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# Optimizing visiting clerkships in dermatology: a dual perspective approach

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## Abstract

Matching into a dermatology residency program has become increasingly more challenging for medical students. As students continue to explore various methods to help them stand out to programs, recent medical literature has continued to show evidence of the important role that visiting clerkships play. Visiting clerkships offer several benefits to both students and programs. In order to optimize visiting clerkships, the perspectives of both students and programs are each examined with recommendations provided to help maximize its benefits.

*Keywords: educational activities, medical education, medical residency, dermatology, clinical clerkship*

## Introduction

In recent years, it has become evident that matching into dermatology residency as a medical student has grown more difficult. The data measured by the National Resident Matching Program (NRMP), including United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE) assessments and research activities, have shown the increasingly competitive nature of the process [1, 2]. The specialty of dermatology both attracts and selects students with high scores on USMLE exams compared to other fields [3]. As students encounter the increasing pressure to publish research in the hopes of improving their chances of successfully matching into the field [4], they have additionally been exploring other methods to further distinguish

themselves to residency programs. Visiting clerkships is one such avenue that students have pursued, which can provide prolonged exposure in an audition-like setting. One survey revealed that 53% of successful dermatology applicants matched where they had prior experience, including 29% at their home institution, 6% at a research fellowship program, and 18% at a visiting clerkship location [5]. In further support of the significance of familiarity, a recent survey of program directors indicated that a rotation at the program director's institution ranked in the top 5 of importance for residency selection criteria [6]. The significance behind visiting clerkships should not be downplayed. Therefore, it is important to examine the perspectives of both students and programs in order to optimize visiting clerkships for maximum benefits to both parties.

From the perspective of students, visiting clerkships allow the opportunity to audition for a potential residency spot at a program of their choosing. Often times, programs are selected by preferences related to a variety of personal factors or close proximity to family, significant other, or school. Students visit with the intent of demonstrating first-hand their enthusiasm, passion, knowledge, and abilities related to the field. Students also have the opportunity to gain supplementary insight into the field and its application process from other residents who have successfully navigated this process. Visiting clerkships additionally allow the program to get to know the students on a personal level in a more intimate setting. This serves to remove the

label of outsider, which comes with its own inherent biases to the residency selection process. In order to optimize interactions with programs, students can undertake a few activities in addition to performing in their expected role. Students can offer to give presentations on research that they had previously completed, ask to give informal talks to residents on recent medical studies, volunteer to assist with any ongoing case reports, and request if they can experience various areas of interest within the department including dermatopathology, inpatient consults, surgeries, and any available specialty clinics. Showcasing prior research experiences may help to highlight past achievements, while also seeking faculty with similar academic interests. Forming close relationships is a salient determinant of a successful clerkship and importantly, provides an opportunity for students to obtain meaningful letters of recommendation, which are a fundamental component of the residency application.

From the perspective of programs, visiting clerkships offer the chance for faculty and residents to become more familiar with students from outside institutions on a more personal level. These clerkships allow for a prolonged period of closely working with a student who would otherwise be considered a stranger to the program during applicant interviewing and ranking processes. Visiting students are often judged upon their medical knowledge, cordiality, enthusiasm, passion, bedside manner, and interactions with faculty, staff, residents, and other students. It is crucial to determine if the student will be a so-called 'fit' for the program in terms of its already established culture. In order to optimize the

time with these students, programs can implement options to create more meaningful interactions. Programs can create an educational lecture series run by residents, offer a hands-on resident-taught suturing workshop, require a formal presentation covering recent medical literature, organize a quiz based on information from the lecture series, and insist that students see patients on their own to subsequently present to either residents or attending physicians. Certainly, some programs are already implementing a combination of the above options. However, in total, these opportunities can lead to greater familiarity with visiting students, while also allowing them additional opportunities to showcase who they are in order to better evaluate 'fit'. Our program has utilized each of these options with impressive results and it is our experience that students also greatly benefit in addition to the program.

It is important to recognize the importance of familiarity with faculty and programs for both students and residency programs. The significant role that these clerkships play as an aid in achieving familiarity and successfully matching applicants who share a particular 'fit' should be appreciated. Students and programs can undertake certain options in order to maximize the opportunity for gaining more familiarity with each other. With an increasingly competitive atmosphere for successfully matching into dermatology, the importance of providing the foundation for a productive and effective visiting clerkship cannot be emphasized enough.

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