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## The American Journal of Surgery

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My Thoughts / My Surgical Practice

## Thoughts on 2021–2022 visiting rotation recommendations from current and recent applicants in surgery



The novel COVID-19 pandemic dramatically impacted the 2020–2021 residency application process. As part of the campaign to stem the spread of the virus within the continental United States, the American Association of Medical Colleges (AAMC) released recommendations immediately suspending in-person away rotations and in-person interviews.<sup>1</sup> The resulting transition to a virtual application format reduced costs for applicants and preserved some degree of communication between applicants and programs.<sup>2,3</sup>

On January 25, 2021, the AAMC released recommendations regarding visiting rotations for the 2021–2022 residency application cycle.<sup>4</sup> Applicants can begin applying to away rotations after April 15, 2021 and programs are recommended to review applications after May 1, 2021. Medical schools are recommended to limit visiting rotations for their students in any specialty to only one rotation, except in cases where additional rotations are needed to graduate. Finally, virtual electives will still be a viable opportunity for programs to offer to applicants.

The re-introduction of in-person away rotations for the 2021–2022 residency application class represents an important aspect of the application experience. As a group of current and recent applicants to general surgery, otolaryngology, plastic surgery, urology, and cardiothoracic surgery, this group of authors hopes to provide a diverse and representative perspective to emphasize the importance of away rotations and address concerns with their re-incorporation.

Students will once again have the opportunity to engage with programs in-person and observe first-hand the workload, social dynamic, and local culture surrounding that residency program. Of equal importance, residents and program directors will return to more authentic evaluations based on the clinical performance and technical skill of visiting students, reliable metrics that surpass the physical confines of virtual assessment. Previous studies have demonstrated that away rotations have a marked influence on applicants when determining their rank list.<sup>5</sup> Regardless, the attempt to find a compromise between social distancing and allowing for traveling experiences may inject new challenges into this application cycle.<sup>5,6</sup>

By allowing only one in-person away rotation per student, the AAMC may inadvertently be forcing the student to signify preferences they may otherwise not be forced to cast. The completion of an away rotation at one institution may be seen as a commitment to that program. Additionally, other residency programs may interpret an applicant's choice not to rotate with them as a signal of disinterest. Limiting away rotations will increase competition

around these highly desired opportunities. It is unclear if residency programs will continue to host multiple students at a time or if these rotations will be limited to one or two visiting students.

Students who may have originally completed 3 or 4 away rotations will have the opportunity for enhanced interaction with their home institutions. This may broaden students' personal education by permitting additional exposure to fields of medicine outside of their chosen specialty before beginning residency. For those considering surgical subspecialties, peripheral experiences in related surgical fields, acute care surgery, and surgical intensive care may prove useful.

When determining which program(s) to apply to, we recommend that students engage with mentors for guidance and recommendations. Communication with residents may also help, as residents are closer to the application cycle and may have current perceptions of what programs are like. Before the application cycle, applicant identification of their ideal training program characteristics, such as program location, educational opportunities, research, culture, and prestige may help in determining where to do a visiting rotation. Utilization of online resources including social media, FRIEDA, Doximity and the like may also help in understanding potential program fit.<sup>2</sup> For students interested in programs in a different region of country than their medical school, completion of a visiting rotation in their preferred region may help in signaling this preference, as most medical students match in the same region as their medical school.<sup>7,8</sup>

The AAMC's recommendations are helpful for students and programs to begin planning for the year ahead. The introduction of vaccines suggests that viral spread between healthcare workers would be minimal, however, it is imperative that travel associated with away rotations travel does not contribute to the spread of the virus. Despite vaccine administration, new virus variants and the complexities of universal vaccination pose threaten to derail away rotations.<sup>9</sup> If this occurs, the AAMC may have to cancel visiting student rotations for the 2021–2022 residency application cycle. As current policies stand today, some states have travel restrictions in place that are prohibitive to student travel. Furthermore, students who travel outside their home state may be subject to quarantine protocols, rendering this process logistically challenging and time prolonging. We believe equity is important for students this application season and that opportunities offered are consistent for applicants within each specialty's match. Providing an option between virtual and in-person offerings may place virtual students at a disadvantage.

We very much appreciate the hard work and dedication that

residency programs across the country demonstrated with the 2020–2021 application cycle. Comprehensive understanding of the unique challenges that applicants and programs will face during the 2021–2022 residency application cycle will produce a mutually successful match. Students may find benefit in continued discussion with mentors; taking the opportunity to pursue rotations peripherally related to one's field of interest; interacting with programs through virtual offerings including, social media, online databases, virtual open houses and sub-internships; and understanding away rotations as an opportunity to demonstrate interest in specific regions of the country.

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