



ADVISING STUDENTS COMMITTEE in EM

The Couples Match Emergency Medicine Applying Guide

Caitlin Schrepel MD, Katie Harter, MD, Heather Streich, MD, Emily Hillman, MD, Adam Kellogg, MD, Alexis Pelletier -Bui, MD and J.V. Nable, MD

on behalf of the CORD Advising Students Committee in EM (ASC -EM)



<https://unsplash.com>

The purpose of this applying guide is to provide some insight into the process of couples matching. This guide is intended for applicant pairs where one or both students plan to apply to Emergency Medicine (EM).

Disclaimer for 2020 -21 Application Year

Due to COVID-19 and the associated travel restrictions and safety measures put in place, the expectations and possibilities have changed this application year. While much of the advice in these guides still holds true, they were written for applicants entering a traditional application year. For the application year of 2020 -21, please keep the following in mind:

- ERAS will open for review by residency programs on October 21, 2020
- EM rotations: Ideally, **each student will complete one and only one EM rotation at a residency -affiliated site.** Away rotations should be reserved only for those students who do not have access to a residency affiliated rotation at their home institution.
- Standardized Letters of Evaluation (SLOEs): **Each student is expected to have only one EM clerkship SLOE in their residency application portfolio** , typically an institutional SLOE from the site of their single EM rotation.
- Non-EM SLOE Letters of Recommendation: As most students will only have a single SLOE, it will be necessary for residency programs to place greater emphasis on non-EM letters of recommendation. CORD will be releasing a SLOE-like template for such letters in July.
- EM residency interviews: **All EM residency interviews will be conducted virtually in the 2020 - 21 application year.**
- Interview numbers: As in prior years, **10-12 interviews should be sufficient for most students.** At-risk applicants may need more interviews. No student should need more than 17 interviews.

General overview

The National Resident Matching Program (NRMP) gives any two people the opportunity to match to residency by linking their rank lists together. In 2020, 2,448 applicants participated in the couples match process (for all specialties), with 95.6% successfully matching.¹

If you couples match, you will apply and interview separately, but when you create your rank list, you will create combinations from that list. You will both then match at the highest rank combination in which both partners have been accepted. You can designate that you are applying as a couple in the Electronic Residency Application Service (ERAS), but you do not have to officially decide on couple's matching until you submit your final rank list.² The Couples Match does not apply if your partner

participates in early matching such as: ophthalmology and urology or with someone matching through the Military Match.

Prior to applying as a couple it will be important to set expectations. The process can be expensive, time consuming, and extra stressful. It is important to meet with your medical student advisor in advance to discuss the process and determine appropriate goals based on your specific situation. You will also need to take into account that you and your partner may not be evenly matched in terms of competitiveness and this may influence the number of programs to which you or your partner apply. ³

Before you apply

This may seem obvious, but it is important to have a conversation with your partner and advisor about your professional and personal goals and determine in advance whether you would rather go unmatched or match to different programs and/or cities. This is important whether or not your partner is your spouse, significant other, life partner or best friend. Talk with your advisors separately and as a couple to come up with appropriate goals. ³

- What does couples matching mean to you?
- What compromises are you willing to make?
- What compromises are you *not* willing to make?
- Is this the right choice for you and your partner?

Other tips:

- If your partner is interested in a program in a particular city, consider doing an away rotation there (*not applicable to the 20/21 application cycle*).
- If your partner is applying to a more competitive specialty, or if you are applying broadly geographically, consider more than one out of town rotation. Typically, for the average EM applicant, we recommend 2 EM rotations (one at home and one elective); however, this might be an instance in which you can justify an additional rotation. *For the 20/21 all applicants, including couples could aim for 1 SLOE.*
- If your USMLE Step 1 score is <220, take Step 2 CK early so that it is available when ERAS opens (score available before/by 9/15). Scores less than 220 may make it much more difficult for you to get interviews.⁴ You will need to meet with an advisor very early in the process (before out of town rotation applications). If it is important to you that you do not go unmatched, you may need to consider a backup plan.

The application

You are not required to tell programs that you are couples matching and you can wait until you are making your final rank list to officially decide to couples match. No one will know unless you tell them. You can tell programs in several ways (on the ERAS application, in your personal statement, during the interview and/or in follow-up or thank you letters). If you are still undecided about couples matching at the time of filing the ERAS application, you should hold off as you *will* get asked about your partner if it is on your application. Applicants often wonder if there is any benefit or risk to telling programs that you are couples matching. In general, the general attitude within the emergency medicine community is that the benefits probably outweigh the risks for most couples.

- Some potential benefits of disclosing couples match:
 - May be able to coordinate interviews and save money (*not applicable to the 20/21 application cycle*).
 - Possibility for one program to lobby for an applicant's partner: For example, if your partner's program of choice really likes them, that program may lobby your program of interest to offer you an interview or even rank you higher on their list. In fact, according to a recent ASC-EM survey, 76.2% (CI 67.9-84.5%) of those involved in the interview process report speaking to the program director of the other program and 43.6% (CI 33.9-53.2%) report moving an applicant up or down on the rank list because they were matching with a resident in another program.⁵
 - When your interviewer asks you why you want to move to that particular city or be part of a particular program, in addition to the reasons you like their program, you may be able to say that your partner enjoyed their interview day, has family in the area, etc.
- Some potential risks:
 - Small programs may prefer not to take applicants from the same school/city.
 - If you are both applying to EM, programs may be concerned about any issues a couple may potentially bring to a small program. However, most programs will still consider matching an EM-EM couple to their program.⁵
 - If you are still on the fence about couple's matching, programs will be treating you as a couple anyway. This may change your rank on their list even though you decide in the end not to enter the couples match.

In general, each partner applying to EM should aim to interview at and rank at least 12-15 programs. The number of programs to which you and your partner need to apply to will depend on both partners' competitiveness as well as your partner's specialty. That

may mean applying to 25 programs for an EM/IM couple and 40+ programs for an EM/Dermatology couple. According to a ASC -EM survey, the majority of faculty who advise (58%) EM bound students entering the match as a couple recommend applying to somewhere between 31-50 programs. And 21% advise applying to over 50 programs.⁵

- If one partner is not as competitive, and it is more important to match than match in your preferred speciality, consider backup strategy. Some options include applying to a surgery or internal medicine preliminary intern year.

There are some additional points worth considering when applying to programs:

- Some cities are great for couple's matching because they have multiple programs in many specialties: eg. Boston, New York, Chicago, Philadelphia.
- You may be able to couples match in nearby cities if there is a midway point that is livable and easily accessible to both programs.
- Consider in advance if you and your partner want to be at the same hospital.
- If you are both applying EM, think about if you want to be in the same program (which can be tricky, especially in smaller programs). Residency programs have various experience and enthusiasm for matching EM-EM couples. In a recent survey of program directors 88.3% (CI 82.2 -94.5%) stated they would consider matching a EM-EM couple.⁵

The interview:

Making it to interview day is a huge step - congratulations! Programs should *not* be asking you if you are married/engaged/dating, but some will (or residents may ask at the social events). You are welcome to discuss your relationship status if you choose to but do not lie on the interview trail. If you are not married or engaged, do not say you are; programs *will* find out and this may affect your application.

Other tips:

- Most programs report trying to coordinate interviews for a matching couple, ⁵ so if your partner gets an interview at a program you have applied to and you have not heard from that program, you should email them to check -in on your application status so that you can maximize your chance of interviewing at the same program at the same time.
- If your partner has personal connections to a city or program, bring this up in the interview or when contacting the program to follow -up on your application.

The Match list

This is often the most stressful part of couples matching. It is worth revisiting your priorities. It also takes a lot of organization to rank a large list of programs. As you figure out how to compromise, here are some things to consider:

- Make your lists individually before comparing them to get a starting point.
- When making your rank list try to organize by cities (programs within the cities) rather than organizing by individual programs.
- What are your priorities?³
 - Living together: all matches need to be within commuting distance. If there are multiple programs centered around one city consider how far you are comfortable driving every day to work.
 - Both partners matching as close to their top choice as possible: you rank top choice programs first keeping in mind how far away you are willing to live.
 - Getting one partner into a particular program: maximize this possibility by ranking this partner's number one choice with all possible combinations prior to moving on to their second choice.
 - Are you willing to have both partners go unmatched? If not, at the end of your list of combinations consider creating combinations where one partner matches and the other does not.
- Avoid ranking programs where one person would be unhappy. Would you rank that program if you were entering the match as an individual?

If you rank all potential combinations, including the option for one of you to go unmatched you could have upwards of 5 00+ combinations. Each partner can submit no more than 700 ranks.

- Consider using a spreadsheet to keep track of your ranks.
- Make sure you and your partner's NRMP rank lists are accurate.
- Allow plenty of time to enter your ranks into the NRMP's ranking system.

Key Points:

1. Educate yourself about the process early at: <http://www.nrmp.org/match -process/couples -in-the-match/>
2. Talk with your student advisor about realistic goals for number of applications, interviews and programs to rank for your specific situation.
3. Communicate clearly with your partner about your goals and priorities.
4. The couples match process is different for every couple, so it is important to figure out how it will work best for you. Remember that despite the stress, this system and process is meant to help you and your partner!

References:

1. National Resident Matching Program, Results and Data: 2020 Main Residency Match. National Resident Matching Program, Washington, DC. 2020.
2. Couples in the Match. National Resident Matching Program. Washington, DC. 2018. (Accessed October 24, 2018 at <http://www.nrmp.org/match -process/couples -in-the-match/>)
3. "Surviving the Couples Match" Couples Match Guide. University of Kansas School of Medicine Office of Student Affairs. (Accessed October 1, 2018 at <http://www.kumc.edu/school -of-medicine/osa/residency -information/couples -match.html>)
4. National Resident Matching Program, Data Release and Research Committee: Results of the 2018 NRMP Program Director Survey. National Resident Matching Program, Washington, DC, June 2018. (Accessed October 1st, 2018 at <https://www.nrmp.org/wp -content/uploads/2018/07/NRMP -2018-Program-Director-Survey-for-WWW.pdf>)
5. Council of Emergency Medicine Residency Directors Advising Students Committee in Emergency Medicine. (2018). [CORD ASGEM Advising Addenda Study]. Unpublished raw data.