

## Navigating the Match as a couple

Sunday, January 15, 2012

*We know you have questions, so we went to the experts for answers. This column features experienced faculty advisors and student affairs professionals answering questions about choosing a specialty, applying for residency, and any other career-related concerns you may have.*

**Dear Advisor,**

**We're entering the Match as a couple — I'm applying to residency in pediatrics and my fiancé is applying in psychiatry. What factors should we consider to determine how many programs to apply to? How many interviews should we complete? And how can we maximize our rank order list so we have the best chance of matching together?**

The number of couples participating in the National Resident Matching Program® (NRMP®) is rising: from 508 couples in the 2000 Match to 809 couples in 2011. So you're not alone.

Also rising is the competitiveness of the Match for all applicants as the number of medical students continues to increase without a proportional increase in residency positions.

Then, the Match presents unique challenges for applicants entering as a couple, especially those applying in specialties that are ultra-competitive or involve advanced or preliminary years. Of the 809 couples who participated last year, 739 successfully matched both applicants, 53 successfully matched one person from the pair, and 17 went completely unmatched.

So those who enter the Match as a couple must decide

- how many applications to submit and interviews to accept,
- how many program pairs to rank, and
- how to control the cost of the interview trail.

Despite the increasing number of students entering the Match as a couple, finding detailed advice regarding effective strategies for couples matching is difficult. And the joint AAMC/NRMP report *Charting Outcomes in the Match* does not offer much assistance. So I'll offer some general rules that apply to applicants entering as a couple in the Match:

**Apply to more programs than individual applicants.** But note, no set number exists because competitiveness counts. For example, you might apply to 40 very competitive programs or 15–20 less competitive ones. Together, you must consider the competitiveness of the specialty, the content of your applications, and the programs. Program competitiveness can be difficult to assess, but this is where good advising from your dean's office enters the picture.

**Consider your specific situation.** Pediatrics and psychiatry (my specialty) both feature programs with a wide range of competitiveness and generally are not difficult to match in.

In my experience as well as considering individual data from *Charting Outcomes in the Match*, most couples applying to pediatrics and psychiatry would be successful and satisfied applying to 20–35 programs,

interviewing at about 10–12, and ranking 8–10. Those numbers should increase if either or both of you have had course or board failures, poor clerkship comments, or professionalism issues.

**Keep your options open.** While certainly stressful and time consuming, plan to carefully juggle interviews and dates, even holding on to “extra” interviews until you see what offers your significant other receives. Although nightmarish for residency directors, you can and will cancel interviews or reschedule to align dates as programs extend invites to you and your significant other. Remember, your goal is to interview at about 10–12 programs. Why so many? Not only must you and your fiancé find programs you both like and where you both receive interviews, but you may not want to rank all the programs at which you interview.

**Consider big cities.** Couples can match into a combination of programs — mixing specialties, program types (i.e., preliminary or transitional, categorical, and advanced), and geographic locations. By choosing big cities, you’ll reduce the need to interview at so many locations, and your rank order lists (ROLs) can then include multiple permutations of pairs on the rank order list. Interviewing at eight hospitals in big cities may create 30 different possibilities or combinations on your ROL.

I’ve found most couples who interview at 10 or more individual programs will nearly always succeed in the Match. You’re lucky your specialties offer categorical positions only. The most difficult matches are those where both students need preliminary and advanced programs. I encourage any students matching as a couple, but especially those facing an even tougher Match, to learn how the Match works.

**Devote ample funds to applying and interviewing.** You’ve likely spent about \$400,000 dollars on your combined education — now is not the time to skimp. You deserve to see enough programs to find the best fit for you both. It can be exhausting, but is well worth the time and energy.

Be proactive — seek guidance from your dean’s office and advisors as you both navigate the Match. We want you to succeed!

*Have a question you want our panel of experts to address? Send your queries to [careersinmedicine@aamc.org](mailto:careersinmedicine@aamc.org) and put “Ask the Advisor” in the subject line.*

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