

Rock and ROL: Creating your rank order list for the match

Tuesday, January 20, 2009

Interview season is winding down, and it's time to start thinking about your rank order list (ROL). For those of you non-fourth-years, an ROL is a preference list of programs at which a residency applicant wishes to train. It's certified by the applicant, submitted to the appropriate match organization, and used to find the best possible match between applicant and program. Similarly, residency programs submit their ordered list of applicants, then the match computers run an algorithm that — hopefully — makes a match.

So how do you approach ranking programs to have the best possible shot at a match? The primary rule, first and foremost, is to rank all the programs at which you interviewed and that you're willing to attend, in the order you prefer them, without regard to your perceived chances of matching. According to Mona Signer, executive director of the National Resident Matching Program® (NRMP®), an applicant is never disadvantaged by ranking the first-choice program first. “You should base your rank order list on your true preferences,” says Signer.

Signer also points out no benefit exists to basing the order of your list on where you think programs may rank you. Regardless of what applicants and programs tell each other about their interest, your list should truly reflect your wishes. The ROL you certify is completely confidential, and program directors don't know where you ultimately ranked their program, just as you won't know where a program ranked you.


Another key point: Never rank a program that you're not willing to attend. Murphy's Law would dictate that if you do, you most certainly will match there. The match agreement you sign as part of your participation is a binding commitment. Only the match organization(s) with which you participate can release you or a program from the commitment. Release is dictated only by special and unusual circumstances, so you must be willing to attend any training program you list.

Rather, rank programs based on the criteria (e.g., location, work environment, setting) most important to you and how you feel the program will meet your career goals. Your list should contain a good mix of competitive, likely, and acceptable “safety” programs. That advice is especially important if you hope to match in a highly competitive specialty.

What constitutes a safety program depends on the competitiveness of the specialty in which you hope to match and your own competitiveness as an applicant. A safety program could be a less competitive program in your specialty of choice or a program in a different, less competitive specialty.

Either way, ensure you rank enough programs to have a good chance of matching. “The most common mistake students make in developing their rank order list is not ranking enough programs, especially in specialties that are highly competitive,” says Signer. In highly competitive specialties, applicants should aim to obtain many


interviews and rank as many of the programs they're willing to attend. In less competitive specialties, it's probably not necessary to rank as many programs.

The joint AAMC/NRMP report  [Charting Outcomes in the Match](#) indicates how long your rank order list should be to maximize your chance of matching. The report provides the number of programs ranked by both matched and unmatched applicants in each of 19 specialties. Data consistently show students who rank more programs have a much higher match rate than those who rank fewer programs. Use the data to help you decide how many programs you should rank, as you consider your preferences.

Honestly appraise your chances of matching in your specialty of choice. Much will depend on how many interviews you received, how well you think those interviews went, and whether there are enough programs you're willing to attend to make a match.

The best way to appraise your chances of matching is get some guidance in this process, especially if you're applying in a competitive specialty or are going through the match as part of a couple. Consult with your advisor(s) and student affairs staff about your ROL. They have a wealth of experience, knowledge, and perspective on the process. After all, this is your first match, but it's usually not theirs.

CiM also has developed the Residency Preference Exercise (RPE) to help you evaluate your individual requirements for a residency and to compare programs based on those criteria. As you review notes from your interviews and start to prepare your list, use the RPE to score and compare programs.

Finally, review  [Charting Outcomes in the Match](#) for information on the characteristics of applicants who matched in their preferred specialties.

Preparing your rank order list can be stressful and may cause you a few sleepless nights. But the good news: most students do well in the match. According to the NRMP, year in and year out about 94 percent of U.S. M.D. seniors match and, of those, nearly 60 percent match to their first-choice program. You too can have a successful match by heeding these pointers, being true to your preferences, reviewing the data, and seeking guidance.

- **Jeanette L. Calli, M.S.**
Program Manager, [Careers in Medicine](#)

Jeanette has a master's degree in higher education with a specialty in career development counseling. She has been working with medical schools and students on career planning and specialty choice for 11 years and is primarily responsible for developing CiM content, day-to-day management of the program, and training faculty how to effectively advise medical students.