continue to keep in touch with programs in which you are interested. Email them with any questions you have, although be sure to verify that your question isn't already answered on their web site. Maintaining this communication is helpful to you and also lets the program know that you are still interested. However, be sure to remain polite and professional in every communication with the program, just as you were on interview day.

What should you do if a program asks where you've ranked them? Is it OK to volunteer that information?

It is a violation of the Match Participation Agreement for programs to request that applicants reveal their ranking preference and for programs or applicants to participate in any form of coercion related to selection decisions (http://www.nrmp.org/res_match/policies/index.html). However, programs commonly contact students to express their interest. Additionally, many students choose to notify programs that they are "at the top of the list" or "competitively ranked" rather than share specifics. Some students do tell their top ranked program of their number one position. Importantly, be honest! Information spreads between program directors and lying is taken seriously. In order to remain composed, prepare a response in advance so that you are ready if any program contacts you.

What do you do if you haven't heard from a program in which you are interested?

Students often contact programs to request interviews when they know they will already be in the region interviewing for a different program. In this way, programs can help you coordinate your travel plans. You can also contact a program you're interested in if they haven't offered you an interview. While this is not guaranteed to work, most students recommend the attempt; it's also a great way to give the program updates to your application. In order to do this, you can call or email the program coordinator or send a brief email to the program director. You can also ask a faculty member at your institution to reach out to the program on your behalf. However, keep in mind that there are many reasons that a program may not have offered you an interview – they may not yet be offering interviews, you may not be a competitive applicant, or you may have applied too late.

How can students budget for the cost of interviewing?

The cost of applying to residency can be steep, and is often not part of the budget or the loan package that students receive for their final year of medical school. GradPLUS and private loans are available for residency application, but there are also multiple cost saving options for thrifty students. When traveling to interviews, use public transportation whenever possible, carpool with classmates or other applicants, and stay with friends and family in the area. Additionally, many schools have programs through which alumni host interviewing students. However, if staying in a hotel is unavoidable, research the area yourself rather than taking for granted that the special rate a program offers is actually the best deal. Stay in touch with other applicants that you meet and share a room with them for subsequent interviews. It can also be helpful to schedule your interviews early, when there are still many dates available, so that you have the flexibility to group your interviews geographically. If you'll be flying often, some students find it advantageous to sign up for frequent flyer miles and for "preferred" or "elite" status with a rental car company or an airline.

Second Looks

After interviewing for a residency position, many programs offer applicants the chance to come back for a “second look” visit. Students have a varied perspective on the utility of the second look. There are many reasons that a second look can be useful, particularly for students who wish to demonstrate their interest in the program and for those who wish to get a better look at the program or its location. However, some students think that a second look can be harmful, since the day is often spent shadowing and it can be easy to look bored.

Couples Matching

The NRMP allows couples to rank pairs of choices together. Further information:

http://www.nrmp.org/res_match/special_part/us_seniors/couples.html

Students who have participated in the couples match recommend that the couple gauge each person’s competitiveness at each program. Most program directors are willing to work with applicants and to help out in arranging the partner’s interview.

Creating a Rank Order List

When it comes to the rank order list, most students strongly emphasize the importance of trusting yourself – have confidence in your intuition without worrying about your competitiveness. Important considerations include the location and size of the program, work hours, didactics, your family and/or spouse, your experience on the interview day, your future career goals (including plans for a fellowship), funding, and your overall happiness. Your list should include your dream programs, regardless if you think you it’s a long shot. Programs that are more realistic can be ranked below your dream programs without jeopardizing your chance at matching to them. Keep in mind that your chance of matching may be related to the number of programs you rank: the longer the rank list, the greater your chance of matching. Programs should only be left off of the list if you’d rather be unemployed than work there.

***Remember: the place where you Match is going to be really excited to get you!
Congratulations on making it and good luck!***

Additional Resources

General Resources

AAMC Roadmap to Residency: From Application to the Match and Beyond

<https://members.aamc.org/eweb/upload/Roadmap%20to%20Residency%202ndEd.pdf>

AAMC Careers in Medicine

<https://www.aamc.org/students/medstudents/cim/>

FREIDA Online

<http://www.ama-assn.org/ama/pub/education-careers/graduate-medical-education/freida-online.page>

Don't Forget to Ask: Advice from Residents on What to Ask During the Residency Interview

<https://www.aamc.org/download/77936/data/residencyquestions.pdf>

Away Electives

On-line Extramural Electives Compendium

<http://services.aamc.org/eec/students/>

Visiting Student Application Service (VSAS)

<https://www.aamc.org/students/medstudents/vsas/>

Rotating Room

<http://rotatingroom.com/>

Board Exams

United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE)

<http://usmle.org>

National Board of Medical Examiners (NBME)

www.nbme.org

Hotel Rates for Clinical Skills Exams

https://www.aamc.org/meetings/153904/clinicalskills_mtgs_homepage_teaser.html

NRMP

National Residency Matching Program (NRMP)

<http://www.nrmp.org/>

NRMP Data and Reports

<http://www.nrmp.org/data/index.html>

NRMP Charting Outcomes in the Match

<http://www.nrmp.org/data/chartingoutcomes2011.pdf>

NRMP Couples Match

http://www.nrmp.org/res_match/special_part/us_seniors/couples.html

Match Participation Agreement for Applicants and Programs

http://www.nrmp.org/res_match/policies/map_main.html

ERAS

Electronic Residency Application Service (ERAS) for Applicants

<https://www.aamc.org/students/medstudents/eras/>

ERAS Fees and Billing

https://www.aamc.org/students/medstudents/eras/residency/69732/fees_and_billing.html