Scott A. Oakman, MD, PhD

Program Director, Hennepin-Regions Psychiatry Training Program

Our evaluation of residency candidates boils down to three main issues, so all of my answers to these questions relate back to how each item gives us information about the candidate in those domains. These are: 1) commitment to psychiatry; 2) interest in our community; and 3) competency in medicine. All the details—grades, extracurricular activities, research, test scores, recommendations—are only important inasmuch as they support those three pillars. As you might imagine, it is somewhat difficult to fully appreciate that on a cursory scan of an ERAS application, especially when, as we did for the 2015 Match, we receive over 1300 applications. Of these, we will interview approximately 90. We will rank almost all of those we interview, and fill 7-8 PGY1 positions.

Frankly, we do interview almost everyone who applies who is graduating from UMN or another medical or osteopathic school in the five-state area. We also seek out applications that indicate undergrad institutions or other significant life connections to Minnesota. (See #2 above.) We usually begin extending interviews the week after ERAS’ opening, and continue to extend them until early January. If you really want to interview with us and haven’t heard from us by early November, please drop us an email and ask!

USMLEs (or COMLEX) should be passed. We will usually extend interviews to US grads without Step 2 scores as long as Step 1 or transcript grades don’t indicate the presence of major academic problems. However, your ranking will be affected if Step 2 passing grades are not posted by the February ranking deadline. Please don’t delay in registering, taking, and passing these exams. We are not likely to take a risk on matching a resident who could be unable to start residency due to failed exams.

Clinical grades are less important than the comments from your rotations, particularly those in psychiatry. Your rotation site doesn’t matter specifically, but most UMN graduates who match here have rotated at either HCMC or Regions. You get to meet us; we get to see you in action. Your letter(s) of recommendation will come from people we know well. That said, most of our faculty have some acquaintance with staff at other Twin Cities hospitals, so it will not be a disadvantage if you rotate elsewhere. Electives likewise help us to get to know you and vice versa. Psychiatry electives are mainly important in that they reflect that you have deeper interest in the field (see #1 above) and will help you solidify your decisions. I wouldn’t recommend more than one elective in addition to your required core rotation, however—you will have four years to learn psychiatry and limited opportunities in your future to experience other areas of medicine that may be of personal or academic interest. Research also is mainly important as another indicator of that interest and commitment. As a clinically-focused program, however, it is somewhat lower on our list of priorities for evaluation. Extra-curricular activities are good in demonstrating leadership and service qualities. Specifics don’t matter too much—better to do something that truly reflects who you are, than to go through the motions to “check off a box”. Mental health related programs on your CV do help us to see that you gravitate toward this area, but are not the only way to display interest and concern in the field.
Letters of Recommendation are perhaps the most important items prior to the interview. We’re looking for at least 3 from attending physicians who have supervised your patient care on rotations, including at least one from a psychiatrist. It really helps (again, #1 above) if they indicate that they are aware that you are planning to go into psychiatry, and think that is a good fit for you. We love to read things like “we really wanted Student Doctor U as a resident in our Other Specialty program, but she is very well suited for her chosen career in psychiatry.”

The interview is your chance to see if our program matches our website, and for us to see if you relate as well to us in person as you did on paper. The interview will be the main determinant of your ranking.

On the interview day—relax. Be yourself. Be interested. Be honest. Ask questions about the program, about your interviewer’s interests, the local area, etc. Expect questions about your interests, the evolution of your specialty choice, your career goals, your educational accomplishments and setbacks. The biggest mistake applicants make is to appear disinterested or negative. Very occasionally someone is blatantly rude or inappropriate with a resident or other applicant, and that will move them down (or off) our list quickly. The bottom line is that we’re looking for people who truly want to care for the mentally ill in our communities, and who will be our future colleagues. Most of all, we’re looking to make a good impression on you, and hoping you see yourself as part of our program for the next four years.