

UC Davis

Dermatology Online Journal

Title

The dermatology residency application process

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4k1570vj>

Journal

Dermatology Online Journal, 26(12)

Authors

Kolli, Sree S
Feldman, Steven R
Huang, William W

Publication Date

2020

DOI

10.5070/D32612051354

Copyright Information

Copyright 2020 by the author(s). This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

The dermatology residency application process

Sree S Kolli¹ MD, Steven R Feldman²⁻⁴ MD PhD, William W Huang² MD MPH

Affiliations: ¹Department of Medicine, Henry Ford Hospital, Detroit Michigan, USA, ²Center for Dermatology Research, Department of Dermatology, Wake Forest School of Medicine, Winston-Salem, North Carolina, USA, ³Department of Pathology, Wake Forest School of Medicine, Winston-Salem, North Carolina, USA, ⁴Department of Public Health Sciences, Wake Forest School of Medicine, Winston-Salem, North Carolina, USA

Corresponding Author: Sree S Kolli, 2799 East Grand Boulevard, Detroit MI 48202, Tel: 313-916-2600, Email: sreekolli2247@gmail.com

Abstract

The dermatology application process is grueling, and is tough to navigate without the proper guidance. This commentary is meant to shed light on the factors that can help applicants stand out in order to be successful in the match. It includes observations from successful applicants from the most recent match process.

Keywords: dermatology, dermatology residency program, program directors, step 1, successful match, application process, pandemic, COVID-19

Introduction

Applying to residency is one of the toughest and most draining processes of medical school. Dermatology is the most competitive specialty with a 2020 match rate of 84.7% for U.S. senior medical students, and much lower match rates for reapplicants, International Medical Graduates (IMGs, 49%), and Doctors of Osteopathic Medicine (DOs, 70.7%), [1]. Although the match rate for U.S. allopathic seniors appears reassuring, dermatology applicants are self-selecting as those who are at the top of their medical school classes tend to be the ones that are more confident of success in the competitive process. The number of publications and research projects done by applicants have increased [2]. Applicants attempt to go on away or audition rotations at other institutions, obtain letters of recommendations from prominent dermatologists, and engage in activities that set themselves apart from the rest (hopefully in a good way). Many applicants have impressive academic

qualifications and are often at the top of their respective classes. Given the challenging nature of the dermatology application process, a method of navigation through the process is to seek the advice of those that have successfully matched, and mold that advice to fit one's own situation/personality. Below are some of the honest observations compiled from successful dermatology applicants that may be of benefit to future applicants. In addition, the current COVID-19 pandemic has impacted medical education in numerous ways and the upcoming residency application cycle will be different from previous years. Therefore, we also provide some alternative solutions to help future applicants navigate these unprecedented times. In addition, the current COVID-19 pandemic has impacted medical education in numerous ways and the residency application cycle will be different from previous years. Therefore, we also provide some alternative solutions to help future applicants navigate these unprecedented times.

Academic qualifications

For many years, strong academic qualifications have seemed like a prerequisite even to entertain the possibility of applying to dermatology. Strong pre-clinical grades often predicted higher Step 1 scores which translated to better clinical grades and United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE) Step 2 Clinical Knowledge (CK) scores. A strong academic record was often a way to qualify for Alpha Omega Alpha (AOA) Honor Medical Society, the most prestigious honor in medical school and used by some residency programs as a filter. However, given the recent changes of USMLE Step 1 to pass/fail, which takes effect in 2022, the emphasis on test scores and grades will diminish as other metrics for

success will take precedence as predicted by some dermatology residency program directors. In addition, a shift towards focusing and requiring Step 2 CK scores may occur as an unanticipated consequence. The Vermont dermatology residency program director (PD), Dr. Joseph Pierson, has often focused on compelling personal statements to invite people for an interview and has predicted that this will be a major criterion going forward as it may also tease out the applicants genuinely interested in the specialty. It also allows applicants an opportunity to tell their personal history, highlight how it relates to dermatology, and demonstrate their contributions to the specialty/program. This also might increase the possibility in the future of finding stellar applicants that would otherwise not have even entertained the possibility of pursuing dermatology because of the Step 1 hurdle. However, this may place greater demands on residency programs as the number of applications to dermatology will most likely increase. Therefore, other metrics may be used in conjunction with a variety of attributes in finding the right applicant.

Although Step 2 CK is still assessed by a three-digit score, there is a possibility that it will follow suit like Step 1 and be graded on a pass/fail basis. Given the de-emphasis on test scores, other metrics for academic success will become more important. Clinical grades assess an applicant's clinical skills and acumen as well as traits of teamwork, adaptability, work ethic, communication skills, and attitude. More honors grades exhibited on the application shows that the applicant can learn, adapt, and improve quickly over a short period of time and will likely be an important asset to the clinical team. Honors in Internal Medicine and Surgery seemed to be valued highly. Although the grade is most important, the summative comments along with the grade are also crucial and provide more evidence to predict the kind of resident an applicant will most likely be. The argument can be made that it is difficult to place so much emphasis on clinical grades as the grading criteria varies from school to school and there are other pertinent factors including implicit and explicit bias that may affect evaluations. Despite the imperfect nature of these grades, comparative

academic standing within the class may promote a less biased distinction. It is important to stand out at least amongst classmates in one's own school as it makes it easier for residency programs to bet on the potential to succeed outside of said school. This is why induction into AOA is reflective of those comparative accomplishments.

Alpha Omega Alpha status appears significant and is an indicator of a well-rounded strong applicant. Often entrance to this honor society requires a strong academic record, service to the school, and scholarly activity. It is another way to stand out from the cohort at one's own school and possibly predict future success. Of those U.S. allopathic seniors who have matched into dermatology, 47% were members of AOA [1]. However, many schools are revising the policies of AOA membership and ensuring fair process by invoking blind admissions because a recent study found inherent racial disparities in membership [3]. Therefore, AOA is far from the perfect metric as residency programs would like it to be. Keep in mind some programs only match applicants who were AOA but applying to dermatology does not appear to be dependent on it since about half of the successfully matched residents were not AOA awardees.

Away rotations

Away rotations are one of the most important assets of the dermatology application process. It opens up opportunities to meet faculty and residents and increase interview invitation and matching likelihood. They offer an opportunity for students and programs alike to find the right fit. But not every medical school encourages away rotations. Top tier medical schools do not typically recommend away rotations; their students often already have an advantage in obtaining the coveted dermatology interviews so away rotations can do more harm than good. The benefits of away rotations are stronger for students coming from lesser-known medical schools and schools without home dermatology residency programs. This allows applicants more opportunities with a strong away performance or may open up a geographic region outside their medical school and/or hometown.

On the flip side, not everyone obtains an interview just by doing an away rotation. It is extremely important to impress as many people at the program as possible and to get face time with the program director (PD), associate program director (APD), and/or chairperson as these tend to be the most influential people at most programs. This will help them to remember your name. However, it does not guarantee an interview. Do your best on away rotations and don't be afraid to ask to work with the most influential people at the program. At the same time, don't take it personally if you don't get an interview invitation despite putting your best foot forward.

Away rotations may not even be an option during this pandemic while social distancing remains of utmost priority. A possible solution is for students to contact faculty and/or residents at the institutions they intended to rotate and inquire about potential research projects. This allows students to make connections, engage in research, and garner potential letters of recommendation.

Letters of recommendation

I believe letters of recommendations (LORs) are extremely important and often underestimated amongst applicants. It is important to exhibit strengths and perform at a high level when interacting with LOR writers. At the same time, put forward the best version of yourself while remaining true to yourself. The quality of the letter depends on the time spent with the letter writer and what was accomplished during that time. A research mentor has plenty of opportunities (hopefully) to assess your abilities in a variety of situations which can speak volumes to your work ethic, attitude, integration on teams, leadership, creativity, accountability, and potential to learn and grow. Furthermore, it also is especially important to impress letter writers in a short period of time, especially on away rotations as it highlights your ease of integration to the system and team. This may be considered more valuable than your dermatology knowledge (which by the way doesn't have to be much at this point, but is impressive if it is). In addition, well known letter writers make a huge difference as this allows your application to be more likely to be flagged for a

potential interview. However, generic letters from well-known people hurt more than help as these letter writers have probably worked with countless number of students. The fact that you didn't stand out may be detrimental to your application.

In light of the pandemic, it may not be possible to obtain enough LORs given the fact that many medical schools have cancelled/delayed clinical rotations for the time being. It may be necessary to contact preceptors from other specialties/rotations that applicants have already completed in order to meet the minimum requirement of LORs for the upcoming residency application cycle.

Research

Research is important and it has become increasingly difficult to forgo research when applying to dermatology. This is not to say that every applicant should engage in research, especially when they are not at all interested (goes back to being genuine and true to yourself), but engaging in research in some way can demonstrate commitment to dermatology. It speaks to the ability to publish, to start and finish projects, collaborate in teams, multitask, and give back to the specialty by improving patient care through research. Programs want to invest in future leaders and change-makers; that allows for improvement of the specialty.

The pitfalls of engaging in research or research years comes when students are a surrogate for free labor and there is no spirit of mentorship or support by principal investigators in these research endeavors. I personally took a research year and comparing experiences to other applicants who took the same route, it is important to find the right mentor. It is important to figure out what kind of environment you thrive in and what type of research excites you. In addition, programs will be excited if you are able to bring that skill set to your new residency program.

The quality of research is just as important as the quantity of research. For instance, original research is weighted more than a case report. It is much more impressive to engage in original work that is published in high impact journals as it takes a considerable amount of effort, time, and creativity to see it through. It appears quantity only matters if

there is quality work amongst it. This point is especially true at residency programs that emphasize engagement in research. Regardless of the type of research chosen, be sure to be able to intelligently and concisely talk about each of your projects.

For current applicants with no home program, it may be tempting to pursue a research year owing to COVID-19 effects on the application cycle. However, this should be based on applicant's individual situation and circumstances and it may not be feasible for all.

The “extras”

The “extras” are the interesting things that get brought up during interviews because those are what makes an applicant unique amongst applicants. Past experiences such as being class president, engaging in Step 1 tutoring, receiving the Gold Humanism Honor Society (GHHS) award, starting a nonprofit organization, obtaining a Masters of Public Health degree, or having had an entirely different career before coming to medical school are all important pieces of information that should be included in your application. These are all indicative of qualities and skills that can be of value to your residency program. Anything that makes your journey or story more interesting and paints a picture of who you are is always an asset when pursuing a job as it makes you memorable. A positive lasting impression is what people remember during rank list meetings.

Tier of medical school

The prestige of the medical school matters especially for top residency programs. It increases the chances of receiving an interview at such programs and also matching at one of these programs. This is not to say applicants from lower tier medical schools won't be able to match at such places, it just makes it more difficult and their record will need to be very strong. It is probably best for applicants to invest (including for away rotations) in places from which they are more likely to receive an interview. Although the opportunity to obtain LORs from such places might elicit more interviews elsewhere, this is one of those factors that must be weighed individually and often fosters mixed results/experiences.

Personality/interpersonal skills/likeability

This area isn't talked about as much, but it goes a long way if you are someone people like having around. It is hard to define and harder to teach, but an important factor as it is assessed in almost everything you do in medical school including your core clinical rotations, away rotations, research endeavors, extracurricular activities, pre-interview dinners, and ultimately on interview day. Programs want someone that can work with anyone and that people want to work with especially when programs are investing time into teaching and molding you into a future dermatologist. Programs also pay attention to how you interact with fellow applicants during away rotations and interviews so be kind and help each other not only to improve your chances but because it is the right thing to do.

Conclusion

This commentary is meant to help future applicants as the dermatology residency application process is rapidly changing in the coming years, and entering dermatology continues to remain competitive. The traditional factors that have set people apart in the past are now becoming obsolete with Step 1 changing pass/fail so maximizing other factors is becoming crucially important. Applicants must also adjust to the current pandemic with creative solutions. Hopefully, residency programs will engage in a holistic process with consideration of current circumstances. Despite the changes in the residency application process, be sure to engage in each activity with genuine interest, hard work, and genuine concern for the people around you; it makes the stressful process much more gratifying regardless of the result.

Potential conflicts of interest:

Dr. Steve Feldman is a speaker for Janssen and Taro. He is a consultant and speaker for Galderma, Stiefel/GlaxoSmithKline, Abbott Labs, Leo Pharma Inc. Dr. Feldman has received grants from Galderma, Janssen, Abbott Labs, Amgen, Stiefel/GlaxoSmithKline, Celgene and Anacor. He is a consultant for Amgen, Baxter, Caremark, Gerson

Lehrman Group, Guidepoint Global, Hanall Pharmaceutical Co Ltd, Kikaku, Lilly, Merck & Co Inc, Merz Pharmaceuticals, Mylan, Novartis Pharmaceuticals, Pfizer Inc, Qorient, Suncare Research and Xenoport. He is on an advisory board for Pfizer Inc. Dr. Feldman is the founder and holds

stock in Causa Research and holds stock and is majority owner in Medical Quality Enhancement Corporation. He receives Royalties from UpToDate and Xlibris. Dr. William Huang and Dr. Sree Kolli have no conflicts to disclose.

References

1. NRMP, Main Residency Match Data and Reports. 2020. <https://www.nrmp.org/main-residency-match-data>. Accessed on December 6, 2020.
2. Ezekor, M., A. Pona, A. Cline, et al., An Increasing Trend in the Number of Publications and Research Projects Amongst Dermatology Residency Applicants. *J Am Acad Dermatol.* 2020;83:214-216. [PMID:31541752].
3. Wijesekera, T.P., M. Kim, E.Z. Moore, et al., All Other Things Being Equal: Exploring Racial and Gender Disparities in Medical School Honor Society Induction. *Acad Med.* 2019;94:562-569. [PMID: 30234509].