

Planning your fourth year

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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,

If there is not time for all of these options, which of these are the most important to do in the first few months of my fourth year:

- **take time off to study and take the USMLE Step 2 Clinical Knowledge (CK),**
- **do a career elective in the specialty I'm pursuing,**
- **do a sub-internship for a strong letter of recommendation, or**
- **take an away elective with the hope of getting an interview at that site?**

Often fourth-year medical students feel overwhelmed by all the scheduling options and strategies available. Here's my advice to help you determine how to best prioritize the limited time available at the beginning of your fourth year and encourage a successful match.

Taking USMLE Step 2 CK early can boost your candidacy. Increasingly, residency programs want to review applicants' Step 2 CK score, not only when creating their rank order list, but sometimes as early as when selecting candidates to interview.

If your Step 1 score is below average, taking time to study and complete Step 2 CK early in your fourth year is your main priority. If your Step 2 score shows improvement over your Step 1 score, program directors will feel more confident in your ability to successfully pass specialty boards, and thus improve your candidacy.

Typically, if your scores for the clerkship shelf exams are at or above the class average, two weeks should be sufficient for preparing for Step 2. If your scores are lower than the class average, I recommend spending 3–4 weeks preparing for Step 2, placing a special emphasis on completing sample board questions.

Completing a career elective in the specialty you're pursuing can be beneficial if you're still undecided about your career track. The best way to determine whether a specialty is the right fit is to spend quality time working in that environment — completing patient care duties as well as talking to faculty and housestaff about their career decisions and learning more about the specialty.

Additionally, building a relationship with a faculty member during the rotation establishes the foundation for receiving a positive letter of recommendation. Generally, two letters of recommendation from faculty members in your chosen specialty are required for a successful residency application.

Completing a sub-internship where you truly have the opportunity to work at the level of an intern can help determine if you have the skills needed to function effectively in a residency program. Program directors highly value comments from faculty who worked with you during

your sub-internship since these letters of recommendation provide insight into your ability to handle the rigor of the intern year. Ensure you're ready to handle the intensity of the workload before scheduling a sub-internship, as a poor performance on such rotations can negatively impact your residency application.

Completing away rotations can be helpful — or potentially harmful — in the residency application process, especially when applying in more competitive specialties. Schedule at least one away rotation if you're interested in matching into a competitive specialty. Otherwise, away rotations are optional. Completing away rotations shows your interest in those programs as well as your interest in matching into a particular geographic region of the country.

Consider the type of away rotation experience you want to complete. An outpatient or consult elective at another institution may give you more time to investigate the hospital and meet with faculty and housestaff as opposed to the time commitment and rigor of completing a sub-internship.

Last but not least, an away rotation is essentially a four-week “on-the-job” interview. A solid performance can be quite helpful, perhaps leading to an interview offer from the institution you're visiting. Conversely, a poor performance can negatively impact your chance to successfully match. The bottom line: Be on your best game when visiting another institution. Hopefully my perspective on these options will help you determine how to best prioritize the limited time you have at the beginning of your fourth year and assist you in achieving a successful match.

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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