

Ranking programs in the match

Monday, January 11, 2010

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,

My interviews have gone well, and I'm interested in several of the programs. But only one of my top programs said they plan to rank me highly. I'm inclined to rank that program first, even though it's not my top choice, to ensure I match. What's the best strategy for listing your top programs for the match?

The match can be a complex process for medical students and residency programs. So it's easy to feel stressed and overanalyze every aspect in the hopes of a successful match. However, the best approach is to follow the logic and recommendations of the National Resident Matching Program® (NRMP®). Residency applicants should always rank programs in order of their preference, regardless of the likelihood of matching in a particular program because the match algorithm always favors the applicants' rank order list (ROL) over a residency program's ROL.

To illustrate this point, let's assume every residency in obstetrics and gynecology has 5 first-year positions. When the match algorithm runs, the computer will look at the first choice of every participating applicant's ROL. If Stephanie ranked the Best Ever Residency Program first and happens to be in the top five spots of the program's ROL, then Stephanie matches at the Best Ever Residency Program. If Stephanie is No. 7 on the Best Ever Residency Program's ROL, then she'll still match at that program as long as two students higher on the program's list have ranked and have been ranked higher by another residency program. If two students higher on the program's list have not been ranked higher by a residency program that they prefer, then Stephanie does not match at the Best Ever Residency Program and the match algorithm looks at Stephanie's second choice (the Not Quite as Hot Residency Program) and repeats the above process.

Applicants aren't penalized for putting "reach" programs higher on their ROL and therefore should prioritize according to their preferences. While students may not match at one or more programs higher on their list, they'll still match at a program lower on their list as long as that program has listed them in the first five spots (in our example) of its list or if enough students ranked higher on that program's list are able to match at another program higher on their list.

The terms and conditions of the [NRMP Match Participation Agreement](#) "...allow applicants and programs to make selection decisions...without coercion or undue or unwarranted pressure." This binding agreement has been developed to, among other outcomes, help minimize angst from abstruse correspondences, although variability exists among programs on following the spirit of this recommendation.

Basing your ROL on a positive statement or trying to game the system can torpedo your candidacy. So heed this advice: Avoid interpreting communication from a residency program when creating your ROL. Rather, follow these rules:

Research residency programs using resources such as your student affair dean(s), specialty-specific advisors, and the joint AAMC/NRMP report [Charting Outcomes in the Match](#).

Include all programs on your ROL in order of your true preferences.

Rank all programs you're willing to go to. You don't want to regret leaving off a program if you end up not matching.

Include “reach” programs, as long as you rank programs within your reach.

Don’t make last minute changes to your ROL. Leave it alone!

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

- **Charles A. Pohl, M.D.**

Associate Dean for Student Affairs and Career Counseling
Jefferson Medical College

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