Residency applications: How M4s should address COVID-19’s impact

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A residency application, like any job-application portfolio, has a narrative. It is the story of your personal and professional journey through medicine. For applicants in the upcoming physician residency-application cycle, that journey was certainly affected by a year and a half of medical education during a once-in-a-lifetime pandemic.

For those still finalizing the list of programs to which they plan to apply, FREIDA™—the AMA Residency & Fellowship Database®—captures more than 12,000 programs, all accredited by the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME).

One major benefit of FREIDA is that it includes a personalized search experience, with more than 35 filters that allow users to sort programs by location (either list or map view), program type, application information, demographics, benefits, Osteopathic Recognition, special tracks and more. Users can access unlimited program views, save custom searches and nickname your favorites to reuse with a free AMA account.

So, how should a medical student’s experiences during the pandemic be reflected in their residency application? Jimmy Stewart, MD, is a professor of medicine and pediatrics and associate dean for graduate medical education University of Mississippi Medical Center (UMMC). He shed some light on that question.

Personal statement

The personal statement is the best opportunity for an applicant to tell their story. It’s likely your story as an applicant will have been shaded by COVID to an extent.

“When I meet with medical students to offer advice about the personal statement, what I usually say

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is: Tell your story in a way that doesn’t capture all the other information that may be in the your application or in your letters of recommendation,” said Dr. Stewart, a principal investigator on UMMC’s project that is part of the AMA’s AMA Reimagining Residency initiative. “It is a narrative, a short story that really captures the things that they are passionate about. If that’s related to COVID, that should be in the essay.

“The thing that resounds the most with selection committees and program directors is a personal statement that allows you to see a person for [who] they really are and the trajectory that they are going in because of that story. COVID is going to play a big part in that, and I don’t think necessarily every person needs to discuss it, maybe you have other formative experiences pre-COVID to discuss.”

Interviews

While nothing has been officially decided, Dr. Stewart said UMMC is leaning toward conducting most—if not all—residency interviews virtually. So, the effects of an ongoing pandemic will be evident from the get-go. Interviewers are going to ask about the pandemic, how students handled the disruptions and how it shaped the way they envision their future in medicine.

“COVID is going to come up more than other individual [topics,” Dr. Stewart said. “But, everybody has a different story. Certainly, I think most people are going to be asking about COVID generally, not everybody has to make their entire story about COVID.”

You also have to factor in that much of your faculty feedback is likely to at least touch on your work and resilience during the pandemic. Considering that, Dr. Stewart said it’s OK to steer conversations to other passions and projects.

“Not every applicant can…totally be about their COVID experience,” he said. "We want to know everything that has led up to that, including before the pandemic.”