

## The reasons students don't match

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*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,**

**In your opinion, what are the main reasons students don't match, and how can I avoid being one of those students?**

Although most U.S. M.D. medical students are able to enter their chosen specialties, a few unfortunate students (1,078 U.S. Seniors in the 2010 main residency Match ) don't match into any of their desired training programs. Those students face the prospect of scrambling into training positions, which often requires them to choose hastily locations or specialties different from the ones they originally pursued.

Adding to the difficulty of this process, the number of slots vacant after the Match (1,060 PGY1 positions in the 2010 Match ) has been declining. This raises the future possibility that an appreciable number of graduates from accredited U.S. medical schools may be unable to secure post-graduate training positions. The prospect of students unable to use their expensive, time-consuming professional educations is tragic not only for the individuals involved, but also for a society facing a physician shortage and investing considerable resources into the next generation of physicians.

So what are the main reasons students don't match? And more importantly, how can you minimize your risk of not matching?

As in most important areas of life, there are no guarantees. But by addressing three components of your decision, you and your advisors can best position you for the Match.

**Academic record.** An application for residency training consists of a large set of data including

- grades earned in courses, clerkships, and advanced rotations;
- narrative evaluations from various sources, accumulated over the course of medical school and reflected in the Medical Student Performance Evaluation;
- participation in relevant activities such as research, teaching, service, and leadership;
- letters of recommendation submitted by a few carefully selected faculty members;
- a brief, but important personal statement; and
- USMLE exam scores.

Your performance, as reflected in your academic record, is directly related to the range of realistic specialty and program options you can expect through the Match process. So conduct a candid appraisal of your standing compared to the likely applicant pool in your chosen specialty and programs within that specialty. And enlist the help of specialty-specific advisors to assist you in that honest assessment.

**Specialty choice.** Disparities in competitiveness among the specialties have never been greater. And thus specialty choice has never affected students' success in the match process as much as it does now. Students

who “do fine” in medical school (i.e., students who pass all courses and USMLE exams on the first attempts and who experience no significant academic or behavioral problems) are highly likely to match in most specialties.

But there’s a handful of exceptions and you must evaluate whether your academic record is extraordinary enough for you to match into one of them. Students who might lack the qualifications to match into their chosen specialties must formulate back-up plans. Applying to a second-choice specialty or improving your application with, for example, a year of research to prepare to reapply in a subsequent year are options you may consider in this situation. As always, seek specialty-specific advice from experienced faculty members to evaluate your options.

**Residency application strategy.** The increasing competitiveness of residency matches has predictably and understandably increased the numbers of applications students submit. Even among less competitive specialties, applying to more programs increases the likelihood you’ll receive enough interviews to yield a high probability of matching. To support this claim, *Charting Outcomes in the Match: Characteristics of Applicants Who Matched to Their Preferred Specialty in the 2011 Main Residency Match* includes data that shows the relation between the numbers of ranks for specialties on rank order lists and the probabilities of matching into those specialties.

In addition to the number of residency programs to which a student applies, the competitiveness of those programs is also important. A list sufficient in length and breadth is your goal and, again, enlist the help of knowledgeable advisors to help you.

As medical schools have increased their class sizes to address the demand for physicians and the number of residency slots has largely remained the same, students are forced to navigate the application process more strategically to match into residency programs. Addressing the factors outlined above should help you (and your advisors) feel confident that you’ve maximized your likelihood of success.

*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.*

- **G. Scott Waterman, M.D.**

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