

# Program directors list 4 red flags for residency applicants to avoid

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For medical students applying to residency programs, standing out from the crowd is kind of the idea. But you don't want to do it for the wrong reasons.

In a recent AMA-member exclusive event, program directors and residents offered insight on the key final details of a medical student's application—the Electronic Residency Application Service opened Sept. 1 but programs cannot access applications in the system until Sept. 29—and broader insights about the process. A recording of the event is available for AMA members—click to join or renew.

For those still finalizing the list of programs to which they plan to apply, FREIDA™—the AMA's comprehensive residency and fellowship database—captures more than 12,000 Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME)-accredited residency and fellowship programs.

Here's a look at some of the red flags program directors told applicants to avoid.

## An unexplained misstep

Bad results are a part of life and medical training. One of the most commonly flagged missteps on a residency application is a failing score on either Step 1 or Step 2 of the United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE).

One program director said that if you have an unfavorable mark anywhere on your application, it can be overcome—if you can offer an explanation and show improvement.

“If someone failed a Step score, I expect to see an explanation somewhere in the application,” said David Marzano, MD, director of the ob-gyn residency at Michigan Medicine. “That should be part of the story you are going to tell. It might be in your personal statement.”

Dr. Marzano spoke of an instance in which an applicant had taken and failed the exam days after losing a parent. That explanation offered insight on the result.

“In terms of a personal disappointment, when you meet your advisers you should talk about how you want to discuss it and explain what you learned from the process,” he said.

Find out the top questions to ask before you submit your residency application.

## A templated letter of recommendation

Your letters of recommendation should speak to your unique qualifications and personal experiences. If they read like anyone could’ve written it—not a faculty member with whom you had a close relationship—that will make program directors question why it was so generic.

“I have seen so many letters that are templates,” said AMA member Ricardo Correa, MD, director of diversity for graduate medical education at the University of Arizona College of Medicine. “That is something that doesn’t say anything about the person. We are looking for something that says you are outstanding or highly recommended.”

Gain insight on what programs are looking for in letters of recommendation.

## Unprofessional social media

An unprofessional social media presence, which often can be retrieved with a simple Google search, can prevent you from reaching the interview stage. Dr. Marzano runs his program’s social media accounts and checks in on who is following.

“We see who follows us,” he said. “We look to see what people are posting on their social media accounts and professionalism is important.

“If you have a social media account you wouldn’t want your mom, dad, husband or wife to see, you should keep that private.”

Learn how medical students can be effective advocates on social media.

## A box-checker

There are certain things that residency program directors look upon favorably, such as research experience. But simply saying you did something, and not saying how it influenced your career path or what it tells about your interests, makes it seem like you did it to simply check the box as an applicant.

“It’s about not just saying what you have done, but how you have done it, how you will integrate it into your career, and what it says about who you are,” said AMA member Chadd Kraus, DO, DrPH, associate program director of the emergency medicine residency at Geisinger Medical Center in Danville, Pennsylvania, and system director of research for Geisinger Emergency Medicine.

“When I was a medical student, I did a lot of research to improve my residency application, but it turned into something else. I’m now a research director. I found a passion doing something I never realized would be a passion.”