

Creating a parallel plan

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With rising medical school enrollments and stagnant growth of residency positions, competition for residency training is increasing. The 2013 National Resident Matching Program® (NRMP®) Match witnessed a 97 percent overall match rate (compared to 98.5 percent in 2012) for U.S. M.D. seniors. After the Match and the Supplemental Offer and Acceptance Program® (SOAP®) concluded, 528 U.S. M.D. seniors still lacked a position and a mere 61 positions remained unfilled.

So it's important you're realistic about the qualifications sought by specialties and your assessment of how competitive you are. After you've gauged your competitiveness and assessed your situation (with the help of your advisor or mentor), you may decide to develop a back-up or, as we like to call it, a parallel plan.

A parallel plan is an alternative specialty and plan for applying in the event your first preference for a specialty doesn't work out. And it's one strategy for optimizing your opportunity to secure residency training. As you consider specialties throughout medical school and how you best fit, think beyond just one, especially if your most attractive specialty is competitive.

Determine a secondary specialty you would be happy in so, as you apply for residency, you can implement your parallel plan quickly and effectively should you not secure many interviews in your first choice specialty. Aim for your second choice to be a specialty for which you're potentially more competitive. Strategize with your student affairs office when applying to multiple specialties, as dual applications involve particular considerations:

Submitting your applications. For some specialties with limited slots, you may need to apply to most or all of the programs. Applying to two different specialties in the same hospital can prove awkward, and no program director wants to feel as though their program is a back-up option. Ideally, consider geographically separating your applications to your different specialties. If you're drawn to a particular region, you might apply to different academic institutions in that region and consider community-based residencies.

Also, work with your advisor or associate dean of student affairs to determine the minimum number of programs to apply to in each specialty. Review the Charting Outcomes in the Match report to assess the optimal number of interviews you'll need to reach the 90 percent match rate in each specialty.

Requesting and using recommendation letters tailored for each field. Students considering multiple specialties require more letters of recommendation than other students. The number of letter-writers you'll need depends on your letter-writers' specialty. If a letter-writer is outside the fields you're pursuing, ask that person to write you two separate letters — one for each of your chosen specialties. However, if the letter-writer is in the field you're pursuing, ask that person to write for that specialty only. It's important to carefully consider whom to ask for letters and which letters will best support your candidacy in each field. So cultivate relationships with faculty in both specialties who might eventually be able to write a strong letter on your behalf.

Scheduling and preparing for interviews. Less competitive specialties typically offer interviews earlier, so schedule those as soon as you're contacted. When programs for more competitive specialties contact

you for interviews, you can cancel some of the other interviews if there's a scheduling conflict. If you cancel, it's important to be courteous — give at least two weeks' notice.

Before you attend any interviews, thoroughly research each specialty. During interviews, you need to articulate why the specialty is a good fit for you and what you can contribute as a resident and future practicing physician.

Ranking the two specialties. In creating your rank order list, it's acceptable to mix different specialties and types of programs (e.g., preliminary, transitional, categorical, advanced). List your preferences for the more competitive specialty first to ensure you have a minimum number of programs. You also want enough programs on the list so you're likely to match in the lesser competitive specialty if you need to. The NRMP limits the number of programs on your rank order list. To rank more programs than the initial limit, applicants must pay an extra fee for each additional program. If one of the specialties requires a preliminary year, don't forget to rank the preliminary spots on the supplemental list.

The challenge in applying to two specialties is presenting your best self to both fields. It's a delicate balance — and to navigate it successfully, solicit additional guidance for your specific situation from an advisor or mentor.