Which factors do applicants weigh most when picking residency programs?

FEB 17, 2021

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Medicine is a calling, many people feel. You don’t choose it. It chooses you. As far as which programs physicians train in, that comes down to a rank-order list.

What factors do medical students consider most—and least—when choosing residency programs? Recent data released by the National Resident Matching Program (NRMP) shed some light on that question.

FREIDA™, the AMA’s comprehensive residency and fellowship database, includes the nearly 12,000 Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education-accredited residency programs, and it offers a streamlined user experience.

Every other year, the NRMP conducts a survey that aims to weigh the factors to which applicants give strongest consideration when applying to and ranking programs. Of those applicants who completed rank-order list, more than 40% responded to the 2019 version of the survey—the 2021 version of the survey will be released after this year’s Match cycle is complete.

Survey respondents were asked to list the factors that influenced both application and ranking choices and the relative importance of each of those factors on a scale of one to five. These factors may be worth keeping on a medical student’s radar in advance of the March 3 deadline for fourth-year medical students to submit their Match rank-order list.

Learn how residency programs will view applications in 2021.

Most important factors

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Among active U.S. allopathic senior medical students applying to residency programs across all specialties, these were the top five considerations.

- Desired geographic location—cited by 88%.
- Perceived goodness of fit—84%.
- Reputation of program—83%.
- Academic medical center program—68%.
- Quality of residents in program—67%.

The top five factors listed by applicants who were active U.S. allopathic senior medical students ranking programs—on their final Match rank-order list—were as follows:

- Overall goodness of fit—89%.
- Interview day experience—82%.
- Desired geographic location—77%.
- Quality of residents in program—75%.
- Reputation of program—71%.

Feeling uncertain about your rank-order list? Here’s what you should know.

**Least important factors for applying and ranking**

Among active U.S. allopathic senior medical students applying to a program, the list of factors survey respondents included 40 options. These were the five least-cited factors:

- Opportunity for training in systems-based practice—13%.
- Alternative duty hours—8%.
- Schools for my children in the area—6%.
- Other benefits—5%.
- Presence of a previous Match violation—4%.

The list of least important factors for ranking a program had the same five factors in the same order.

**Ranking strategy and application statistics**

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Here are some other interesting nuggets from the survey.

U.S. seniors most commonly ranked the programs in order of their preference, with 88% citing that as a strategy for ranking programs. Seventy-four percent ranked all the programs they were willing to attend and 68% ranked all programs with which they interviewed, regardless of preference.

The median number of applications submitted by U.S. seniors who matched was 39. The median number of interviews offered to matched U.S. seniors was 17, with those applicants attending an average of 13 interviews. Matched U.S. seniors ranked an average of 13 programs.

The median number of applications submitted by U.S. seniors who did not match was 59. The median number of interviews offered to applicants who did not match was seven with those applicants attending an average of seven interviews and ranking an average of seven programs.

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