

The types and advantages of different residency programs

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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,

What types of residency programs exist? What are the advantages of each?

Choosing a residency is a big decision, and one that creates stress and anxiety for many students. Your residency is important because it's a time of tremendous growth both in your clinical knowledge base as well as your professional development. Much of what you learn will come from patients. So you must find a program where you are motivated to learn and study about your patients and can become an excellent, caring, humanistic physician, as well as feel happy in your work and home environments.

There's no one perfect residency that's the best fit for all students — the best program for you depends on your strengths, weaknesses, goals, and personality. This is a good thing and one reason the match works so well — it prevents students from ranking the same program as their first choice because instead, they're gravitating toward different residencies to find a program that fits their individual needs.

Personality. When I was interviewing in internal medicine, the most noticeable difference I found between programs was the personality of the program. The residency director and residents and how they treated each other were significant factors in whether I liked a program. You can get an idea of the program's personality by reading their Web site, but I learned far more by visiting the program, talking with the director and residents, and observing how the team interacted while on rounds.

Program Type. An often-discussed difference among residency programs is the type of program: research-intensive versus community-based. This difference is more pronounced in some surgical residencies where a research track or research year(s) are incorporated into the program. Generally, primary care residencies differ less — you'll mostly care for patients.

However, what may differ is how faculty members spend their time when they're not supervising residents. In a research-intensive program, the faculty may work in the laboratory. In a community program, the faculty will use that time to see patients. These experiences may influence what topics faculty emphasize while on rounds and how they teach residents and their general approach to patients. Typically, university-affiliated programs are research-intensive and community hospital programs are designed to produce clinicians; but exceptions to both stereotypes certainly exist.

Research-intensive programs are said to provide an advantage for helping their residents secure fellowships, but that depends on your specialty and what type of fellowship you want. One of the best ways to assess this is to investigate where a program's recent graduates are now.

Some programs produce many graduates who enter directly into practice in the same local area as the residency program. To me, that indicates a program has a good reputation in the community and it's likely you'll receive job offers locally when you finish residency. If all the past graduates landed fellowships in competitive subspecialties at big university programs (i.e., ones with good football teams), then their graduates are highly respected in those arenas. If you want to keep your post-residency options open, consider this type of data, which is sometimes available on the program Web site and often distributed during the interview day.

Geography. Some students feel it doesn't matter where their residency is located — they'll be in the hospital all the time. They might as well work in (insert the state adjoining yours that's the butt of all jokes). Other students want to spend whatever free time they have at the beach or mountains or visiting family. If you think you'll feel emotionally healthier living in a certain area, factor that into your decision.

But before everyone decides to go to Hawaii and abandon the mainland, remember that most residents end up working their first job close to their residency. If it's important you end up living in a particular geographical location, it may take extra effort to secure a job there if you're residency occurs on the other side of the country.

Socialization. Another factor students gauge: the family-friendliness of the program, which is often discussed when you meet with residents during the interview. Some programs attract young singles that often socialize together. Others attract married residents who share in family-friendly activities. Again, consider your type of group and personal situation.

Size. Some specialties have programs that vary in size, from a few residents a year to dozens in each class. You may like the family feel of a small program or having many colleagues with whom to share the workload. In larger programs, you may experience more outside lectures and research opportunities and a greater diversity of faculty from whom to learn. Smaller programs may provide closer relationships with colleagues.

Incredible diversity exists among residency programs. In order to find the perfect program for you, consider applying to a diverse group — some big, some small, some university-based, some community-based. Just be sure to discuss your decision with your advisor. Good luck!

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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