

The ERAS Supplemental Application: Current Status and Recommendations for Dermatology Applicants and Programs

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PRACTICE POINTS

- The Electronic Residency Application Service (ERAS) Supplemental Application was piloted in the 2021-2022 residency application cycle and was utilized by the vast majority of dermatology applicants and programs.
- Survey data suggested that both applicants and programs found the supplemental application useful, particularly the preference signaling portion.
- The supplemental application will return for the 2022-2023 application cycle and will be integrated into the MyERAS workstation platform for easier access by programs.

The 2021-2022 dermatology residency program application cycle involved an optional common supplemental application piloted by the Association of American Medical Colleges' (AAMC) Electronic Residency Application Service (ERAS). In this article we present data on the utilization and opinions of applicants and programs regarding the supplemental application, discuss changes to the supplemental application for the upcoming application cycle, and offer recommendations to applicants and programs entering year 2 of the ERAS supplemental application.

Cutis. 2022;109:306-308.

In the 2021-2022 residency application cycle, the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) piloted a supplemental application to accompany the standard residency application submitted via the AAMC's Electronic Residency Application Service (ERAS).¹ Dermatology was 1 of 3 specialties to participate in the pilot alongside internal medicine and general surgery. The goal was to develop a tool that could align applicants with programs that best matched their career goals as well as program and geographic preferences. The Association of Professors of Dermatology Residency Program Directors Section was an early advocate for the supplemental application, and members of our leadership were involved in the design, implementation, and evaluation of the pilot supplemental application.

Participating in the supplemental application was optional for both applicants and programs. The supplemental application included a Past Experiences section, which allowed applicants to highlight their 5 most meaningful research, work, and/or volunteer experiences and to describe a challenging life event that might not otherwise be included with their application. The geographic preferences section permitted applicants to select up to 3 regions of interest as well as to indicate an urban vs rural preference. Lastly, a preference-signaling section allowed dermatology applicants to send signals to up to 3 programs of particular interest.

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The authors report no financial conflicts of interest. Drs. Ahmed and Helfrich are members of the Association of Professors of Dermatology Program Director Steering Committee.

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With the close of another application cycle, applicants and programs will begin preparing for the 2022-2023 recruitment season. In this column, we present dermatology-specific data regarding the supplemental application, highlight tentative changes for the upcoming application cycle, and offer tips for applicants and programs as we approach year 2 of the supplemental application.

Results of Supplemental Application Evaluation Surveys

During the 2021-2022 recruitment season, 93% (950/1019) of dermatology applicants submitted the supplemental application, and 87% (117/135) of dermatology residency programs participated in the pilot.² Surveys conducted by the AAMC between October 2021 and January 2022 showed that a large majority of dermatology programs used supplemental application data during initial application review when deciding who to interview. Eighty-three percent (40/48) of program directors felt that preference signals in particular helped them identify applicants they would have otherwise overlooked. Fifty-seven percent (4288/7516) of applicants across all specialties that participated in the pilot felt that preference signals would help them be noticed by their preferred programs.² Preference signals were not evenly distributed among dermatology programs. Programs received an average of 23 signals, with a range of 2 to 87 (AAMC, unpublished data, February 2022).

Additional questions remain to be answered: How does the number of signals received affect application review? How often do geographic and program signals convert to interview offers and matches? Regardless, enthusiasm among dermatology programs for the supplemental application remains. In a recent survey of Association of Professors of Dermatology program directors, all 43 respondents planned to participate in the supplemental application again in the upcoming year (Ilana Rosman, MD; unpublished data; February 2022). The pilot will be expanded to include at least 12 other specialties.¹

As many who reviewed residency applications in 2021-2022 will attest, there was difficulty accessing the supplemental application data because it was not integrated into the Program Directors' Work Station, the ERAS platform for programs to access applications, which will be remedied for the 2022-2023 iteration. Other tentative changes include modifications to the past experiences sections and timeline of the application.²

Utilizing the Supplemental Application: Recommendations to Applicants

Format of the Application—Applicants should familiarize themselves with the format of the supplemental application in advance and give themselves sufficient time to complete the application. In general, 3 to 4 hours of focused work should be enough time. Applicants should proofread for grammar and spelling before submitting.

Past Experiences—The past experiences section is intended to provide a focused snapshot of an applicant's most meaningful activities and unique path to residency. Applicants should answer honestly based on their interests. If a student's focus has been on volunteerism, the bulk of their 5 experiences listed may be related to service. Similarly, a student who has focused on research may preferentially highlight those experiences. In place of the long list of research, volunteer, and work experiences in the traditional ERAS application, applicants can highlight those activities in which they have been most invested. Applicants are encouraged to reflect on all genres of activities at any stage of their careers, even those not medical in nature, including work experience, military service, college athletics, or sustained musical or artistic achievement. Applicants should explain why each experience is meaningful rather than simply describing the activity.

Applicants also have the option to share a notable challenge they have overcome. It is not expected that each applicant will complete this question; in general, applicants who have not faced notable personal or professional obstacles should avoid answering. Additionally, if these challenges have been discussed in other areas of the application—for example, in the personal statement or medical student performance evaluation—it is not necessary to restate them here, though applicants can choose to do so. Examples of topics a student might discuss include being a first-generation college or medical student, growing up in poverty, facing notable personal or family health challenges, or having limited educational opportunities. It is important to share how this experience impacted an applicant's journey to dermatology residency.

Geographic Preferences—The geographic preferences section can be difficult for applicants to navigate, as it may involve balancing a desire to attend a residency program in a particular region vs a greater desire to simply match in dermatology. In the past, programs may have made assumptions about geographic preferences based on an applicant's birthplace, hometown, or medical school. In the supplemental application, applicants have the opportunity to directly reveal their preferences. We encourage applicants to be candid. Selecting a geographic region will not necessarily exclude applicants from consideration at other programs. For some applicants, program qualities may be more important than geography, or there may be no regional preferences. Those applicants can choose "no geographic preference." There is considerable variability in how programs use geographic preferences. For this reason, it is in the best interest of applicants to simply respond honestly.

Preference Signaling—Preference signaling allows applicants to signal up to 3 preferred programs. Dermatology program directors agree that applicants should not signal their home program or programs at which they did in-person away rotations, as those programs would already be aware of the applicant's interest.

Although a signal increases the chances that the application will be reviewed holistically, it does not guarantee an interview offer. Programs may differentially utilize signals depending on multiple factors, including the number of signals received. We encourage applicants to discuss preference signaling strategies with advisors and focus on signaling programs in which they have genuine interest.

Recommendations to Selection Committees and Program Directors

The intent of the supplemental application is to provide a more meaningful picture of applicants and their experiences and preferences, with the goal of optimizing applicant-program fit. Programs should explicitly define for themselves the applicant characteristics and experiences they prioritize as well as their program goals. The supplemental application offers the potential to streamline holistic application review based on these elements. The short essay answers in the past experiences section permit reviewers to quickly scan for important experiences that align with the program's recruitment goals. Importantly, reviewers should not penalize applicants who have not completed the question regarding other impactful life experiences, as not all applicants will have relevant information to share.

Some programs may find the geographic preferences section more valuable than others. Multiple factors affect how much weight will be given to geographic preferences, including program location and other characteristics that affect the desirability of the program to applicants. The competitiveness of the field, relatively low match rate, and limited number of programs may lead to less emphasis on geographic preferences in dermatology compared to other specialties. The purpose of this section is not to exclude applicants but to give programs more information that may help with alignment.

Anecdotally, many dermatology program directors were most interested in the preference signaling section of the supplemental application. Programs should consider signals to be evidence of strong preliminary interest. Programs may utilize signals differently depending on many factors such as the overall competitiveness of the program, program location, and the total number of signals the program receives. We recommend that programs

holistically review all applications accompanied by a signal. Programs that utilize a points system may choose to award a certain number of points for a signal to their program. A signal might have a higher value at a program that receives only a few signals; conversely, a program that receives a large number of signals might not place tremendous value on the signal but may use it as a tiebreaker between similarly qualified applicants. Preference signaling is solely a tool for application review; because applicants' preferences may change after the interview process, signals should not be utilized during ranking.

Next Steps

For program directors who have excitedly awaited residency application reform, the supplemental ERAS application is an important first step. Ultimately, we hope the supplemental application supplants much of the current residency application, serving as an efficient high-yield tool for holistically evaluating applicants' academic and service records, accomplishments, and training preferences. Arriving at a new application will undoubtedly take time and discussion among the various stakeholders. Please continue to complete surveys from the AAMC, as feedback is the best method for refining the tool to serve its intended purpose.

Optimization of the application content is only one component of the reforms needed to improve the application process. Even with a revamped application tool, holistic review is challenging when programs are inundated with an ever-increasing number of applications. As such, we encourage stakeholders to simultaneously consider other potential reforms, such as caps on the number of applications, to allow programs and applicants the best opportunity for a mutually successful match.

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