

## Points of Consideration in Applying to Surgery Training Programs

Faiz L. Tuma *FACS, FRCSC*

Central Michigan University College of Medicine, USA

### Abstract

Surgery training continues to be challenging and competitive. Training programs developed multiple strategies to select the best candidates. Applicants continue to improve their chances to join the highly ranked programs. Various skills and strategies have been adopted to optimize their application process. However, many applicants are still in need to prepare for the application process and identify the best strategy to present themselves. In this editorial, we provide practical points to consider when planning to apply and join a surgery training program.

**Keywords** : Surgical training, Application strategies, Surgery programs, Residency application

**Citation** Tuma FL. Points of consideration in applying to surgery training programs. *Iraqi JMS*. 2021; 19(2): 134-136. doi: 10.22578/IJMS.19.2.1

### Introduction

Acceptance into a general surgery program may become a natural outcome to a well-planned preparation in the few years before applying. In other words, preparing to apply to general surgery should start as early as possible and be planned for adequately. Surgery programs have several selection strategies for surgery candidates <sup>(1)</sup>. Hence, well and advanced planning with hard work is crucial for training career success. Stories from senior professionals and academic experts confirm the importance of planning and hard work in shaping careers. The aim of this article is to provide introductory points for surgery applicants to consider in their preparation for their candidacy.

The first and most important point is the genuine desire and intent to become a surgeon. This should be based on thoughtful and comprehensive planning and knowing self-competencies. It is crucial to know if you want

to be a surgeon, and why. The stronger and original motives behind your decision the more likely you will be a perseverant and eventually successful candidate, trainee, and practicing surgeon. Most successful candidates prepare for the program from their early medical school time. There are common elements that most programs look for in the candidates such as high interest, exam scores, research activities, and interest in education. However, several other factors are variably considered by various programs. Factors like assertive personality, school of graduation, future place of practice, likeability, perseverance, tolerance.

### Criteria for high ranking

Few important points to consider when applying:

#### 1- Exposure to surgery

Candidates are preferred to have sufficient exposure to surgery indicating that they chose this specialty based on adequate awareness. Early exposure to and learning experience are

known to inform specialty selection <sup>(2,3)</sup>. It would look weird to express interest in surgery without being involved in surgical services. Elective surgery during clerkship improves exposure and career development <sup>(4)</sup>. Performance and grade in the rotation are generally looked at with attention. An honor degree in the surgical rotation is expected. It would raise a question mark if the grade is below honor.

## 2- Letters of reference

These are routine requirements of a good candidate. They are preferred to be from surgeons with a key role in surgery training such as clerkship director, program director, chairman, or known educators to validate the letter content. The letter should be directed specifically to surgery programs with specific performance highlights. Avoid generic letters that may not give the impression of genuine evaluation.

## 3- Research experience

Most programs welcome a candidate who can participate in research activities in various roles <sup>(5)</sup>. Be prepared to describe your role and participation in research. Having your name in a publication or abstract is minimal. It is preferred to have your name as a first author in a study with various research skills such as knowledge in statistics, scholarly writing, and submitting manuscripts. These additional skills may help the program in improving their scholarly activities which almost all programs need.

## 4- Interest in education

As a good resident, you are expected to teach medical students and junior residents. In addition, interest in education will likely lead to good learning skills. Interest in education cannot be claimed by words. Taking a couple of courses or workshops in education or having some knowledge of education principles will give a better impression about the interest in education.

## 5- Future planning

Candidates who have a future vision of their subspecialty planning give a better impression. The early involvement of medical students in specialty exposure and planning enhances career selection <sup>(6)</sup>. However, candidates should have a flexible mind and plan to use the residency to refine their ultimate plans of subspecialty.

## 6- Interview

This is a very important part of the application. It plays a major role in ranking. Interviewees make a final impression based on how candidates present themselves. There are several ways to prepare for the interviews. Unfortunately, many candidates come with scripts of what to say in the interview. Even though this reflects preparation efforts, but it does not help the interviewees to know the candidate's personality. Therefore, use all preparation points as materials to create your thoughts around rather than scripts to say during the interview. It is important to be clear, well-spoken, honest, humble but confident, spontaneous with good communication skills - both verbal and nonverbal. Tips and training on interviewing can be extensive and are beyond the scope of this article.

## 7- USMLE score

USMLEs scores have significant implications on a candidate's application <sup>(7)</sup>. Many programs use the United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE) score as a filter of the initial applications. Programs receive hundreds of applications each year. They offer only about 10% of the applicants an interview. Therefore, the USMLE score is used as the first filter.

## Program perspectives

Surgical programs and their respective societies have embraced strategies to recruit successful candidates <sup>(1)</sup>. Therefore, it is important to understand what perspectives the programs have in the selection process. As a potential resident:

## **Tuma, Points of Consideration in Applying to Surgery Training Programs**

- a) You will work within the program intimately for 5 years, so it is crucial to be a nice person who is easy to get along with.
- b) You will provide patient care, so reliability, trustworthiness, and efficiency are important as that will save the team significant efforts/time and prevent serious problems.
- c) The program must have the highest board exam success rate. Therefore, programs want to be sure that you will pass the final board exam without difficulty. Programs should have a minimal 65% passing rate.
- d) All programs have research and publication requirements. They will appreciate someone with research and publications skills, not just having your name on a couple of published articles.
- e) All attending faculty like to have teachable/learning resident who shows improvement after teaching and feedback. Attain this learning attitude and if you have a story to show that, use it in the interview.

### **Conclusions**

It is crucial to verify the motives and desire behind considering training in surgery. Once decided, prepare as early as possible. Build your case as a reliable, contributing, achieving, successful, and professional resident and future surgeon that can be easily identified as such.

### **References**

1. Yan Q, Jiang Z, Clothier WT, et al. Recruiting trainees to surgery in the United States and Canadian system - What strategies are effective? *Am J Surg.* 2021; 221(2): 410-23. doi: 10.1016/j.amjsurg.2020.12.006.
2. Nelson BA, Rama JA, Weiss P, et al. How and why trainees choose a career in pediatric pulmonology. A qualitative study. *ATS Sch.* 2020; 1(4): 372-83. doi: 10.34197/ats-scholar.2020-00320C.
3. Sani I, Amalendran J, Hamza Y, et al. Letter to the Editor: Factors influencing a medical student's decision to pursue surgery as a career. *World J Surg.* 2021; 45(1): 339-40. doi: 10.1007/s00268-020-05784-9.
4. Sheu L, Goglin S, Collins S, et al. How do clinical electives during the clerkship year influence career exploration? A qualitative study. *Teach Learn Med.* 2021: 1-11. doi: 10.1080/10401334.2021.1891545.
5. Schmidt LE, Cooper CA, Guo WA. Factors influencing US medical students' decision to pursue surgery. *J Surg Res.* 2016; 203(1): 64-74. doi: 10.1016/j.jss.2016.03.054.
6. Alkatout I, Günther V, Brügge S, et al. Involvement of medical students in a surgery congress: impact on learning motivation, decision-making for a career in surgery, and educational curriculum. *Wien Med Wochenschr.* 2021; 171(7-8): 182-93. doi: 10.1007/s10354-020-00802-w.
7. Ehrlich H, Sutherland M, McKenney M, et al. Implications of the United States Medical Licensing Examination Step 1 Examination Transition to Pass/Fail on Medical Students Education and Future Career Opportunities. *Am Surg.* 2020: 3134820973382. doi: 10.1177/0003134820973382.

---

**E-mail: faizt@hotmail.com**