

How to Obtain a Position in a Dermatology Residency Program

Introduction

As a first year medical student, you may not be certain of which specialty is right for you; however, if you are considering dermatology (or other highly competitive specialties), start planning and taking action early. If you decide that you would like to pursue another specialty, you can adjust accordingly. The earlier you start exploring the field, the more likely you will put together a well-rounded application for residency. Even if you are a senior medical student when you decide to pursue dermatology, a compelling story and well-crafted application can be appealing to many dermatology programs.

Our specialty is committed to increasing diversity in the field; however, under-represented minorities (URMs) remain a small portion of dermatology residency applicants due to many factors, including lack of guidance or mentorship. According to the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) report on dermatology applicants through the Electronic Residency Application Service (ERAS), of the 1,084 applicants in 2017, only 58 identified as Black or African American and 86 as Hispanic, Latino or of Spanish origin (<https://www.aamc.org/download/359226/data/derm.pdf>). Therefore, ensuring that URMs have adequate guidance in the complex application process is imperative (Figure 1).

First Year Medical Students (MS1)

As a first year medical student, start by making an appointment with your advisor in the Office of Medical Education to get advice on how to gain early exposure to dermatology, and seek out opportunities to get to know the dermatology faculty and residents in your school. Join the Dermatology Interest Group (DIG) at your medical school or start a chapter if you do not have one. You can find more information about DIG at their national website (<http://derminterest.org/>). Run for an executive position in DIG so that you can develop a close relationship with the DIG dermatology resident and faculty advisors. Use this platform to learn about community-based activities sponsored by the interest group. It is also helpful to identify medical students in the class above you who are planning to go into dermatology as well as students who recently matched

into dermatology. These individuals can provide insight and helpful resources at your home institution. Moreover, attend Grand Rounds and local dermatology conferences when possible. This will help you to learn more about dermatology and become familiar with the faculty and residents. After some time of observation, identify a faculty member or resident who you could approach to be a mentor. Inform your mentors that you are interested in learning about research projects, case reports and volunteer experiences, and ask them to keep you in mind if they learn of any opportunities in these areas. Keep in mind that Grand Rounds are generally open to medical students; however, at some institutions, smaller educational sessions (i.e. journal club, didactics) may also be open to medical students. It is best to ask before attending.

MS1 and MS2 years should be focused on exploring all areas of dermatology and getting to know the current faculty and residents. However, be mindful and do not be too aggressive. Remember faculty are busy clinicians. If you reach out to a faculty member and do not get an immediate response, be patient. Wait at least two weeks before sending a polite follow-up email.

This is also a great time to shadow a dermatologist to make sure dermatology is right for you. While shadowing, constantly ask yourself “Can I do this for 40 years of my life?” Remember you are committing to a lifelong career so go into dermatology for well-explored reasons. Exploration, self-awareness and reflection are important aspects of choosing a career in dermatology. Additionally, be aware that there are various subspecialties within dermatology (i.e. general, pediatric, procedural, dermatopathology) and various practice settings (private vs. academic). Taking the time to shadow early on will help you understand if this is truly a field of interest and perhaps help narrow down a specific focus. Determining a subspecialty in dermatology early on is not expected, however; if you do have a particular interest within dermatology, you should explore it, as you may be asked to explain this interest during the interview process.

As dermatology is a competitive field, it is a priority to focus on mastering the curriculum content and maintaining good academic standing. Aim for

your personal best in your core academic curriculum and clinical rotations. Alongside your institutional curriculum, you should study USMLE Step 1 “the Boards” exam material. Start practice questions early to help identify key concepts, along with understanding Step 1 question and answer formats.

If you do not have a home dermatology program or cannot identify a local mentor, seek a mentor through the American Academy of Dermatology (AAD) (<https://www.aad.org/mentorship/>) or the Skin of Color Society (<http://skinofcolorsociety.org/about-socs/>). Participate in activities to help the underserved or your community to reduce healthcare disparities. Consider volunteering at a local free clinic and exploring whether these clinics offer dermatology services with which you may become involved. Many programs are putting emphasis on a "culture of caring" in addition to clinical grades and USMLE Step 1 scores. Sustained community service is highly regarded by residency programs.

Summer After First Year of Medical School

This is the time to conduct research. It has been well documented that research experiences and publications are strongly associated with successfully matching, so it is important to prioritize this endeavor.¹ Select a research project that is feasible to complete within this timeframe or that can be continued during your MS2 year. Aim for your manuscripts to be accepted by a journal by September of your MS4 year, which is when your application for dermatology residency is due. Joining an already established project is a good start with a reasonable projected stop date to have time to prepare adequately for Step 1. If you commit to a research project - own it. Take initiative. Be responsive to your mentors, answer emails promptly, collaborate with other research personnel effectively, and gather all materials such as clinical tables, figures, clinical images and histopathology images efficiently. Anticipate what your team will need, perform tasks in advance and inform your supervisors of your progress often. For novice writers, consider referencing material on the basics of medical writing (e.g. *The Clinicians Guide to Medical Writing* by Robert B. Taylor, etc). Discuss and construct a broad outline of goals and timeframe for your research project that explicitly align to your research mentor’s expectations. Your research mentor should be able to provide you a letter of recommendation, so do an outstanding job. Remember, if the hypothesis is not proven, this is still worthy of a publication. Prior to starting the project, discuss the potential for publication in a peer-reviewed journal. Provide your mentor with a list of upcoming dermatology conferences that you think may be good opportunities

to present your work. Many medical schools provide funding for their students to present research.

If you are unable to identify a research project within dermatology, obtaining a publication in an alternate field may also be regarded well. Be able to explain this research interest and, if applicable, provide a brief but illustrative story of your transition to interest in dermatology or how your project may relate to dermatology. Keep in mind, there is no magic number for scholarly activity projects to match into dermatology, but the majority of the applicants had five or more abstracts, presentations, or publications at the time of the application.³

This is also the time to shadow dermatologists and plan for MS2 year with a continued focus of USMLE Step 1 practice. Depending on your interests and resources, consider global medical electives (some medical schools have a global medicine track) as there are opportunities to participate in dermatology focused clinics abroad.

Second Year Medical Students (MS2)

MS2 year should be seen as a continuation of your MS1 agenda. Furthermore, if you did not decide until your second year of medical school that you wanted to pursue a career in dermatology, it is not too late. You can still spend time looking for mentorship opportunities and research projects in MS2, MS3, and MS4 years. However, the focus of your MS2 year should be spent on preparing for USMLE Step 1 exam as performing well is strongly associated with an increased chance of matching. Dedicating time and resources to performing well on this test is important. The mean score for U.S. allopathic senior medical students who matched into dermatology was 249 compared to 241 who did not match into dermatology. It is still possible to match into dermatology with a score below this mean. Some dermatology programs have their cut off scores posted on their websites, and many do not use cutoff scores. It is very important to meet with your local medical school and dermatology mentors prior to deciding whether you will apply for dermatology residency solely based on your USMLE Step 1 score.

We also encourage future URM applicants to consider applying to the AAD Diversity Mentorship program. This program is primarily aimed at 3rd and 4th year medical students who desire additional mentorship. Mentors are encouraged to help with publications, letters of recommendation and guidance through the application process. Consider taking advantage of this program to use this time for your away rotations. Alternatively, this program can be completed in the summer of your MS1 and MS2 year to coordinate research and obtain early exposure to dermatology; however, the majority of recipients

complete this program during their MS3 and MS4 years.

Third Year Medical Students (MS3)

MS3 clinical rotations are critical. Residency program directors use recommendations and evaluations from this clinical year to ascertain your clinical abilities and ability to function well as a resident. Key components to clinical evaluations are working well with the team and taking ownership of your patients, even after being on call. Prepare for transition to clinical rotations by discussing expectations with upperclassmen and fellow classmates who completed rotations. Obtain feedback from your clinical preceptors early in the rotation and make meaningful strides to meet or exceed expectations. When planning for your rotations, consider starting with internal medicine and surgery to have a foundation upon which to build when working with the dermatology team on consults and in clinic. Plan to complete your first dermatology rotation at your home institution once you have had the bulk of your core clinical rotations. After completing a rotation at your home institution, seek feedback on your clinical performance to use for your away rotations.

In January and February of your MS3 year, you should begin to consider planning for away rotation applications through the Visiting Student Learning Opportunities (VSLO™) program. Most dermatology applicants complete 1-2 away rotations in the beginning of their fourth year of medical school, though they are not required to do so. You may apply for more than one rotation per time slot but be sure to withdraw additional applications once you have been assigned. Visit your local Office of Diversity and Inclusion in order to identify medical schools that offer specific rotations for URM students. These programs may include supplemental funding.

Though completing an away rotation is not necessary, it may improve the likelihood that you match to the program at which you rotate. It is extremely important that you take this opportunity to get to know faculty. Schedule a meeting early on with the program director and/or chair to discuss your interest and possible research opportunities. Meetings are often scheduled by the department administrative assistant. This appointment is to introduce yourself and convey your interest in the field and the program. Attend the meeting with a printed version of your up-to-date curriculum vitae. Please keep in mind that some programs have many rotators and program directors and chairs are not able to meet individually with every student. During away rotations, make sure not to do things that may be portrayed negatively - do not wear provocative clothing, do not spend time on

your cell phone during clinic hours or conferences, do not perform procedures or interview patients without prior permission, do not complain or convey an impression of laziness or boredom. Also, bring a clean white coat, arrive early every day to lecture and clinical responsibilities, and be able to present patients without reading verbatim from a cell phone or typed note. Be prepared to give a presentation on a topic of interest during grand rounds. If this is not required, you may offer to do so. In preparation for your home and away rotations, you can review the Basic Dermatology Curriculum on the AAD website (<https://www.aad.org/education/basic-derm-curriculum>). Be comfortable using dermatological terms to describe the cutaneous exam, along with knowing the first line treatments for the most commonly seen dermatological disorders such as acne, eczema, psoriasis, warts and skin cancer. Read about patients and dermatology cases you come across during your rotation.

At the completion of your MS3 year, you should have scheduled your rotation at your home institution as well as your away rotation(s), if applicable. You should also have begun to think about 2 or 3 dermatology faculty members to ask for a strong recommendation letter. Two letters from dermatologists and one letter from your attending faculty during your internal medicine rotation are ideal. Complete all outstanding publications or prepare them for submission. Start your personal statement and allow time for several revisions. Your personal statement should describe specific experiences and anecdotes to illustrate your abilities and qualities that make you a good candidate. Do not list accomplishments. Let your letters of recommendation toot your horn, not your personal statement. This is an opportunity to highlight your narrative and strengths that are not found easily in the rest of your application. If possible, have your dermatology mentor and local dermatology resident review your personal statement. If you are genuinely interested in a specific program you can personalize your personal statement to that specific school detailing why you are interested in their program. Some programs will have applicants fill out a secondary application where you may also get a chance to highlight why you want to attend that specific program. Be honest and submit the secondary application in a timely manner.

Towards the middle to end of MS3, schedule the USMLE Step 2 CK and CS exams. Many, but not all, residency programs require or prefer completion of USMLE Step 2 prior to submission of rank lists in February of your MS4 year.

Fourth Year Medical Students

Electronic Residency Application Service (ERAS) opens in July of your MS4 year. Reference the American Medical Association database on each residency program through Fellowship and Residency Interactive Electronic Database Access (FRIEDA) (www.ama-assn.org) prior to applying.

Programs start accepting applications in September with interviews typically taking place from November to early February. Upon completion of ERAS, some programs may require a supplemental application. This information is provided on ERAS or on the institutional website. Be sure to check the program website directly if it is not listed on ERAS. It is encouraged to submit your complete application early, and no later than September 15. The current deadline for the MSPE submitted by your school is October 1st.

Submitting applications to every program can be cost prohibitive. In general, expect that you will receive one interview invitation for every ~10 programs you apply to, though this will vary depending on your competitiveness. It is important to apply some level of scrutiny when selecting programs, taking into consideration location, reputation and research interests. Be aware that some dermatology residencies have programs with special tracks, such as research or Internal Medicine/Dermatology joint residencies, which may require unique application considerations.

The cost of application fees and interview travel must be considered. If possible, begin saving for this early on in medical school to avoid taking on additional loans. In one study of applicants to Stanford's Dermatology Residency Program, the mean amount spent for interview travel was \$4500.³

Prior to submitting your application, have your mentors review your application and personal statement. Ask for letters of recommendation prior to August 15. Who writes your letter and how well they know you is an important part of your application. Provide letter writers with your curriculum vitae, personal statement draft, and ERAS cover sheet. Ensure that several of your letter writers are academic clinicians. It is imperative to have a letter from dermatology faculty who knows you well. It may be helpful to have a letter from someone who is well known nationally, but only if they also know you well.

The vast majority of dermatology programs are advanced (or categorical) programs, meaning you are expected to begin your training after having completed a PGY-1 intern year. Generally, acceptable internships are in internal medicine, general surgery, pediatrics, family practice, obstetrics and gynecology, emergency medicine or a transitional year. The majority of dermatology residents complete an

internship in internal medicine or a transitional year. While you may be focused on perfecting your dermatology application, keep in mind that your application for an internship will also require a personal statement, letters of recommendation and a careful consideration of where to apply. Often, the personal statement and letters of recommendation can be slightly adjusted such that they are eligible for both, however it is important to obtain individualized guidance on ensuring that your internship application is well-prepared.

Additionally, MS4 is generally the time when medical students are selected for membership into the Alpha Omega Alpha Honor Society. While not every school has a chapter, membership in this society is a factor that residency program directors may consider in interviewing and ranking candidates as it demonstrates a commitment to scholarship, leadership, professionalism and service. A 2017 publication stated just under half of the applicants who matched into dermatology were AOA members.³

The Interview

Complete mock interviews with at least one mentor prior to the actual interview. Look up commonly asked questions during residency interviews and ask your mock interviewer to ask you each one. Make sure you have a good answer for each question and ask your interviewer for guidance and constructive criticism on your demeanor, energy level, eye contact, body language, vocabulary and content of your answers.

Know the program! Access the department website to get to know faculty and residents. Perform a literature search and familiarize yourself with faculty publications. Contact any upperclassmen who have interviewed at the program to get insight on the interview process. You can also contact the interview coordinators or department secretary to get an idea of the activities during interview day. Of note, the interview coordinator is the person you will be interfacing with prior to and after your interview day. He or she is an important aspect of the program, and it is in your best interest to treat this person with the utmost consideration and respect.

In addition to knowing your interviewers be sure to know your application thoroughly. You can and likely will be asked questions on any aspect of your application.

Practice a list of commonly asked questions:

- Why dermatology?
- Why our program?
- What are your goals?
- What are your strengths?

What are your weaknesses?
Tell me about your research?
Tell me about an interesting patient?
Who are your role models and why?
What are your interests outside of dermatology?
What questions do you have?
What could you offer this program?

The publication *How to Obtain an Orthopedic Residency*

(https://www.aaos.org/uploadedFiles/PreProduction/About/Diversity_in_Orthopaedics/Diversity/How%20to%20obtain%20an%20orthopaedic%20residency.pdf) also has a list of questions to consider asking while on the interview trail. When answering the above questions try not to sound rehearsed or portray yourself as overconfident.

The Successful Match: Rules to Succeed in Residency Match authored by Drs. Rajani Katta and Samir P Desai is another resource. These authors also have a podcast as well as a section for dermatology applicants. Visit www.thesuccessfulmatch.com. Plan to be 10 minutes early on your interview day. If possible, find the location prior to the interview. Again, pay attention to your appearance. A dermatology residency interview requires professional dress. Do not dress provocatively. If you have to question yourself then it is probably not a good choice to wear. The best choice is a comfortable suit and shoes without any flashy accessories. Be prepared for variable weather during the winter months. If you are flying, carry your interview clothes with you in case your checked baggage does not arrive in time

Interview days are long, and you often interview with the entire faculty. Make sure that you bring water or a mint. If you have a mint, be sure not to have anything in your mouth during an interview. Chewing gum is not recommended.

It is important to talk to residents from each program during your interview experience to get a better idea of the program. Remember, you are being interviewed throughout the process, from interacting with staff when scheduling the interview to speaking with residents at the very end of the interview day. Always have questions prepared to ask of each interviewer. Do not speak to anyone in a familiar way. You must be professional with everyone. Do not drink more than one glass of alcohol if it is offered in a welcome dinner. Finally, be kind to your fellow applicants as these will be your potential classmates and peer colleagues in the future.

Post Interview

Write thank you notes. At the very least, send a thank you note to the chair and the program director. Email is preferred. Keep it short, but specifically

mention some memorable point in your conversation. If a program advises you to not send thank you notes, then this recommendation should be followed. Also, begin the ranking process immediately after your interview. Make a list of pros and cons that will help you keep track of programs once you have completed your interviews. A letter of continued interest should be carefully considered after you have completed your interview season and have identified a program that best meets your professional and personal goals. This should be discussed with your dermatology mentor/advisor prior to sending. These are tools to help you start the process. If you do not feel as if you are a strong candidate, consider ranking programs in other specialties or considering a research gap year. Internal medicine provides a good option, as there is a possibility that you may be able to complete your first year of internal medicine and re-enter the match. In addition, there are also research fellowships available throughout the country. Always have a plan B. As a physician, there are many fascinating careers available to you. Everyone doesn't match in dermatology, but all students have the opportunity for a fulfilling career in medicine.

Special Circumstances

For those who have come to a decision to pursue dermatology residency later in their medical school career or identified a gap in their scholarly exploration, you may consider a gap/glide year. This should be considered a time for growth and exploration of the field of dermatology both in its clinical arenas (diseases and treatment paradigms) along with the areas of scholarly discovery currently in the field. This should be balanced with the extended time of delaying graduation, along with additional financial considerations.

Conclusions

A lack of diversity exists in the field of dermatology due to many factors. However, we hope understanding and knowing the application process in detail might provide useful information for potential URM candidates who might consider dermatology as a specialty (Figure 1). There are growing opportunities to develop and explore interest in the specialty of dermatology through mentorship, publications, podcasts, and online resources. A diverse workforce has been shown to provide better care and reduce healthcare disparities; therefore, diversity should be a goal for the field of dermatology as well. Dermatology is a fascinating field of medicine and can be very fulfilling and rewarding in many ways. If you ultimately decide you want to pursue dermatology, we hope this guide will help you

successfully match into a dermatology residency program.

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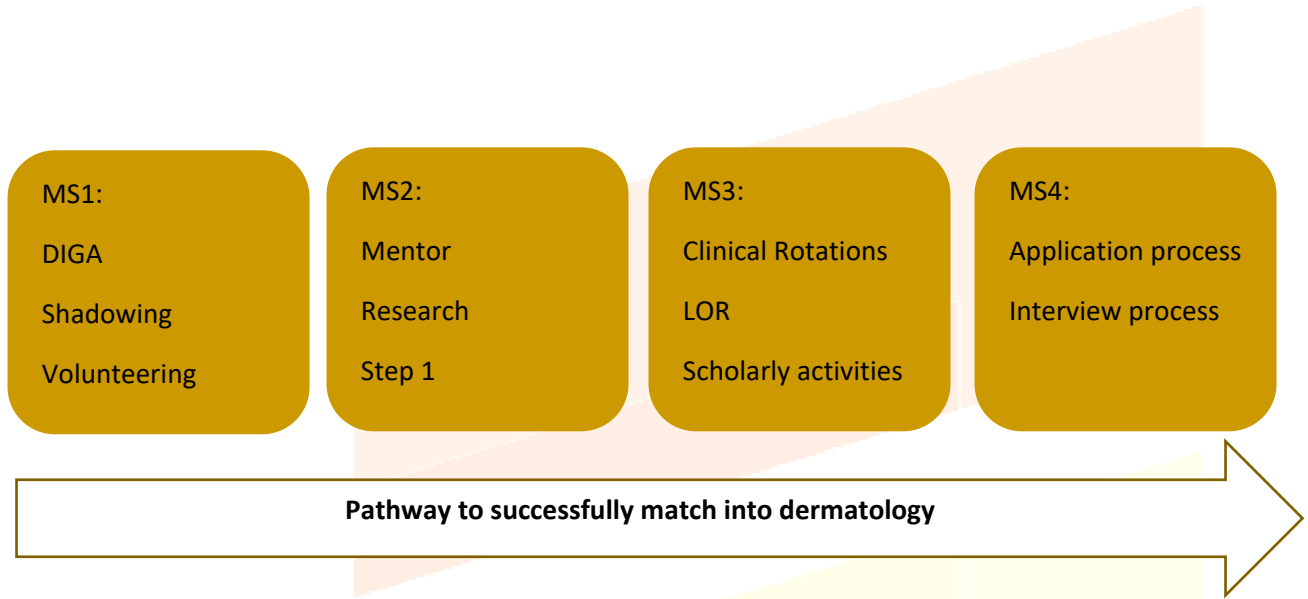


Figure 1. Schematic representation for successfully matching into dermatology by year in medical school

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Online Resources

AAD Diversity Mentorship Program - <https://www.aad.org/members/leadership-institute/mentoring/find-a-mentor/diversity-mentorship-program>

Nth Dimensions-

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/52defd81e4b0528cb0536a43/t/5c129976aa4a99408bd6663b/1544722808492/Nth+2018+Dermatology+Internship+Flyer-D3.pdf>

Women's Dermatologic Society- <https://www.womensderm.org/awards/award-programs/student-summer-research-fellowship>

FREIDA (AMA Residency and Fellowship Database) - <https://www.ama-assn.org/life-career/searchama-residency-fellowship-database>

Residency Timeline

NRMP - National Residency Matching Program - www.nrmp.org

<https://students-residents.aamc.org/applying-residency/article/eras-timeline-md-residency/>

Minorities in Medicine to get information on groups underrepresented in medicine. <https://students-residents.aamc.org/choosing-medical-career/medical-careers/deciding-if-medicine-you/minorities-medicine/>

Dermatology Residency Programs in the U.S. - <https://apps.acgme.org/ads/Public/Programs/Search>

Residency Application Services

ERAS - Electronic Residency Application Service <https://www.aamc.org/services/eras/>

Skin of Color Society - <http://skinofcolorsociety.org/>



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