

Essentials of Matching in General Surgery

Over 140 Surgical Residency Program Directors and Residency Coordinators contributed their advice on this topic. Their comments were broken up among the categories presented here. Please keep in mind that there is a huge variety among residency programs. It is, therefore, important to do specific research into the programs you are interested in. These are just the common themes that emerged.

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General Advice:

- There are many differences between University and Community programs. This is a great first step to research to decide which type of program is a better fit for you. Just in terms of acceptance, generally speaking, if you are less competitive applicant as compared to other surgical applicants, a community program may be a better option.
- Some things to think about while deciding on type of programs are: What is it that you are looking for? What are your overall goals – academic, private practice, general surgery, subspecialty, and geography?
- If you are considering further sub-specialty fellowship after general surgery, search for programs who have a good track record for graduates entering that subspecialty
- Unfortunately there is no US News and World Report for Residency, the best resources are word of mouth from those who are current residents
- If you are married or have a significant other, make sure that they understand and support you
- Surgery has one of the highest rates of attrition, be sure that this is really what you want to do for your lifelong career and not that you just had a positive experience during your surgery rotation or clerkship
- Send in your applications in time and PROOFREAD carefully!

Strong Positives in Application:

- Board scores above the national average, higher than 230/240 for the top Academic Surgery programs
- Excellent academic record- top 1/3 -1/2 of class, AOA membership, honors in surgery
- Do rotations at institution you are interested in
- Evidence that applicant is team player. This can be seen through commitment to some sort of extracurricular activity.
- Demonstration of leadership
- Any additional surgical experience such as working as a tech or any extra participation in a surgical anatomy/3D anatomy course

Surgical traits:

- COMMITMENT, passion, and Dedication—be sure this is what you want to do and are willing to put in all the hard work and long hours to do it
- Ability to multitask and superb time management and organizational skills

- Honest, forthright, mature, clear thinking, direct, decisive, ethical, humanistic
- Motivation to learn and excel, don't settle on being mediocre
- Well-rounded
- Can work well under stress
- "Admitting that you are in control and that you could have done it better or different is an important surgical instinct"
- Professionalism, great interpersonal and communication skills

Research:

This is the subtopic that received the most variety of response. This seems to be very program specific and program director specific. However, generally speaking Academic programs place a lot higher value on research experience and publications than community surgery programs.

- It is better to get started early on in medical school and continue throughout all four years
- Show strong involvement in the work such as take part in the conception and design of the research proposal and not just work in a lab
- Publications and presentations
- Don't do research for the sake of doing it
- Be prepared to actively discuss your research during interviews

Personal Statement:

This is also a subtopic that generated a vast diversity in responses. Some program directors really valued the personal statement, while others barely looked at it.

- Clear, concise, compelling, well-written and proofread carefully
- Discuss more who you are and what makes you unique rather than your love for surgery and why you will make the best surgeon
- If you have an unusual story—Share it!
- No more than one page
- If you have any "red flags" on your application, you can use the personal statement to explain them, but be sure to accept responsibility and not put the blame on external causes
- Show that you will be a good fit for that program

Negative Traits in Application:

- Failing a course or the boards
- Poor academic performances
- If Step 1 scores are low, take Step 2 in time for applications
- Extended period of unexplained absence from medical school or before residency
- Professionalism or ethics concerns
- Being part of many extracurricular activities at the expense of academic performance
- Strong grades and scores, but otherwise blank application. Successful applicants demonstrate being well-rounded
- Inappropriate or careless picture in application

- Ways to help overcome any flaws include personal calls and notes from personal connections of the program you are interested in on your behalf

Letter of Recommendation:

After Board Scores and Grades, this is the MOST important aspect of the application!

- Very important to have strong letters only from SURGEONS, especially program directors, clerkship directors, chairmen, senior faculty, or from surgeons that the admissions committee know
- Letter from someone who really knows you and can comment on your character, technical skills, your determination for surgery, not just recite your CV. It may be a good idea to meet with your letter writers to discuss these things
- Mention something along the lines of the letter writer wanting you to be in his or her own surgery residency program
- Avoid generic or mediocre letters
- Get letters from faculty who are full time staff, not residents or voluntary faculty

Things to do while in Medical School to boost your chances of acceptance:

** indicates can be done anytime in medical school*

YEAR 1 and 2:

- Try to find a mentor early on, females are encouraged to look for female surgeon mentors
- *Time with a surgeon outside of the rotation to get a better feel for the field
- Be involved in school, hospital, community, foreign work, research and demonstrate peer elected leadership positions
- Study hard!
- The summer between first and second year is very important, do research or something else you feel passionate about

YEAR 3 and 4:

- Read a lot journals not just textbooks, they are more up to date and demonstrated your willingness to learn
- Work hard and take initiative with residents and attendings—show them you can interact well with them
- Come to surgical cases well prepared on the patients case and ask appropriate questions at appropriate times
- Have some night call and trauma experiences
- Do well in all rotations, not just surgery
- In third year- “find the surgery program director, chairman or surgery advisors by January to give you advice about your 4th year and to start the process of getting your letters of recommendation. Find out from the seniors who are the faculty that you need letters from or with whom you should do a rotation.”
- In third year, make sure attendings and residents know you are interested in surgery.
- Do Sub-internship in surgery and do well in it

- Do away rotations fourth year, especially in institutions you are interested in applying for residency
- Do several surgical rotations in a row during fourth year, this will give you a taste of life as a surgeon
- Fourth year is your last chance to learn other non-surgical subspecialties like critical care, radiology, anesthesia—take advantage of this, they will be helpful in the future
- The best resources to learn about the application process are the young residents and graduating fourth years in your school. They just went through it so they can give you the best and most current advice

Interview:

This is essentially the deal breaker. All of the above comments are basically aimed at you getting the interview. The interview is your time to shine and at this point it's pretty much up to you to convince the admissions staff that you should be offered a spot.

- Ultimately the goal of the interview is to see if you are a right fit for that specific program and vice versa, if the program is really the right fit for you
- Behave appropriately at ALL times, not just during the actual interview and only with the person who is interviewing you. Be polite and courteous to everyone, you never know exactly who you are meeting and what role they may play in admissions, this especially includes the residency program coordinator and the other residents. Also, mind your behavior when you are alone, you never know who is watching.
- Show interest in the program: do your research about the program, ask good and appropriate questions, do not ask questions about information that is readily available to you
- If there are any events before the interview to which you are invited—GO and really get to know the residents, for these are the people you will potentially be spending the next five years with. Also keep in mind that this is a chance for them to get to know you better than just a 30 minute interview
- Be confident, but not arrogant and be prepared to demonstrate WHY the program should accept YOU.
- If you have to cancel the interview, call and do it as quickly as possible
- Follow up with appropriate correspondence, send Thank You notes, make sure it is addressed to the CORRECT hospital and personnel, but do not send unnecessary emails and calls constantly checking on the status of your application
- Dress appropriately and professionally. Present yourself well. Have great eye contact, handshake.
- Immediately answer any interview invitations and try to let the residency coordinator know of any special needs you as soon as you can (i.e. dietary preferences, time constraints)
- Plan to arrive early and have contingency plans for any weather/road delays
- Feel comfortable using resources provided such as list of residents whom you may contact
- PRACTICE interviewing skills, do mock interviews

Special Notes for International Medical Graduates:

- Be aware that surgery is very competitive and it may take several tries to get a position
- Make sure you have U.S experience by doing clinical rotations and letters of recommendations from U.S surgeons
- Research and publications with an American university helps
- VISA issues are usually one of the biggest concerns and greatest deterring factors for foreign doctors who are not U.S citizens
- Be prepared to do a preliminary year before being offered a full categorical position

Match List:

- Do not put down a program you really do not want to be a part of—five years is a long time to be in a place you are unhappy in
- If you are a competitive applicant then rank 10-15 programs, if you are less competitive then apply for 50-70 programs and make sure to include second and third tier programs
- List your top choice first regardless of what you think your chances of matching there are