Are you a Medical Student applying to Dermatology?

**Interest**

Deciding on general Medicine, Surgery, one of the specialties you want to practice for your career is a daunting task. Take some time for some introspection for what you really want to do and what you envision for your career. Do you like to work with patients—adults or kids? Do you like to diagnose? Do you like to manage chronic problems? Do you like to perform procedures?

The answers to these can help guide you to the right direction. You can always change your mind, but it’s easier if you start on the right track. There is no rule that one you make a decision, that it can’t be changed but time spent reflecting beforehand is invaluable before you find yourself going into a pathway that isn’t right for you.

When you are rotating or interviewing for a residency in Derm, you will be asked over and over why you want to go into Derm. If you aren’t sure—you should take the time now to be sure. This is not intended to be a difficult question to answer.

**How do I match in Derm?**

**You need residency interviews—the more the better.**

**How do I get an interview? Your application needs to stand out from the crowd.**

Each year our program selects 3-4 residents but we get >500 applications. This is similar for most programs as most students apply to the majority of Derm programs. If you think about the process from the perspective of the program, they need to winnow down this pool of applicants down to about 20-40 that they will ask to come for an interview.

Most of these hundreds applicants are EXCELLENT applicants so how do they pick?

1.—The applicant took a unique path to get here. Examples:

a. They were born in a refugee camp and immigrated as a teen and made it to med school.
b. They were a teacher before Med school.
c. They ran a business before they were in Med school.
d. They have a PhD in genomics
e. They have a PhD in music.
f. They were in the military prior to med school.

These people all stand out from the stack of applicants and make the reviewer interested.
2—The applicant is from the geographic area of the program. If you can only invite 20 candidates, you’re much more likely to invite those that would likely come there for residency so a willingness to live there (a geographic connection) can help.

3—The applicant is a perfect fit for the program. Examples:
   a. The program has a strong focus on global health and the applicant has been focused on global health since they started med school.
   b. The program chair focuses on Merkel Cell Carcinoma and the applicant has done research on Merkel Cell Carcinoma.

**Having good grades and wanting to do Dermatology is great, but as most applicants will fit that mold, think about how you are different and MAKE SURE THEY KNOW!**

**Grades**

Dermatology is unfortunately one of the more competitive specialties. While this attracts excellent students, it also discourages students from applying who might actually be excellent Dermatologists. If you want to do Derm, you should apply, but be aware when the road will be more difficult if your grades are not stellar.

[Graph showing Step 1 Scores Are Rising by Preferred Specialty]

**Board scores**

Having good board scores can help, but are NOT a requirement to apply to Derm. Most of us value how you perform in your clinical rotations more highly than your board scores but high scores do make it easier to get an interview. If you got a low score on your Step 1 or Step 2 boards, you can still match, but it will be an uphill battle. If you got a 280 on Step 1, you still might go unmatched though—nothing is a guarantee. Many programs screen based on Step scores—be sure to check the program’s website to see if they will screen you out—if so, don’t waste your time and money applying to that program.
Rotation grades

Most schools don’t have grades in the classroom portion of medical school, but most do have grades in the clinical rotations. Since the clinical rotations more closely mirror real life and the skills needed to be successful in residency, your grades in your required clerkships matter a lot. If you get Honors in all of your required clerkships, you will not only be highly sought by residencies, but more importantly you will probably turn out to be an excellent physician. If you get only a Pass in all of your required clerkships but honors in your Derm rotation, you should reconsider Dermatology. We don’t want students who forgo learning the basics of medicine just to apply to Dermatology. We want good physicians who are also passionate about Derm. We don’t recommend more than 2-3 Derm rotations max—spend time getting trained in other areas too.

Advising

You should reach out to a Dermatologist as soon as possible to discuss your interest if you’re considering Derm. Reading this is the first step but having a meeting to discuss your CV and your intentions is critical. It sometimes helps to have publications in Derm and if you don’t plan ahead, you won’t have time to get anything published before you are filling out your ERAS application.

Please reach out to one of the UW Dermatologists who advise medical students. If you are a WWAMI student, this is especially important as we want to make sure that you can do a Dermatology rotation in Seattle. There are no Academic Dermatologists or Residents at any of the WWAMI sites. If you want to be a Derm Resident, you should work with one and see what that is like before you become one. If you want to apply to Dermatology, you’ll need a letter from an Academic Dermatologist which means you’ll have to work with one first in Seattle. Doing a Derm rotation in your home state may be possible and may be a great education, but you should ALSO do a rotation in Seattle.

Away Rotations

1 to 2 max
Away rotations are an opportunity to do a Derm rotation in another state. This is a great way to see how Derm is practiced in another system and also greatly improves your chance of getting an interview at that site. Unfortunately, they are also very expensive as they are considered optional, so the UW will not subsidize your travel or housing. Many of our WWAMI students have grown up and gone to college and med school within the WWAMI region which makes them a gamble for other programs as the UW is the only Derm program in the entire WWAMI region. If you are a Derm program in Georgia trying to select your 20 interviewees, you are unlikely to select someone who has never lived outside of the PNW. If
that candidate did an away rotation in Florida though, it would show a willingness to relocate and keep them in the running, perhaps. Away rotations are a valuable way to do this as you get training at the same time—but they are expensive so not necessarily available to everyone due to family obligations or economic realities. This is unfair, thus the internal 1-2 max rotation cap on rotations in our program.

**Letters**

You can submit 3 or 4 letters with your ERAS application. If you submit 4, they should all be there for good reasons. Examples: one is from a research mentor, one is from a program director, one is from another Dermatologist who knows you REALLY well, and one is from a non-Derm clinician who knows you REALLY well (like a college mentor for example). If you don’t NEED 4 letters, only submit 3.

One MUST be from an Academic Dermatologist whose name is known to other programs around the country—such as a Division head/Department chair or the Program Director/Associate Program Director of the residency program at UW. Letters from community Dermatologists are nearly always glowing—letters from Dermatologist who regularly write letters for other students are much more valuable as they can talk about how you compare to your other peers applying to Dermatology. This is what letter readers are looking for—they will usually not focus on the letter that just talks about how great you are in isolation as that doesn’t help show how you are different than the other 400 applications.

If you do an away rotation, you MUST get a letter from that rotation—this is the only way we know where students did away rotations, and a letter shows you were successful in a different environment.

**Research**

There is a long tradition of requiring research to apply to Derm. Times have changed and this is NOT a requirement at most programs, though some still prefer research. It might give you a leg up against other evenly matched students. Deciding to do research is a personal decision though.

**Types of research**

**Bench research/basic science:** Very time consuming. This is not something you can be successful in on the side or in a 1 month rotation. If you enjoy basic science research, taking time off to do research can be fun and rewarding and make your application much stronger if you get publications from the time. If you don’t enjoy this, don’t force yourself to do it—no one benefits in that scenario.
Clinical research: You may be able to do some clinical research while an active student but it requires a mentor who already has a project cued up or up and running. Some people take a year off to do clinical research. Several programs around the country are factories for clinical research and will get you great experience in the process and lots of publications—but it’s a year of your life to get this experience so deciding to do this is a personal decision. Don’t do it unless you ENJOY clinical research.

Writing papers: Though not “traditional research” writing reviews or case reports can get you some experience in the process and publications and don’t require as much committed time. This is lower hanging fruit, and expectedly is valued less highly than doing more of a research “fellowship” year but can be done without extending your education. If you’ve never written a paper before, you should—it’s a worthwhile process to see if you enjoy this and not having ANY publications is uncommon in Derm applicants.

The BACKUP PLAN

Everyone needs a backup plan. Even the all honors, 280 on my step 1, first author on a Nature paper applicant. Everyone needs a backup plan. What you do is dependent on your personal preference, your financial independence, and will require long discussions with any spouses, families, or significant others that will be affected by your choice.

Types of backup plans:
1— I’m going to leave it to chance and use the SOAP to find a position if I don’t match. This is not a plan.

2—Co-apply to two specialties. If you like Derm and Rehab—you can apply to both and interview for both. You’ll know by late fall by the number of interviews you’ve gotten if you’re likely to match so can decide which route to go prior to submitting your rank list in February.

3—Expand a prelim into a categorical Medicine or Surgery spot. When you submit your match list, you don’t have one list for prelims and one list for Derm programs—you enter a long list of whichever combos of these you want – in order of your preference. For example:
If you applied to prelims in Seattle, Tulsa, and Baltimore and applied to Derm programs in Seattle, Tulsa, Baltimore, Boston, and Milwaukee, your rank list might look like this:

1— Prelim Seattle, Derm Seattle
2— 5-- Prelim Seattle, Derm Tulsa, Baltimore, Boston, & Milwaukee
6—Prelim Tulsa, Derm Tulsa
7—Prelim Baltimore, Derm Baltimore
8—Prelim Seattle
9—Prelim Tulsa
10—Prelim Baltimore
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It is unlikely (but up to you) that you would want to match a prelim in Tulsa and Derm in Milwaukee as you would need to relocate twice in 2 years—most people tend to do their prelim in their home area OR pair Derm and Prelims in adjacent locations so they only need to move once.

You’ll notice the last 3 options are unmatched derm with a prelim—if you don’t match in Derm, you can still match into a prelim if your rank list has these solo options at the end.

Some Prelim programs will allow applicants to expand into a categorical medicine or categorical surgery spot if they don’t match into Derm too. Not every program does this, so you’ll need to look at the prelim program websites or talk to the SOM medicine or surgery advisors to find out where you can do this. Obviously, if a prelim in Tulsa doesn’t allow that option, you might get stuck in a prelim 1 year program with nothing to do afterward.

4—Apply only to a prelim with a plan to take a year afterward to do research or something else that might make your application stronger on reapplying. You can reapply to derm WHILE you are a prelim but it’s not a guarantee so you’ll still need a backup plan for this backup plan. Every year, there are a small number of programs that find they have an open position for a new Derm resident due to expansion of the program or someone who backed out of a spot. Only people who have already done at least a year of another residency can apply for those positions for a same-year Derm spot the upcoming July. If you didn’t match and are doing a prelim, you can apply for the upcoming summer Derm residencies to try to get one of these spots. The pool of applicants able to apply for these is relatively small since most applicants are graduating med students and still need to do a prelim. However, these positions are unpredictable so you have to be willing to go ANYWHERE and still might not get in.

5—Back out of the match if you aren’t getting interviews and plan to take a year BEFORE prelim to do a research fellowship or similar. If you think you aren’t going to match, beat the rush and start applying to fellowships before everyone else so you have a plan in place before the ides of March.

Applying

In August/September of your final year of med school, you will submit your ERAS application for residencies. You’ll put together a few things for this:

1—an electronic version of your CV with every work, volunteer, and research experience you want programs to know about
2—your step 1, 2, and/or 3 scores and grade transcript
3—your “Dean’s letter” which is created by the SOM on your behalf to describe you and your med school experience in a long letter that goes to every program. It will describe usually which “quartile” of the class you are in even though the UW doesn’t rank each student individually.
4—Letters of recommendation (as described above). Note you can upload lots of letters and decide WHICH 3-4 letters you send to each program so you may send a few Medicine
5—Personal Statement. You’ll need to write a 1 page (no more, no less) statement of why you want to apply to Derm and why you are a great candidate. There is no formula for this and many find it very hard to write as the structure is entirely up to you. Though nearly every applicant sends the same PS to every program, the ERAS site actually allows you to upload as many PS’s as you want and you can decide WHICH PS goes to which program. I STRONGLY recommend leaving a space in your last paragraph of your PS that allows you to customize 1-2 sentences as to why you want to go to each particular program so that each program gets a PS that is unique to that program. <10% of applicants do this and it really makes you stand out from the pack. It also forces you to think about why you want to apply to each place. Just make sure you sent the Tulsa PS to Tulsa and not Milwaukee—Oops!

6—You’ll need to decide WHERE to apply. There are around 100 Derm programs. PLEASE don’t apply to all 100 even though most applicants do. It costs you money to apply to each one and there is good data that there is a point of diminishing returns. Only apply to programs for which there is a reason. If you don’t want to live in Milwaukee, don’t apply to Milwaukee programs. Remember that every program gets hundreds of applicants and most never get interviewed—if you aren’t a good fit for a program, don’t waste your money as it’s unlikely you’ll get an interview. Use the data that the AAMC has compiled over years. They have a whole section on just applying to Dermatology

https://www.aamc.org/cim/480276/applysmartnewdatatoconsider.html