

8 things you should know about applying for residency but were afraid to ask

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You can just imagine the scene: a conference room full of teaching faculty and the program director, everyone swilling murky coffee and avoiding the day-old doughnuts as they consider the fate of residency applicants they want to rank in the Match. The debate begins over who would make the best residents for their program — who interviewed well, who has the best credentials on paper, who seemed arrogant or uptight, who's the diamond in the rough that can truly shine given the chance?

Just as you want to find a residency that's right for you, program directors and faculty want residents who'll fit in with their training environment and faculty. The application and interview process is all about evaluating that fit so you can thrive in your training.

CiM staff attended a student affairs professional development conference that focused on the transition to residency. We listened to program director panels, heard horror and success stories of students going through the Match, and participated in sessions designed to impart the best wisdom and current practices in preparing for the application and residency process. Without further ado, we present the eight things you should know about applying for residency but were afraid to ask:

1. **Do your homework regarding how competitive you are.** Ensure you review all the Match and residency applicant data available to ensure you're competitive for the specialty you're considering. Talk with your specialty-specific advisors about programs you're considering since they'll have a better grasp on program characteristics.

Your school may also have specific information on where past classes have matched. This data can help you gauge how competitive you are at the specialty and program level.

2. **If you're interested in a competitive specialty, cast your net widely and create a parallel plan.** It's no secret that specialties like dermatology, plastic surgery, anesthesiology, otolaryngology, radiology, ophthalmology, and a few others are especially competitive. If you've chosen an especially competitive specialty, plan to apply to more programs to help ensure you'll be successful on Match day. You may also consider a parallel plan, so meet with your advisor early to discuss your individual situation.
3. **Avoid getting too creative with your personal statement.** Programs aren't looking for the next *New Yorker* columnist. They want a simple, one-page statement that describes who you are and why you want to enter their specialty.

Your personal statement provides the chance to highlight your strengths, outline why you're a good match for your chosen specialty, and indicate how their residency program can help you meet your career goals. As one program director panelist said, "Spell well, use good grammar, and get out!"

4. **Your letters of recommendation are important in the screening process, so secure good ones.** Whom do you ask? Someone who knows you and your work. You want at least one and preferably two (out of three or four letters) from someone in your chosen specialty.

To ensure getting a good letter, ask your potential letter-writers if they feel like they know you and your work well enough to write you a strong letter. If there's any hesitation, ask someone else.

5. **Programs review applications early, so submit yours as soon as you can.** Many programs begin reviewing applications as soon as the Electronic Residency Application Service (ERAS) opens in September, and some begin offering interviews in October. It's to your advantage to plan well in advance for the application process and prepare your materials early.
6. **The interview is a two-way street.** Keep in mind that interviews are critical for both the program and the applicant. While it certainly is your time to shine, it's also your opportunity to assess the program itself and your fit with its residents, faculty, institution, and community. They want you to learn about them as much as they want to learn about you.
Preparation is key, so practice answering common interview questions. You should also consider what characteristics are most important to you in a program so you can formulate questions to ask your interviewers.
7. **Most programs include numerous, different people in their selection process.** A review committee can include faculty, residents, chief residents, program coordinators, and of course the program director. So know people are reviewing your application packet from numerous, different backgrounds and perspectives. You never know what may stand out for one person or be a red flag for others. Being a well-rounded student who's a good fit with the program (see No. 1) can take you far in this process.
8. **The more programs you rank, the better your chance of matching.** The National Resident Matching Program® (NRMP®) has collected data on the relationship between the length of an applicant's rank order list and whether they match. The data have consistently shown matched applicants average longer rank order lists than unmatched applicants. In the 2008 main residency Match, U.S. seniors who matched ranked an average of 9 programs, while unmatched applicants ranked only 5 programs.
The residency application, interview, and match process can be grueling. Use the services your school offers — including advising, workshops, panels, specialty groups, and other resources — to help you stay on track and secure a position in a training program that's right for you.

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