

Career Counseling in Plastic Surgery Frequently-Asked Questions

This booklet has been prepared by the Department of Surgery, Division of Plastic Surgery in response to questions frequently asked by medical students who wish to explore the training and career opportunities in the field of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery. We hope that it will be helpful to students and serve as a basis of discussion in individual meetings with faculty members and residents.

- **Can you give me a brief description of the field? What are the key elements of this field that define it?**

All of the surgical specialties involve the care of patients through surgical procedures as well as a medical management of diseases that lend themselves to surgical management. These fields require a high level of dexterity, self confidence and a commitment to the patient that includes both pre and postoperative care. One of the defining elements of plastic surgery is the ability to work with other surgical subspecialties in addressing complex issues.

- **What is the patient population that I will encounter? Will it include both children and adults? Will there be emergency work? What types of technology will I encounter?**

The patient population varies tremendously and runs from newborns to the geriatric population depending on the field of plastic surgery. This encompasses reconstructive surgery, surgery of the hand, craniomaxillofacial surgery. Diseases can range from severe, immediately life threatening conditions such as necrotizing fasciitis to routine elective cosmetic surgery. Technology plays a large role in plastic surgical procedures and is constantly evolving requiring continuous education and skills development throughout one's career.

- **Is it possible to describe the personality characteristics of many physicians in this field?**

Most surgeons tend to have deep commitments to their patients, are a bit obsessive, decisive and self confident. Plastic surgeons will develop and hone specific problem solving skills unique to this specialty.

- **How long is the training program/residency?**

Plastic Surgery Residency is a 6-7 year program through the NRMP match. This is called the independent track. Training can also commence after general surgery (also called a fellowship) for three years.

Are there fellowships available after residency?

Additional fellowships are available after plastic surgery training in the following disciplines:

- Craniofacial Surgery
- Hand Surgery
- Burn Surgery
- Microsurgery
- Aesthetic Surgery

- **How do I know if my academic record/grades will make me a suitable applicant?**

The easiest way is to meet with an advisor from the division and review your record with them. They will be happy to share their honest opinion of your competitiveness.

- **What is the role of my USMLE Step 1 score? What is a competitive score to qualify for an interview? If I failed Step 1 what are my options? Should I take Step 2 early?**

Having a high USMLE score is essential in qualifying for an interview. Average USMLE step 1 scores are typically the highest for plastic surgery applicants. A competitive score would be higher than 240. Most programs do not look at step 2 seriously as it is assumed if you have made it past the initial screen, you will have no problem with step 2

- **Do I need a Step 2 Clinical Knowledge score to be screened for an interview? To be ranked?**

Generally yes, but some programs may not require it.

- **Is there anything that I can do in my rotation or elective experience in this field to enhance my qualifications?**

A Research experience will benefit you and help you but will not make up for poor grades or a bad academic record. Truly personalized letters from well known academic surgeons go a long way in promoting your application.

- **Should I take outside electives in other institutions? If so, how many are advised and allowed?.**

Outside electives should be tailored to each individual students needs. Electives can be done as audition electives at potential programs or as a way to get a letter from a national figure in your field. This needs to be discussed in detail with your advisor.

- **Is a research experience important in my application to this field? Do I need to do a one year research experience? Will research offset a low Step 1 score? Should I have publications to qualify for your field?**

Research will benefit your application but will not make up for deficiencies in your application. You do not need a separate year of research with a competitive record and rarely will a year of research overcome a very weak academic record

- **Is community service important in my application to this field?**

Community Service is helpful and demonstrates a commitment to the field. Surgical Experiences are best. Again, community service will not make up for bad grades and letters rather it will only help sort out equally capable applicants.

- **What do you advise on obtaining letters of recommendation? Should they all be from the field? How many should I have? Do I need a chair's letter? If so, how do I obtain that letter?**

A minimum of 2 letters from surgeons are required and a third letter can be from a non surgeon with unique knowledge of you and your abilities (IE research). If possible a letter from a nationally recognized plastic surgeon will help as their letters are well known and easier to interpret. Letters should come from people that are best able to write meaningful letters that demonstrate a real understanding of the applicant, rather than just a reiteration of a file. Students interested in plastic surgery should meet with division chief as soon as possible in their medical school career to help the division develop a relationship with the student and allow the departments' faculty to better understand the student and his unique needs and qualifications which will help produce the best possible letters.

- **How do I meet with residents in the field and ask them to share their experiences and advice? Can I find residents with educational backgrounds similar to mine?**

The best way to find residents to discuss surgical training is during your surgical rotations when you are working together. Specific residents with similar educational backgrounds can be identified by the program director should you desire that.

- **If I want to learn more about the field, can you recommend how I do that?**

The best way to learn about the field is to work with surgeons. This will allow you best assess your ability to fit into the specialty. Each specialty also has web sites such as the American Society of Plastic Surgeons web site (www.plasticsurgery.org) which has a medical student programs at each annual meeting.