

“Rocking the Match”: Applying and Getting into Residency

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Success in life requires talent and skill. But in addition, preparation is critical because it allows a person to use talent and skill to their maximal advantage, putting the person in the best position possible for whatever is planned. Success in the residency application process is more likely if the student keeps this in mind. If a student begins to prepare long before the deadlines and due dates, the process will be easier and things will be more likely to work to his or her advantage. This article is written from the perspective of someone who has evaluated many residency applications and many residency applicants. It is “an insider’s view” into the process and provides some tips to medical students as they contemplate the next step after medical school. The points in the article can be remembered with the mnemonic “MRS. POPE,” which should allow the student to recall the importance of Mentoring; how to prepare a Résumé; the value of good Scores; the skills involved in Promoting oneself; the role of careful Observation during the interview process; and how to Present oneself and Express interest during and after the visit. Even if the mnemonic cannot be recalled, the student should remember above all that the process of preparing oneself for applying for residency begins the first day of medical school, if not sooner. Hopefully, students can use the information in this manuscript as a recipe for “rocking the match.”

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Several years ago, I was asked by Dr. Crystal Simpson, now the assistant dean of student affairs in the Office of Diversity for Medical Students at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, to meet with groups of underrepresented minority medical students who were participating in the Johns Hopkins Geriatric Summer Scholars Program¹ to discuss how to succeed when applying for residency training. I hoped that my

advice was practical, useful and meaningful to young individuals studying medicine who happened also to be from groups that were underrepresented in medicine. Apparently, the students felt that it was, and soon I was invited to present this talk at a regional Student National Medical Association (SNMA) Medical Education Conference. The students titled my talk “Rocking the Match,” and I have therefore chosen that as the title of this article, which is the gist of that talk.

Some time ago, I coauthored an article comparing the Match to “March Madness,” the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) tournament involving college basketball teams that takes place in the spring.² The Match and March Madness both occur around the same time of year, and both involve a complex system in which either individuals or teams are selected for competition and, ultimately, for a big prize. The comparison doesn’t stop there. Any college coach will tell you that winning a championship does not begin in the NCAA tournament or even at the start of the basketball season. It starts far earlier than that, typically many years earlier, when recruiting a talented group of athletes. Similarly, a successful Match for a medical student does not begin during “interview season,” or even with a well-put-together application several months before. It begins the very first day of medical school, if not sooner.

The following advice is written from the perspective of someone who regularly mentors students through this process and as someone with years of experience as a residency program director evaluating prospective interns. It is “an insider’s view,” so to speak, and it provides some practical tips for medical students applying in any specialty, from any background and culture and of all races. However, it is written with special attention to students from underrepresented minority groups, who often have unique issues to deal with as they try to “rock the match.” I will focus on seven aspects of the process: Mentoring, Résumé, Scores, Promoting yourself, Observation, Presenting yourself and Expressing interest. These can be remembered with the mnemonic, “MRS. POPE.”

MENTORING

In the modern era, sports agents have emerged as powerful figures. Sports agents are the subjects of movies (*Jerry Maguire*) and television shows (*Arli\$\$*) and often grab the headlines (Scott Boras) after obtaining lucrative contracts for a client (\$252 million for Alex Rodriguez several years ago). A simple lesson can be learned from this. It is not enough to pitch shutouts, hit home runs, throw touchdowns or hit 20-foot jump shots at the buzzer. Those feats are important, but not enough. Modern sports figures need an agent if they are going to get the mega-contract. A medical student needs an agent too. The student has to do well in school, but that is often not enough. The student needs someone, or preferably more than one person, to trumpet his or her accomplishments. The need for a mentor may be particularly relevant to underrepresented minority medical students who cite overall lack of mentors, lack of a same-race mentor and lack of a same-race role model as significant barriers to professional development.³

Don't Hide

Sitting in the back row of class has been a strategy used by medical students for decades in the hope that no one would ask them to speak up in class. Hiding is even easier now that technology allows for the recording and dissemination of lectures via the computer; it is possible for students to learn without even attending lectures. Although being anonymous is sometimes easier and more comfortable, it does nothing to help you get a mentor or advance your career. Regarding mentors, several things should be kept in mind: 1) get one; 2) consider strongly having more than one; 3) diversify your mentor portfolio (consider some who are older and have mentored many medical students in their career and others who are younger and may be able to relate more readily to your experience); 4) try to ensure that at least one faculty member knows you very well during medical school; 5) consider at least one mentor who can identify with some particular trait or personally relevant issue (e.g., gender or race); 6) do not be shy about asking your mentor for things; that's why the person is your mentor.

Make an Appointment

It is not difficult to establish a relationship with a mentor. At every point in your career, ask someone several years senior to you, "Which faculty member has the best reputation among people in your class as someone who is helpful to students?" A second-year student can ask a fourth-year student, "Which faculty member is going to be your grand marshal at graduation this year?" Find out who won last year's teaching award. Chances are that this will identify faculty members who are very dedicated to students and who never turn a student down. Contact that faculty member's assistant or secretary and ask to make an appointment. Explain that you are a stu-

dent in need of advice and mentoring and that you have heard great things about this person. Then, once you have the meeting scheduled, consider a quick e-mail to the faculty member explaining who you are, when your meeting is and what you expect from the meeting. Explain that your hope is that he or she can get to know you during your medical school career and that the relationship can develop over that time. Indicate that you would like to benefit from this person's wisdom and guidance and that when you apply to residency, you hope that this person will have come to know you well enough to guide you through that process. This is, after all, what formal mentoring programs do at schools that have them. And if your school has such a formal mentoring program, you will undoubtedly benefit from it. But you can also create your own of sorts.

RÉSUMÉ

One of the hardest things for students to come to grips with is that they are nothing but a piece of paper. While that is a statement that is deliberately exaggerated for effect, the truth is that at times the only thing that represents you is a piece of paper. Your résumé, with or without accompanying documents, is sometimes your only hope of getting in the door. And if you don't get in the door, no one gets to meet you. This is particularly difficult for people who are still young and who have been told throughout childhood that they are wonderful and have great personal qualities to appreciate. Your grandmother, your high-school principal and your pastor might have always said what a beautiful person you are, but you will have no chance to show that if your résumé does not get you in the door.

Your Résumé is a Living, Breathing Document

Your résumé, also called your curriculum vitae or CV, needs constant attention, constant feeding. It is like a child or a pet. Do not neglect it. Put it on your computer desktop. Review it periodically to ensure its correctness and to make sure it is up to date. If someone asks for your résumé, you should never have to work to prepare it. It should always be ready.

It is Far Easier to Remove Something than to Add It

If your dean asks you to talk to students in a local high school about careers in science and medicine and you do it, put that on your résumé. Note that I am not recommending you do it in order to have another line on your résumé. Choose to do things, or not to do them, based on your interests and abilities, but once you do something, put it on your CV. When you are ready to submit a résumé as part of an application, you can always decide to remove something that does not pertain to that position or that would not be of interest to the in-

dividuals judging your candidacy for that position. But it is far more challenging to remember all the things you have done that might be considered community service; for example, months or years after you have done them.

Don't Be Shy

Once you recognize that you are nothing but a piece of paper (if you understood what I meant by that), you will not be shy about putting your best features out there for all to see. Include all your awards and all your honors. If you were high-school valedictorian or if you were graduated *summa cum laude*, list it right up front. Now is not the time for modesty.

Explain Things That Need Explaining

If you received the Doris E. Friedemeyer Award at college graduation, that's terrific, but as a program director, I won't know what that award was given to you for unless you explain it. You can certainly list the name of the award, but a sentence or two—typically set off in italics, describing what you were recognized for—would be helpful. And remember that numbers are often better at describing something than words. If an award was given to you because you were the #1 student of 422, write that.

SCORES

Many students grow up in a nurturing, supportive environment in which occasional poor grades are treated with a gentle hand on the shoulder and a "you'll do better next time." And while support and unconditional love may be the rule for a parent, grandparent or spouse, it is seldom the approach taken by someone who must evaluate 1,000 applications and choose 10 qualified individuals from among them.

Scores are Important

Scores are important. Period. Study hard. Prepare for examinations, especially the big ones, like the U.S. Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE). If test-taking is not your strength, a program director might still cherish you as a resident in his or her program, but that program director might never get to meet you because you may never be invited for an interview in the first place because of a bad score. If you need to take a test taking preparatory course, do it. If you need to say no to a social engagement in order to study, do it. If you feel sad because all your friends are enjoying themselves at a concert while you are in your room taking practice exams, get over it. Scores are important. As I wrote in the last section, you are nothing but a piece of paper—at least not until you have your foot in the door. If you have saved thousands of small children in a third-world country by bringing them food and shelter, but you failed the boards, the person on the other end of your application may never find out about your supreme act of humanity.

PROMOTING YOURSELF

Promoting oneself is important to career advancement. Effective self-promotion, which highlights an individual's attributes without having the person appear arrogant or obnoxious, is an important skill to develop. Self-promotion may be especially important for underrepresented minority groups in academic medicine. Studies show that minority medical school faculty are promoted at lower rates compared with white faculty⁴ and are less likely than white faculty to hold senior academic rank, even after adjusting for years as a faculty member and for numerous measures of academic productivity.⁵ This suggests that processes that are effective for those in the majority may be inadequate for minority groups, who may therefore be more reliant on self-promotion. Although there is little literature on the topic, this is likely the case with minority medical students as well as minority faculty. Offices of minority affairs or minority affairs organizations are found at many medical schools to address minority student issues, but few are active in the writing of the dean's letter⁶ or other letters of recommendation.

Put Your Mentor to Work

It is sometimes hard to know how something you say or write comes across to others. Self-promotion must not cross the line so that an individual appears immodest. Have your mentors read your résumé or personal statement to make sure that it does not go too far. Practice interviewing with your mentor to make sure that what you intend to say promotes your talents but is not off-putting.

Promote yourself through your mentors and through other individuals in positions of power or authority who can broadcast your attributes to others. Asking for letters of recommendation is sometimes a difficult task for medical students. However, it should be easy, especially if you followed some of the steps above and have an established mentor who knows you well.

Letters of Recommendation

Promote yourself by finding the right people to write your letters of recommendation. There are several different kinds of letter writers, each with a particular value. Don't just consider a particular letter in isolation; evaluate all your letters together. If one letter writer can comment well on your clinical performance on the wards, perhaps another writer can address another aspect of your performance such as research, community service or leadership in professional organizations. Some students ask the most well-known professor at their school for a letter, thinking that having a letter from that person will impress others. That will not be the case, however, if it is clear from the letter that this individual does not really know you. Of course, the best letter is from an individual who is very well known, who has evaluated

hundreds or perhaps thousands of students over several decades, who knows you well and who believes you are one of the best students ever. Certainly, that kind of letter is impossible to obtain if you are not one of the best students ever. But the problem is that even if you are, if a faculty member of this renown does not know you well, you will still not be able to get a letter like this. And having a young faculty member note that you are “the best student of the five students I have ever worked with since joining the faculty” does not carry nearly as much weight as having a senior faculty member note that you are “in the top 10% of more than 500 students I have worked with at this institution in the 25 years I have been here.” That is why I recommended earlier (in the section on mentoring) that you get to know someone with this kind of experience early in your medical school career.

Asking for Letters

Asking for a letter of recommendation should be done formally. Don't ask in the hallway or if you run into someone in the ladies' room. Make an appointment with the faculty member. Tell the individual's assistant or secretary the purpose of the meeting. Indicate that you want to review your career goals and objectives and ask for his or her support with a letter of recommendation. Either give your résumé to the assistant beforehand, send it to the faculty member by e-mail or bring it with you to the meeting. Ideally, you should also have your personal statement, typically a one-page essay that tells something about you, your accomplishments and your goals and objectives. It is in your best interest to make sure that the faculty member will write you a very strong letter. Very few letters of recommendation describe a student's negative qualities or make the student seem undesirable. In this context, though, a bland or neutral letter will be seen as quite damning. When you ask for a letter of recommendation, you will want to give the faculty member “an out.” Faculty will seldom say no to a request for a letter of recommendation, even if they do not know you well enough or think highly enough about you to write something laudatory. Consider asking, “Do you feel you know me well enough to write a very strong letter of recommendation?” This shifts the focus away from the individual's sense of your performance and character (few faculty will want to say that they don't think highly enough of you to write a letter) and to something “safer,” namely, how well the faculty member knows you. It also focuses very clearly on precisely what you want, not just “a letter” but “a very strong letter of recommendation.” If the faculty member does not feel that he or she can write you the strong letter of recommendation you seek, that person now can say, “I don't think I know you well enough; you might want to ask someone who knows you a bit better.” To promote yourself through your mentor (or other faculty member), you might even consider asking whether the individual would like you to write some-

thing about yourself and your attributes that might make his or her job a bit easier. This may allow you to help shape the content of the letter and highlight your attributes. You might suggest, “I really appreciate that you are willing to write me a very strong letter of recommendation. I know how busy you are, and if it would help you, I would be happy to write a few paragraphs about myself and some of the things I have done to make the process easier for you.”

OBSERVATION

Once you are invited for an interview, take full advantage of the situation. Don't be so overwhelmed that you fail to observe. You can spend an entire evening with a person you have a crush on and not realize that person has only one shoe on. Sometimes we fail to observe things when we are overwhelmed by emotion. The fact that you are there means that the program is interested in you. Relax.

Keep Your Eyes Open

Every person and every situation looks the same through the inside of your eyelids. Open your eyes. Look at the environment and see how it matches your personality and your learning style. Are there people there who are succeeding who are similar to you in personality, interests or color? It certainly helps to speak with program leaders when you interview, but make sure to speak with the interns and residents you would be joining if you went to that program. Find people you would be comfortable with (if they exist there) and ask how they feel and how they are treated.

A program's attitude toward minorities should be very important to minority applicants. It is, thank goodness, illegal for organizations to forbid entry to minorities. But legislation has not made every environment welcoming for minority applicants. It is not enough to take down the sign forbidding minorities entry or acceptance. Minority applicants should look for some sign that minorities are welcomed, cherished and have outstanding opportunities for success. Look for evidence that program leaders are doing something specifically to attract minority applicants. It is clear that these issues are important to minority applicants, and they should be important to program directors. One study showed that minority applicants were significantly more likely than white applicants to identify ethnic diversity of patients, house staff and faculty as being important to them when choosing a residency program. Other important factors included the feeling of being wanted and an academic environment supportive of ethnic minorities.⁷ Talk to residents during the interview day and make sure that underrepresented minority residents feel that their program leaders, their colleagues and the environment as a whole are supportive of minority residents.

PRESENTING YOURSELF

Congratulations. When you finally visit a program, you are no longer nothing but a piece of paper. But now, you may be nothing but a handshake. A suit. A hairstyle. A way of speaking. While this statement may also be deliberately exaggerated for effect, the truth is that you will be judged by your appearance. Individuals who interview and judge others for a living (e.g., program directors) often form very strong first impressions. Typically, those individuals are flexible and those impressions are changeable, but those first impressions are nevertheless important. Present yourself as someone who is confident (but not cocky), enthusiastic (but not unable to contain your enthusiasm) and poised (but not aloof). You would probably not deliver a talk in front of thousands of people without rehearsing it first. Your interview is just as important, and it must be treated in that way.

Rehearse

Have a faculty member at your institution interview you to practice. Make it count. Dress as you would dress during a real interview. Shake his or her hand. Speak as you would during an interview. Have that person purposely ask you the one question you most dread. Think about how you are sitting. Should your legs be crossed? Are you slouched over, and do you appear too relaxed or are you too stiff in your chair? Is your shirt out of your pants? Is your chair facing one way and the interviewer's chair facing in a different direction? Are you making eye contact? Does it interest your interviewer when you speak about yourself, your background, your upbringing, your work, your interests and your passions? Do you know how to give the interviewer a bird's-eye view of the topic and know when to stop? It is always better to have the interviewer want more (and ask for it) than to leave him or her waiting for the moment you'll stop talking. If you're thinking about how to discuss your community service, your research work or your leadership role in an organization, imagine how you would discuss it if you were sitting next to someone at a bar or if you met someone at a party. It is true that if you did molecular biology research, you should be able to discuss the specific steps you took in running a gel or using a particular antibody, but that is not what your interviewer wants to hear at first. What was the significance of your work? What does it all mean? Start there and have the interviewer ask for more. Now that your foot is in the door, make sure you've got the right shoes on.

EXPRESSING INTEREST

You're done interviewing. Do you have to write a letter or e-mail to the program director or to the person who interviewed you? The answer is no. These people receive lots of correspondence and likely will not remember whether you contacted them or not, especially if your correspondence is generic. If you walk down a

busy city street and pass by 100 people and 50 of them say hello and 50 do not, you will likely not know who greeted you in passing and who walked by without making eye contact. On the other hand, if a person stops in front of you, shakes your hand and tells you he really likes your tie or your dress, you will likely recall who that person is.

Love Letters

If you truly want to express interest, make your correspondence specific. Write a love letter. Not, "I love you more than anyone else." Most program directors don't take that seriously. Instead, "I love your program because I could envision myself on the wards taking care of a patient population that has many financially disadvantaged persons, whom I am particularly dedicated to. In addition, given my interest in oncology, I would look forward to working with Dr. Smith and perhaps even working with her on a clinical research study in pancreatic cancer."

Enough or Too Much?

Some applicants worry about expressing too much interest. There are three things that govern you here, in my view. First, never be dishonest. You can certainly communicate about things that you find positive about a program without mentioning those things that are negative or concerning if you like, but do not indicate that something is positive to you if it is not. Second, do not commit a Match violation. The National Resident Matching Program (NRMP) website (www.nrmp.org) has a section that discusses Match violations and is very helpful in this regard. If you have a question about any statement you want to make, you should consult this website or discuss it first with a knowledgeable faculty member at your institution. Third, think long and hard if you find yourself expressing very strong interest to many different program directors. This is akin to someone writing love letters to three different men or women. It does not make sense. Figure out which program you like the most and, if you want, let the program director know that you are very interested and why. Do not tell a program director that you are ranking that program #1 on your list if it is not true. The statement is not binding, but you do not want someone to develop bad feelings about you that could count against you later. Most physicians have good memories or they would not have passed anatomy.

SUMMARY

The Match is terrifying to many students, but in reality it can be truly exhilarating. The steps outlined above will make success more likely and should allow you to go into the process confident and secure. The most important thing you should remember, though, is to begin preparing early. There should be nothing more fun than forming relationships with faculty members early in your

career, presenting all your wonderful attributes both in writing and in person and visiting programs as an educated consumer, trying to find the one that matches your personality and your goals and objectives best. You can be successful, and you can really “rock the match.” And you can learn a lot about yourself in the process. Today’s medical students are entering medicine at a wonderful time in our profession’s history. Much is changing, and changing rapidly, in science, health policy, information systems and clinical care. Of all the wonderful things on the horizon, there is none more exciting than the process that will hopefully lead to diversification of the physician workforce. Diversifying our profession should be one of our highest priorities, and each minority medical student should sense his or her unique value, not just as a bright, caring physician of the future but as our only hope to reach that goal.

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