

What if you don't match? 3 things you should do

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Staff News Writer

On Monday, March 15, medical students participating in the 2021 Main Residency Match will find out whether they matched with a program.

Those who get the unfortunate news that they did not match and who are then unsuccessful in obtaining a position through SOAP, the Supplemental Offer and Acceptance Program, might wonder what their options are for keeping their dreams of a career as a practicing physician alive. A physician who has worked with unmatched applicants explains how to make the most of the coming year and improve the odds of matching the next time around.

Margarita Loeza, MD, is a family physician and chief medical information officer at Venice Family Clinic, a community health center in Los Angeles. For several years, she hired unmatched graduates to work with her in clinic—she has been unable to work with unmatched students of late due to restrictions put in place designed to limit potential exposures during the COVID-19 pandemic. She has seen firsthand, in both those graduates and her peers, the steps applicants can take to make themselves more attractive to residency programs.

FREIDA™, the AMA's comprehensive residency and fellowship database, includes more than 12,000 Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education-accredited residency programs, and has a new look and feel that offers a streamlined user experience.

The AMA also has curated a selection of resources to assist residents, medical students and faculty during the COVID-19 pandemic to help manage the shifting timelines, cancellations and adjustments to testing, rotations and other events at this time.

Dr. Loeza offered this advice.

Stay in touch with your medical school

“Some [unmatched applicants] will be embarrassed, hide out and not tell anyone, but they ought to do

just the opposite,” Dr. Loeza said. “Stay in touch with your dean and others at your medical school and ask them for help.

“Also, get involved in a research project. Look for mentors at your medical school who are working in the field of medicine you want to work in and volunteer to help.”

Find a job in a clinical setting

“You have to get a job that helps you keep your clinical skills, so you don’t forget medicine,” Dr. Loeza said. “Programs are going to want to know how you kept your clinical skills current, because you sat out a year.

“As a rule, you aren’t allowed to care for patients unless you’re in a residency, but you can, say, scribe for a doctor. Some states, though—Missouri is one of them—now allow unmatched graduates to work as assistant physicians in underserved areas.”

But the work does not have to be in direct patient care. Dr. Loeza hires unmatched applicants to work as electronic health record trainers for the clinic’s hundreds of volunteer physicians, residents and medical students.

Learn about the five skills residency program directors expect on day one.

Take the USMLE Step 3 exam

The United States Medical Licensing Exam (USMLE) Step 3 tests more in-depth clinical knowledge and decision-making. Because Step 3 covers the core disciplines, it is recommended that you take this exam while your knowledge of these core areas is still fresh.

Taking the exam while you’re in between medical school and residency can pay dividends.

“Passing it will make you a more competitive applicant the next time around,” Dr. Loeza said. “Some residents have started intern year and then didn’t pass Step 3, so their program was short a doctor. Passing it will make program directors feel they don’t have to worry about you.

“A couple years ago, I had two unmatched graduates working for me. One took Step 3 and passed it, and he got 14 interviews. The second student didn’t take Step 3 like I asked him to—he got only one interview invitation and didn’t match. The next year, he took Step 3 and passed, and then he matched.”

Discover more study tips for the USMLE and COMLEX-USA.

Try a new approach

Dr. Loeza also suggests, when the time comes, taking a different approach to applying and interviewing.

“The Match process and the interview process are expensive, but the second time around, you’ll probably have to apply to even more programs,” she said. “You might also have to apply to more than one specialty.”