

Career Counseling in Psychiatry

Frequently-Asked Questions

This booklet has been prepared by the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences in response to questions frequently asked by medical students who wish to explore the training and career opportunities in this field. 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?

A psychiatrist is a physician who specializes in the diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of mental health and emotional problems. Because of extensive medical training, the psychiatrist understands the body's functions and the complex relationship between emotional illness and other medical illness. The psychiatrist is thus the mental health professional and physician best qualified to distinguish between physical and psychological causes of both mental and physical distress. (American Psychiatric Association)

- ***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?***

Psychiatrists work with a wide variety of patients, rich and poor, severely impaired or quite functional, and with a broad range of ages from young children to the elderly. The field is practiced in a variety of settings such as emergency care, brief outpatient therapy, outpatient psychotherapy, research and medication management. The field lends itself to practitioners shaping their careers based on their interests.

Psychiatry places a great deal of focus on the doctor-patient relationship, and less so on technology. That said, electroconvulsive therapy and transcranial magnetic stimulation are skills mastered by many clinicians. In the research community, utilization of imaging technologies has been growing exponentially, and in the near future will likely be part of the practice of community practitioners.

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

The field attracts individuals who are interested in the most complex aspect of being human, our behavior and our emotions. Psychiatrists are trained in an array of perspectives including the neurophysiological, intrapsychic and sociological. Given the wide array of possible career paths, psychiatry attracts a similarly diverse set of practitioners, although inquisitiveness, social awareness and a high level of verbal skills are most prevalent.

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

Psychiatry is a four-year residency. The program at DMC is typical, though the order may vary at other sites. The PG-1 year includes four months of medicine or pediatrics, two months of neurology and six months of inpatient Psychiatry. The PGY-2 year is spent in an array of psychiatric care settings such as inpatient, specialty clinics and consultation-liaison. PGY-3 residents carry a caseload of outpatient psychotherapy and psychopharmacology patients. The PGY-4 year is individualized and can involve electives, ward leadership positions, and research.

- ***Are there fellowships available after residency?***

Addiction Psychiatry
Brain Injury Medicine
Child and Adolescent Psychiatry
Clinical Neurophysiology
Forensic Psychiatry
Hospice and Palliative Medicine
Pain Medicine
Psychosomatic Medicine
Sleep Medicine

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

Graduating from SUNY Downstate will give you a solid foundation for starting your training to be a psychiatrist. As in any other specialty, the top programs require that you excel within their medical school class, have high USMLE scores and have done research. There are hundreds of programs throughout the United States in both universities and community settings. The academic rigor required to match with a specific program varies substantially among programs. The specifics of the programs you are interested in should be discussed with the clerkship director (Dr. Brouette).

- ***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?***

As discussed above different residency programs have different expectations for Step 1 scores. If you have failed Step 1, however, it is recommended that you pass Step 2 as early as possible in your fourth year.

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

Most programs do not expect, but would prefer, to have Step 2 scores prior to their submitting the match list.

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

Your first priority in any of your clerkships is to care for your patients and learn as much as you can about that field. In regards to electives, a SUB-I in psychiatry is vital if you are uncertain about your career choice. To prepare for psychiatry residency choose electives that will insure you have a broad background in medicine and neurology. Getting involved in a research project, even if not in psychiatry, can also substantially improve the competitiveness of your application, as would presentations or publications, in psychiatry or related fields.

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

The choice of taking psychiatry electives at other institutions is your decision. The advantages of doing this rotation are that you get an opportunity to evaluate the program before you submit your match list and the institution has an opportunity to work with you. This opportunity to see you on the wards can improve your chances of getting matched to certain residencies.

In addition, appreciate that most departments of child psychiatry are separate from the general adult psychiatry program and often have limited influence on application decisions.

- ***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?***

Any research experiences will significantly improve the competitiveness of your application. Most programs would like to see that you've been involved in research or other structured academic pursuits, but only a few will not interview you unless you have been published.

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

The field of psychiatry cares for a population who are often ostracized and stigmatized because of their illness. Most residency programs are impressed by work which demonstrates a commitment to the underserved, disaffiliated and disenfranchised.

- ***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?***

Most programs require you have three letters, and although not a strict requirement, we recommended that at least one is from a psychiatrist. Programs do not require a chair's letter and unless you've worked extensively with the chair there is no reason to request one.

- ***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?***

SUNY Downstate has a large and active psychiatry program with residents who have a strong commitment to medical student education and seek out opportunities to meet the applicants to discuss their experiences. In addition, the University sets up several panels over the course of the MS 3 and MS 4 years for student to interact with current residents.

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

Talking with your ward attendings, residents and the clerkship director are the most immediate ways of learning about the field. The American Psychiatric Association also has several resources for medical students. Membership in the APA is highly recommended, includes both informational and career-planning resources, and is free for medical students!

Dr. Michael Myers (the Vice-Chair for Education, and our Chair, Dr. Stephen Goldfinger are always available to meet with students interested in psychiatry.