

and Extremity Trauma (ISR), a state of the art burn care center and research depot. The anesthesiologists at BAMC maintain the Research Center of Excellence for Total Intravenous Anesthesia (TIVA) as the home of the Triservice Anesthesia Research Group Initiative on TIVA (TARGIT) to explore its military applications. The National Naval Medical Center (NNMC) and Walter Reed Medical Center (WRMC) are similar institutions on the east coast, which are associated with the nation's primary medical research center, the National Institutes of Health (NIH).

Historically, military graduates have been outstanding, with near perfect passing rates of the written and oral board exams. Military anesthesiology alumni have contributed to respiratory care through the advent of intermittent mandatory ventilation (IMV) and high positive end-expiratory pressure (PEEP) ventilation. As alumni, they have gone on to be departmental chairmen, leaders in academic residencies, authors of anesthesia textbooks and numerous medical and public publications. Some have become editors of major journals and served as a president of the American Society of Anesthesiologists (ASA). Indeed, military anesthesiologists become inclined to serve as leaders, educators and innovators that have dotted the map and history with their contributions.

Summary

My former chairman recognized a pattern of “expertise, maturity, work ethic, duty and ability to adapt,” which were forged by early responsibility and heroic challenges. These providers learned firsthand the critical value of teamwork, determination and adaptability. They succeeded at doing more with less, traveled many extra miles and improvised when many would yield. I believe it was these ideas that caused my chairman to suggest that a department full of military-trained anesthesiologists “would solve many of the problems that I face as a chairman in anesthesiology.” In many ways, the military houses one of the last frontiers of anesthesiology where technology and sophistication must give way to simple tools and basic medical principles. Their solutions are won through innovation, determination and adaptation. Like all pioneers, these providers emerge with war stories and battle wounds of the soul and body. But, they emerge stronger, undeterred and more able than before. More importantly, most report that the care they rendered during their military missions was the most meaningful of their career. One provider commented that he thought he enjoyed delivering anesthesia, but he added with tears in his eyes that “helping our soldiers in their dire need was the best experience of my career and possibly my life.”

Some would argue that greatness is not what we become but rather what we do. A military anesthesiologist is not a life of wealth, privilege and prestige. However, the life of a military anesthesiologist will involve thousands of military members that volunteer to stand in harm's way for America and its allies' sake.

Compared to its civilian counterpart, military anesthesiology is a selfless, industrious and relentlessly demanding profession without commensurate praise, comfort or financial gain. Nonetheless, a military anesthesiologist finds meaningful reward in raising the fallen soldier, in the grateful tears of his or her family, and the consolation that their expertise may have aborted the misfortune of those serving who dare to give everything.

NOTE: *The content of this publication is the exclusive opinion and interpretation of the author and not that of the Department of Defense or one of its uniformed services.*

CHAPTER 7

What Makes a Competitive Anesthesiology Candidate?

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Anesthesiology is a very demanding field. It requires skill, speed, knowledge, judgement and vigilance. These traits have not only brought you success in medical school but are your main highlights in gaining acceptance into the anesthesiology residency of your choice. Use the tools that have brought you to this point. Highlight your strengths and brush up on some tips about interview skills. Use this chapter as a guide to prepare yourself for the application process. Good luck.

What are Residency Programs Looking For?

Residency programs are not only looking for the best and the brightest, they desire an applicant who will be a “good fit” into their program. As an interviewer, I remember my first interview session when I was told to look at the applicants not only as the future of anesthesiology but as future partners.

Applicants must be able to function compatibly within the program, having similar goals and educational styles. For example, a student who learns only from lectures and tutorials will not do as well in a program noted for clinical excellence and independent study. Both the applicant and programs are searching for a successful partnership.



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What Sets You Apart?

You want to be the best, and that is a natural desire, but so does everyone else! Being competitive in an anesthesiology application requires certain basic skills as well as those elements that set you apart from the rest.

- **Basic Requirements**

Many programs have basic requirements that they use as a filtering device for applicants. These requirements are very good medical school grades (mostly high pass to honors), solid USMLE I scores and strong letters of recommendation. Top programs will have more stringent guidelines. Residency programs will sort through applicants based on the student's ability to meet their pre-set requirements.

If you meet these basic requirements, you can be relatively assured of a second look and usually an interview. Now let's break down the basic requirements and examine each component of a winning combination.

- **Medical School Grades**

Residency programs are not looking for only passing grades but some high passes to honors. If you come from a program that is mainly pass and fail, your class ranking may be a way of evaluating you against your peers. Anesthesiology programs look for candidates who are strong students, especially in the fields of pharmacology and physiology.

If you have incompletes or failing grades you may be excluded early in the process. If you have a good explanation for a blemish on your record, explain it in your personal statement, or find a way to get this information to the anesthesiology department to which you are applying. They may overlook a failed grade if it is inconsistent with an outstanding record and a good explanation furnished.

- **USMLE Scores**

The USMLE Step I examination is taken in the summer of the second year and is usually basic science oriented. Step II of this examination process is taken at any time during your fourth year of training.

Anesthesiology programs are looking for a decisive passing grade on Step I. If you are debating whether you should take Step II before applying you must look at your test taking skill and confidence that you will score well. If you had a weak Step I score, a strong Step II performance may make you more competitive. Conversely, a poor Step II exam may put a strong Step I score into question. If you take the exam and pass it solidly it will definitely enhance your desirability to your program. Many program directors believe that high USMLE scores correlate with good to high scores on anesthesiology in-training exams and ultimately to success in passing the written certification exam. Thus, high USMLE scores generally result in an invitation to interview.

- **Letters of Recommendation**

Having strong letters of recommendation often will tip the odds in your favor when it comes to being granted an interview. As a candidate you should seek out letters of recommendation from people who can write powerful letters of support and who know you well. You want someone who can emphasize your strengths as an applicant. Remember that when you are applying that you are marketing yourself. When deciding who should write these letters, it is a good idea to have at least one of your letters be written by an anesthesiologist. The most highly ranked letters are typically those written by academic heads of their departments.

When asking for a letter of recommendation it is a good idea to provide that person with a copy of your curriculum vitae and personal statement. It is also advisable that you spend some time with your recommender honestly discussing your strengths and weaknesses so that emphasis can be placed in the appropriate areas.



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Setting Yourself Apart

You have all of the basic requirements and now you are looking at how you can get ahead of the other candidates. Start with your personal statement. Other components of a competitive application include anesthesia electives or work experiences and research. Remember that anesthesiology is more than a technical skill or applied pharmacology. The anesthesiologist is the leader of the health care team and program directors are looking for leaders. Avoid filling your application with “fluffy” one- or two-day volunteer positions and focus on projects that have required drive, initiative and leadership.

- **Personal Statement**

Programs often use this part of your application after you are granted an interview to find out more about you before your personal meeting. Interviewers often use this essay as a question generator during the interview session. Remember that your personal statement will be the first impression your interviewer is given. Make it a good one. You want to mention

why you want to be an anesthesiologist and what attributes would help you in achieving that goal, as well as how you tested your interest in anesthesiology (rotations, shadowing, etc.). Other ways to approach this component of your application is to tell the story of your life and how it has steered you to anesthesia as a specialty. Draw your audience in and give them a glowing first impression. Having said this try to avoid the cliché statements like “I want to be an anesthesiologist because I like physiology and pharmacology.” Virtually everyone applying for anesthesia likes these things as well. Also, when discussing your personal attributes avoid definitive statement such as “I have exceptional IV and intubating skills.” Short of an applicant who was a nurse anesthetist before going to medical school, an overly confident statement such as this only tells the program director how little insight you have as to how much there is to learn. Lastly, just before you submit your personal statement have someone you trust proofread it! Minor grammar, spelling and word use error might not seem all that important, but anesthesiology mandates attention to detail, and a sloppy personal statement says all the wrong things.

- **Anesthesia Electives**

Having added exposure to anesthesiology shows the interview committee your dedication and knowledge of the field. It relays to them you know what you’re getting into and you really want a career behind the “ether screen.” If possible, make sure at least one rotation is at a tertiary care center. If all your rotations are at small community hospitals or surgery centers it may raise the question of whether you really understand the implications of caring for critically ill patients in the operating room.

- **Work Experience**

Some applicants have further polished their applications with extra exposure to the field of anesthesia. This usually takes the form of summer internships or work-internships over the summer or during breaks. It places an exclamation point after your stated dedication to the field of anesthesiology. If you have the time and opportunity, we highly recommend gaining further exposure.

- **Research**

As interviewers, we give a nod of approval to those applicants who have research experience. Having done many projects ourselves, we know the extra time and work required to participate. We offer this with a word of caution. If you have participated in a research project make sure that you know what role you played in the project and the project’s goal. We see many applicants that spent a few days in the lab and really made no strong contribution to the study. Moreover, they had no idea what the goal of the study was other than reciting the title. Please do not be one of these applicants!

It will take your application down a few notches and perhaps cost you a residency position.

We encourage you to get into the lab and participate. Find a mentor and be relentless that you want to do some type of research project and follow through. You will be rewarded for your efforts when you get accepted into an anesthesiology program.

Some Helpful Hints

Congratulations on deciding to join the field of anesthesiology. You made an excellent decision. Remember to get the basic requirements aligned and then work toward adding extra elements to your resume that will make you an extremely competitive candidate.

To prepare for a successful interview have a trusted professor or mentor give you a mock interview. Gain feedback on your appearance, speech and behavior. You don't want to appear coached, but the last thing you need on interview day is to represent yourself poorly. On the day of your interview dress professionally. You want the interview committee to look at you as a future partner. Smile and act confident. You are an excellent candidate. Listed below is a checklist of items/tasks to be completed prior to the interview in order to look, act and talk like a successful applicant.

Considerations for Presenting a Positive Image When Interviewing

Walk the Walk

1. Subdued mannerisms (no wild hand motions)
2. Manners ("Yes, doctor" and "No, thank you")
3. Firmness of handshake (no limp fish, no weight lifter's grips)
4. Maintain eye contact (don't stare!)
5. Posture (no slouching, small of back against chair)
6. Speaking (not too loud, not too loquacious)
7. Tone of voice (vary pitch, use pauses to keep interest)

Talk the Talk

1. Be honest, tactful, respectful
2. Know your personal topics well (research, anesthesia interest)
3. Learn about the program via website, literature, and ask follow-up questions based on that reading

Look the Look

1. Appropriate appearance (remove facial piercings or unnatural hair color)
2. Appropriate dress (look professional)
3. Being overdressed may be as bad as sloppily dressed (could look too "slick")
4. Remember your appearance is a nonverbal form of communication

CHAPTER 8

Choosing a Residency

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Having made the decision to pursue a career in anesthesia, the next decision to be made is where to go for residency. The National Resident Matching Program (NRMP) match process can be intimidating; however, a systematic approach that assesses your goals as well as your strengths and weaknesses as a learner will help guide you to the correct decision.

Self-Assessment

The first fact that needs to be established is that not every person learns best in the same environment, and as such there is no single "best" program. While many people ask "What is the best program," the question should be "What is the best program for ME?" This is an important distinction because it implies that before you can start to examine programs, you must first examine yourself. Looking back over your education to date, where have you had the most success? Where have you encountered difficulty? Do you function best in a small, more intimate setting or in a large group? Are you a very self-directed person or do you function better when you have mentorship and direction? Would you rather be in an urban or a rural environment? These are but a few of the many questions you must ask yourself before you get started. This type of personal introspection is difficult at times, but it is important to be honest and critical if you want to find the best fit. The reality is that you have already accomplished a great deal and passed a number of competitive selections to get to this point. You have developed a set of strategies for learning that have served you well and set you among some of the most educated people in the country. The only thing standing between you and your future career is post-graduate training, and selecting a program that matches well with your personality and learning strategies will be the key to future success. It is often helpful to get an outside perspective from a trusted friend or mentor when considering these issues, but the end result should be a personal list of criteria to use when assessing programs.

Identifying Programs

Once your self-assessment is complete, the next step is determining your list of programs to send applications. The simplest way to start this process is to sort programs based on your list of personal criteria. If location is important, then an initial sort by geographic location would be important. If the potential for research or a future academic career is important, you may want