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# Applying to dermatology residency without a home program: Advice to medical students in the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond

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**Abstract** Dermatology has historically been one of the most competitive residencies to match into. One commonly overlooked factor is the importance of having mentors in the field, as they have experience guiding successful applicants and can provide great insight into what residency programs are looking for. Given that many students without home dermatology programs may struggle to find mentors in the field, we share advice on how these students can obtain the mentorship and guidance needed to match into dermatology.

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Dermatology has historically been one of the most competitive residencies to match into. Successful candidates generally have stellar United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE) scores, often with significant amounts of research and excellent letters of recommendation.<sup>1,2</sup> One factor often overlooked is the importance of having mentors in the field, as they have experience guiding successful applicants and can provide great insight into what residency programs are looking for. While many mentor-mentee relationships naturally occur due to home affiliations, students who do not have home dermatology programs (NHDPs) may struggle to form these relationships and subsequently obtain proper guidance. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic has made it even more challenging for NHDPs given limited

shadowing and away rotation opportunities. We share advice on how NHDPs can form strong mentor-mentee relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond in order to obtain the proper guidance needed to match into dermatology.

During the preclinical years, NHDPs should attempt to reach out to their medical school's alumni who have matched into dermatology residency programs, as alumni have experience navigating the school's curriculum while maximizing dermatology exposure. They can provide guidance on contacting local physicians and potential research opportunities. If available, dermatology residency advisors at the medical school may also provide similar information. Additionally, NHDPs should consider reaching out to nearby dermatology residency programs to shadow attendings. Over time, NHDPs can develop professional relationships with these physicians and ask to formally become their mentees. If internal mentor-mentee programs exist, NHDPs can ask

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**Table 1** Strategies that NHDPs can use to find mentorship opportunities during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

Mentorship opportunities	Examples
Alumni who matched into dermatology or dermatology residency advisors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inquire about opportunities to maximize dermatology exposure while balancing medical school responsibilities.</li> <li>• Request to be connected with faculty at different institutions who can provide mentorship.</li> </ul>
Local dermatology programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shadow or work with faculty on a routine basis and ask to become a mentee.</li> <li>• Inquire about formal mentorship opportunities at neighboring institutions.</li> <li>• Become acquainted with residents, especially those who were former NHDPs, and obtain their perspectives.</li> </ul>
Research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work with dermatology faculty at different institutions on research projects and ask to become their mentee.</li> <li>• Attend research conferences to learn about topics of interest and reach out to presenters.</li> <li>• Participate in research fellowships and work closely with designated faculty.</li> </ul>
Social media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Search #DermTwitter and follow accounts such as @derminterest to find and engage in conversations with dermatology faculty.</li> <li>• Engage with dermatology residency social media accounts to attend events specific to each program.</li> <li>• Use Instagram to learn about mentorship and fellowship opportunities on the Dermatology Interest Group Association page and dermatology residency program pages.</li> <li>• Use resources listed on the Dermatology Interest Group Association accounts, such as the Research Fellowship Spreadsheet,<sup>5</sup> to locate fellowship opportunities.</li> </ul>

NHDPs = students who do not have home dermatology programs.

to join these initiatives. While working alongside attendings, NHDPs will naturally provide opportunities to connect with and learn from residents or students from other medical schools as well. Residents can be a great source of information, as they recently went through the process, and some residents may be former NHDPs themselves.

Another avenue for NHDPs to obtain mentorship is through research. By working closely with the dermatology faculty on research projects, NHDPs can develop professional relationships and obtain mentorship. To find these research opportunities, NHDPs can ask residents or attendings at neighboring institutions with whom they have worked. Al-

though some opportunities may not work out initially, persistence, time, and ingenuity are needed. Alternatively, NHDPs can email experts who specialize in different areas of dermatology or conference presenters to see if they have opportunities for becoming involved in research. Given that many conferences are virtual due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the latter option has become more popular. Lastly, NHDPs can complete research rotations or fellowships at different institutions which can allow them to develop strong relationships with faculty.

Another interesting avenue to form mentor-mentee relationships is through social media platforms such as Twitter

and Instagram. For example, NHDPs can use Twitter to engage in discussions with dermatology faculty and find mentors by searching #DermTwitter.<sup>3</sup> This method enables users to identify faculty with shared interests and provides them with the opportunity to further develop dynamics via direct messaging, as people are now more open to meeting remotely. NHDPs can also use Instagram to follow the official accounts of dermatology residency programs and mentorship organizations. Many residency programs have increased their activity on Instagram due to the COVID-19 pandemic and are now able to share information about social events—such as virtual “meet-and-greets”—with a greater audience. Additionally, the Dermatology Interest Group Association routinely posts about mentorship programs and research fellowships, such as its faculty mentorship program for NHDPs, on its Instagram account. Many dermatologic societies offer great mentorship opportunities—including the American Academy of Dermatology Diversity Mentorship Program, Medical Dermatology Society Mentorship Program, and Skin of Color Society-Mentorship Program—for medical students.<sup>4</sup> Staying updated on available opportunities for mentorship is imperative and can be supported through social media.

## CONCLUSIONS

We have shared our perspective on different strategies that NHDPs can use to form strong mentor-mentee relationships

with dermatology faculty (Table 1). We hope these practices will help students obtain the guidance they need to successfully obtain a dermatology residency position.

## Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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