

The Rank Order List Chronicles!

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Congratulations, you are done with your residency interviews and one step closer to your dream residency! With the COVID-19 pandemic, the residency interview process as we knew it has altered like so many other things around us. In-person interviews have been replaced by virtual platforms, the meet and greets are taking place over break-out rooms. Lunch hour with residents is virtual. There is no saying if this virtual process is here to stay but it won't be surprising if residency programs adopt a hybrid model moving forward. Making a rank order list is no easy feat and with all the recent changes, this can be a real cause for decision fatigue. We will revisit key aspects from your residency interviews in a stepwise fashion to achieve a near perfect rank order list!

A. Geographic Location

Simon Van Booy famously quoted "For those who are lost, there will always be cities that feel like home." Since residency is at least four years, it makes sense to consider where you will train. Do you want the big city life replete with a good gastronomic scene, theater, orchestra and a commute? Are outdoors important to you? Are schools and childcare important deciding factors? How much value do you give to the weather, cost of living, traffic? It all boils down to personal preferences and is definitely worth mulling over.

B. Program-Specific Considerations

Even though interviews have been virtual for the past few years, programs are adapting and showcasing themselves through virtual tours and online meet and greets to make up for the absence of in-person visits. Let's look how to tease out a program's benefits:

1. Educational Resources

- a. Does the program sponsor educational resources? These range from access to virtual question banks (e.g. Board vitals, Pathprimer which can come handy during board preparation) other virtual resources like Expertpath, Immunoquery, access to online journals, and a variety of general or subspecialized pathology textbooks and compendia. Some programs give residents a set of basic books while others provide a generous book fund that can be used for online resources too. Can you access e-libraries and textbooks? It is also important to know how frequently these resources are updated.

b. **Focus on Trainee Education and Well-being**

This is one of the most important aspects of making the rank list. Try to focus on the general well-being of the trainees you met: Did they look happy and well-adjusted? Or did they seem stressed and dissatisfied? Did they seem comfortable speaking up without fear of retaliation? Was the program diverse at both trainee and faculty/staff level? Were there any social events or annual group activities? These are indications that a program fosters social engagement of its residents.

c. **PGY-1 Orientation**

Pathology residency has its own learning curve and some programs approach this by easing their residents into rotations. Some have “bootcamps” to begin with where trainees observe grossing and autopsy before they begin their actual rotations. Programs often have introductory basic histology sessions which give a leg up before you start histology rotations.

d. **Didactics (Protected Time)**

Didactics can significantly enrich your pathology training. It is good to know if there is a structured didactic schedule for the whole academic year. Is the didactic time protected? Are didactics spread through the week or is there one dedicated day in the week? This can matter if you rotate at multiple sites. Another consideration is who designs the schedule. Is it the chief resident or faculty? Some programs follow a two-year didactic schedule where topics are repeated biennially. The composition of didactics on Anatomic Pathology (AP) and/or Clinical Pathology (CP) topics should be noted. Is it a well-balanced schedule or special focus on topics with respect to AP/CP boards?

e. **Resident Free Time**

If you will be spending several years in a residency program, a collegial environment is essential. Residents who socialize outside work and participate in group events together make the workplace a better environment.

f. **Are there resident wellness initiatives sponsored/endorsed by the program?**

COVID-19 has underscored the importance of mental wellness. Programs should have dedicated resources available to trainees.

These resources may range from crisis helplines, complimentary counseling sessions, free individual professional coaching, emergency childcare resources, and many others. These resources can help the trainee navigate a variety of topics like interpersonal relationships with care teams, attendings, other trainees, handling critical feedback, time management and prioritizing, conflict, career decision making, leadership, as well as challenges that may arise in their lives outside of work.

2. Program Benefits

a. **Travel/Book Fund**

Programs usually have dedicated travel and book funds of varying amounts. Some programs combine the two funds, some even allow using book funds for buying electronic devices (laptops, tablets, etc.) as long as they contribute to the trainee's educational experience.

3. **Research Opportunities**

a. **What percentage of residents engage in research at the program?**

A good way to gauge research participation of trainees is to identify how many abstracts on average are presented at national meetings annually. Do trainees get dedicated research time or mentorship if they want to pursue research projects?

b. **Is a scholarly project or QA project required by the program?**

Some programs require trainees to complete QA/ research projects in order to pass a rotation or complete their training.

c. **Does the program cover travel/stay costs for attending research meetings if the trainee is presenting?**

This is usually contingent on travel funds. Some programs cover all meetings, some cover a meeting only if the trainee is presenting their project.

4. **Fellowship Opportunities**

Although not all residency programs offer in-house fellowship options, this may be a factor to consider in your decision, particularly if you are interested in pursuing a competitive subspecialty. If the program has limited in-house fellowship openings, try to identify what percentage of trainees subspecialize.

5. **Work-Hour Violations**

- a. The Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME) is the body responsible for accrediting all graduate medical training programs for physicians in the United States. ACGME requires programs to follow the duty hours diligently. It can be challenging to bring this topic up during communications with a program, but it is nonetheless important to address during interviews and revisit at the time of your ranking order list. Things to consider: Does the program perform after hours transplant evaluations or tissue procuring for research that are covered by trainees? Do trainees get time off if they must cover procedures overnight? Do you have attending supervision? Tissue procurement can be a moonlighting opportunity in some programs.

6. **Pathologist Assistant (PA) Support**

- a. Is the gross room adequately staffed? If there are enough PAs, the grossing experience is geared towards learning and focusing on more complex teaching specimens.

- b. **Do residents have grossing requirements?** Some programs have a three-day cycle where residents gross one day and the following two days are for slide review. Some do grossing and slide review every day or on alternate days. Grossing requirements can vary from grossing on a particular subspecialty or grossing a mix of surgical specimens.
- c. **Can services function without resident support?**
The services are usually able to function independently which gives residents flexibility in designing their schedule and allows more time for learning. Some programs need residents to find coverage if they choose to take time off.

7. Program Support for Maternity/Family Leave

It is helpful to have a supportive program with inclusive policies on maternity, Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), disability leaves. Some programs provide provisions of emergency childcare which can come very handy.

8. Board Examinations

- a. Consider the program's board exam pass rate! One metric to look at a robust academic program is their board pass score. Programs usually share this information with interviewing candidates. Another consideration is if the program has a requirement to complete step 3 before starting residency or within the first couple years. Can educational time be used to sit for boards or must residents use their vacation time? Does the program give you any monetary assistance to register for the exams or purchase board resources?
- b. Do seniors have protected time to study for boards in the months before the exam(s)?
Is the program flexible with your rotations during board preparation time? Can you schedule light rotations close to the exam once you have completed your required rotations?

9. Organization of AP, CP, and NP(Neuropath) rotations

- a. Are they combined right from the beginning or does the program start with AP and then progressively incorporates CP?
AP/CP programs can either combine the rotations throughout the four years or have AP rotations grouped altogether followed by CP rotations. There are ACGME requirements which every program follows. The remaining time can be tailored to a resident's interests through elective and research rotations.
- b. How many research months and elective months are permissible in addition to the required (core) rotations?
- c. AP only, AP/NP, PIRRT and CP only tracks

There are few programs which offer these different tracks but have to be made aware before the match. There are very rare programs which allow a trainee to change the tracks once they start the residency.

10. Autopsy

- a. How are the autopsy rotations organized?
 - i. According to the revised ACGME criteria, a resident in the AP/CP combined track must have completed at least 30 autopsies to sit for the board examinations. Most residents should have no trouble reaching this number. Does the program have dedicated autopsy months or is it combined with other rotations?
 - ii. Some programs let trainees share autopsies with coresidents if they don't reach the required number.
 - iii. Most programs also offer a dedicated rotation at a local medical examiner's office to gain exposure to forensic autopsies.

11. Organization of Call Coverage

- a. How many weeks of call do residents cover? How is this distributed over the the course of the residency training?

Call weeks are integral to the residency curriculum. It can range from AP or CP only calls, AP/CP combined calls or Autopsy calls, depending on the rotation. In some programs call duties start shortly after the first year or residency whereas in others, this responsibility is delayed until the beginning of the second year. It is also important to note if call encompasses multiple sites and if you have to commute to cover calls at another site after the work day. Some programs have evening calls, some have an overnight call schedule for late intraoperative consultations and transplant cases. It is important to know if there are well-equipped call rooms in case you must stay on-site. You should consider if residents cover calls until a certain time in the evening or if you are expected to take call any time as needed, including weekends.

12. Teaching Experience

Does the program offer resources for mentoring junior trainees? Does the program has an academic affiliation? If so, do trainees get the opportunity to assist during histology labs or other teaching sessions? Some programs have resident leadership courses for trainees who want to build a career in academics.

13. Parking and Subsidized Residential Housing Options/Other Perks

Free parking is a big perk that is provided by some programs. If you do not drive, discounted public transport passes through the academic institution are also available. The option of subsidized housing can be helpful if you choose to train in a high cost of living area.

14. Opportunities for Spouses or Significant Others

If you are moving with a significant other, it is good to explore if they will have career opportunities in that city. For candidates interested in Couples Match: check if your partner is also ranking their respective program in that city or same geographic location. If you choose to train in different cities, check out travel options between the cities.

15. Visa Sponsorship

For applicants requiring visa sponsorship, some programs are forthcoming on their websites which visa they can sponsor (J1, H1B). Stay tuned for our upcoming blog entry on this topic!

Choosing a residency program is a culmination of many factors which have differing importance to different applicants. Give it some thought and go for the rank list which works best for you and your family. We at MatchToPath wish you the best of luck!

Tips For ROL Preparation

- Don't rank programs you did not interview at, even if you applied to this program. Programs won't rank candidates they did not interview, and match will occur (and you will waste a slot in your ROL).
- Always rank according to your own criteria and what factors are most important to you/your family.
- Never rank a program that you would not want to attend.
- Rank every single program that you would consider attending.
- Don't wait until the last minute to certify your ROL.
- Don't rely on informal commitments from program directors
- Know what constitutes a match "violation"
- Don't underestimate or overestimate yourself.
- Don't make your ROL too short.