

University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine

Penn Med is unique in the number of avenues of support and the amount of practical data and advice provided to students to help in preparation for each step of the progression through medical school and to residency. Seminars, meetings, programs, workshops, and open houses provided by the Career Counseling Program (CCP) are accompanied by booklets of information and an array of data and advice from experts in a particular field. In addition to these ample resources, Penn Med also has a non-standard academic curriculum that helps students start narrowing their field of interest early.

Penn Med's curriculum consists of one and half years of pre-clinical education beginning in August and ending in December of the second year, core clerkships beginning in January of the second year and ending in December of the third year, and electives and scholarly pursuits filling the final one and half years of medical school. As a result, students are introduced to clinical experiences and potential future specialty choices mid-way through the second year of medical school and have almost two years of clinical experience (including the core clerkship year and nine or ten months of elective time) before submitting final applications for residency.

The organization of career counseling in the first two years of medical school focuses on exposure to multiple specialty fields and includes an introduction to the [Careers in Medicine \(CIM\) Program](#) through an Office of Student Affairs (OSA) sponsored session. Students participate in many events such as OSA-sponsored brown bag lunch seminars, specialty open houses sponsored by clinical departments who provide food, Student Specialty Society Meetings where faculty advisors offer information on specialty careers and alternate career paths, and annual meetings organized with the Alumni Office where alumni return to discuss their experiences in non-standard career paths. As an example of a non-standard offering, healthcare consulting companies often present information at Penn Med to recruit students to their companies. A lunchtime seminar in the fall of the first year also provides information on combined degree options available at Penn Med. In addition to informational meetings, students are provided opportunities to follow physicians through specialty society-run shadowing programs and through shadowing requirements in the first year of medical school.

As students progress through their clinical years, they are assigned a faculty career counselor(s) based on their potential field(s) of interest in the middle of the third academic year, although it is up to each student to request an assignment and contact their assigned counselor for advice. Approximately 60% of students request a counselor; the other 40% of students find their own career counselors in the faculty with whom they work throughout their clinical clerkships. Each clinical department has an Academic Coordinator who usually happens to also be the Career Counseling Unit Chair. The Chair is typically a faculty member who has been involved in both undergraduate and graduate medical education and is familiar with residency application and training. The Chair recruits volunteer faculty physician career counselors for students in his or her department and provides them with information on their role as career counselors. For students who have difficulty in deciding on a specialty or career field, the Associate Dean for Student Affairs (ADSA), the Director of Student Affairs (DSA), and department-specific advisors work with individual students to aid them in narrowing their potential fields of interest.

In the spring of third year, the ADSA and the DSA hold a class meeting to discuss the MSPE, the Charting Outcomes in the Match document, ERAS, career counselors, letters of recommendation, application and academic progression and timelines. During this meeting, students are provided with a residency application information booklet that includes a timeline for the final year of medical school, an authorization form for letters of recommendation, guidelines for unique characteristics paragraphs, sample personal statements and CVs. The ADSA will then individually meet with each student between March and August to discuss specific career goals and to get to know them in preparation for the MSPE. In June of the third year, the DSA meets with the entire class to provide information regarding FREIDA, the San Francisco Match, ERAS, and the logistics for the Match. From August through October the DSA and the ADSA read students' personal statements and they provide advice to aid them in revising or finalizing their statements.

Penn Med also offers multiple web-based guides including a residency application timetable and a guide that demonstrates the rates of success of past Penn Med students with specific grades and Board scores in being admitted to specific residency programs. In addition, Penn Med offers their own web-based guidelines written by residency program directors to aid students in selecting elective courses and to provide residency selection criteria. The latter describes what characteristics residency program directors seek and lists what they consider to be the top five programs for each specialty. Furthermore, each department offers a point-person, usually the residency program director, who meets individually with students, writes letters of recommendations for them, and provides these students with advice on which residency programs are within their reach based on their application materials. The point-person or similar counselor in their specialty field also provides one advocacy phone call to each student's top program choice.

In October of the fourth year of medical school, the CCP provides a Residency Interview Workshop featuring Penn Med residency program directors that equips students with an intensive 18-page Guide to Residency Interviewing. The 2008 Guide includes sections on acing the interview, frequently asked interview questions, questions for students to ask the interviewer, a residency program evaluation guide, advice from former Penn Med students, and an article from *Academic Radiology*. Students are advised at this meeting to reach out to faculty counselors if they do not receive calls for interviews, at which point the OSA and faculty counselors jointly develop a backup plan. The Penn Med CCP also provides a highly organized system to aid students who did not succeed in the Match, including dedicated staff time and an on-call Department career counselor, help with the “Scramble,” and advice on alternate options for the year.

Following Match Day in the spring, graduating seniors organize a Career Night for third year students where each room is dedicated to a separate specialty. Information sessions are duplicated so that students may attend multiple sessions to gain information from graduating students on the residency application process. On Career Night, each student is provided an informational booklet that includes an application timeline, list of general resources, tips for interviews, interview questions, guidelines for after the interview, advice for Step 2 exams, and individualized information on 22 residency fields.

While the Penn Med CCP is well-organized and offers multiple avenues of support, its inception was not without hurdles, the most difficult of which was engaging the faculty for their part in the new career counseling endeavor. The recruitment of the faculty career counselors was facilitated by having at least one faculty member in each department who were already participating in counseling and academic activities. The CCP utilizes four mechanisms of evaluation: the AAMC graduation questionnaire, LCME accreditation student surveys, focus groups with students, and student satisfaction surveys. Through these mechanisms, the program has received positive feedback from students and graduates. While the program is noteworthy both for the organized mechanism for recruiting and training counselors and for evaluating its own success, the CCP hopes to include more extensive training of counselors as a potential area for improvement in the future.

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Best thing about the program?

“The best thing about our program is that it provides many avenues of support, advice, and counseling, early exposure to careers and selection criteria, and full support and guidance throughout all four years, including the application process, the Match, and post-Match support.” – Student Affairs Office

“Our program allows students to have a choice to shadow in a specialty of interest in M1/M2 years and provides counseling to help in choosing a specialty that includes individual meetings with clinical and administrative assistants for each specialty. Further, administrators assign a faculty career mentor for each student once a specialty is chosen and contacts for research are offered with each meeting. The program offers one administrator who deals specifically with undecided students to help them to choose a specialty.” – OSR representative