

How to choose residency programs that best fit

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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,

I'm a fourth-year student preparing to apply for residency. Besides applying to my home program and the other programs in my city, how do I evaluate and choose programs to apply to?

Choosing residency programs that best fit you can be difficult. You must consider numerous factors to determine how each program fits.

Program location. Many students first explore areas of the country where they might want to live permanently, as often, students settle and continue practicing near where they completed residency. Most students seek programs near family, which also ensures a support system nearby when you're faced with the stresses of residency training.

Seriously consider why you want to train in a particular location, as some residency programs may be regionally selective. Last year, one of my students interviewed across the country, and an interviewer asked, "Why should we rank you, since we know you are from out of state and will never come here?"

So, conveying any geographical connections — whether familial, personal preference, or other — when you interview can help you argue your commitment to attending the program.

Last, you must decide if you'd enjoy living in the area. Consider what the location offers, be it more metropolitan or rural. Even though a lot of your time will be spent in the hospital, you'll still have plenty of time "off-premises," hopefully to enjoy what the community offers.

Program characteristics. Many programs can be classified as one of two broad categories: academic or community. Academic programs tend to be closely affiliated with a university, emphasize research, and employ more structured didactic teaching sessions. Community programs, on the other hand, tend to be focused on real-world practice with less emphasis on research and may be more suited if you want to enter into private or rural-based practice.

Your career goals. If you might pursue a competitive fellowship or a [career in academic medicine](#), selecting academic programs for residency increases your competitiveness. Also, university faculty may be better professionally connected and thus better able to help you network for a post-residency position.

Progression of responsibilities. In each program you're considering, what tasks are the interns and senior residents allowed to do? For surgical specialties, does the program offer early operative exposure, or are the chief residents overshadowed by fellows who compete for cases? You should select programs based on your learning style and the amount of supervision, patient types, and patient volume you prefer.

Program feel is one of the most important characteristics and one of the most difficult to evaluate on paper. Objective variables such as the number of residents, rotation and call schedule, salary, and vacation policy say little about the feel of a program. Rather, spend an away rotation at a top-choice program to best assess feel. When planning your electives, select rotations where you may be competitive for a position. If you won't be competitive for a residency position in that program, you'll be wasting your elective time rotating there. During the elective, evaluate residents' interactions with faculty, the training support they receive, and general camaraderie of the program. Overall, are the residents happy? Happy residents are often an indicator of a good, balanced program worthy of consideration.

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.

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