



The Ultimate Residency Playbook

Every year, we work with many DO students that realize too late what they should have been doing in MS2/MS3 to increase their competitiveness and preparedness for the residency match. This is the unspoken checklist that residents and program directors know – but your school probably won't tell you.

Why This Happens:

- **Lack of true home programs in key (and sometimes all) specialties**

- Limits early specialty exposure, mentorship access, and research + networking opportunities.

- **Insufficient infrastructure for personalized, physician-led, specialty-specific career guidance**

- Non-physician faculty = no personal insight or exposure to the nature of the application process
- One mentor can often be staffed with 20+ students (in addition to other responsibilities)
- Lack of key specialty specific nuances that make a successful applicant in different niches
- Lack of emphasis on the tactical steps needed to be taken early in their careers to have a competitive application

The Solution: MS2

- Take both USMLE and COMLEX if competitive specialty is even remotely on your radar
- Avoid resource overload → 1-2 Q-banks, 1-2 core video/content resources
 - Our favorites: UWorld, Amboss, Boards&Beyond, Anki
 - Use these early in MS2 to get familiar with board examination format and style
- Start building CV early: research, leadership, teaching involvement
 - Focus on quality, impact, & longevity of experience > quantity of experiences
 - Aim for experiences in specialty of interest or for causes you deeply care to support.
- Network with faculty + join interest groups (local and national)

- Do not be shy to leverage cold email outreach to faculty at other institutions - some of the best relationships stem from this!
- [OMM Bootcamp](#) → comprehensive high-yield video review resource for COMLEX I/II

For the MS3:

- Prep smart for shelves/rotations: complete all questions from two (2!) Q-banks for every rotation prior to shelf exam/COMAT to ensure success.
- Be the rotation rockstar: professionalism, teamwork, ownership of patients, and assistance with daily workflow and tasks.
 - If you make your resident's life easier, they will vouch for you behind closed doors.
- Lock down LORs early and often (3-4 per specialty)
 - Identify faculty that you've worked with for at least 1-2 weeks to get non-generic and powerful evaluations.
- Finalize specialty choice by mid-MS3
 - Seek out opportunities to explore the specialties you are interested in early in the year, even if you are not necessarily scheduled on that specific service.
- Use VSLO strategically: identify programs early, contact coordinators in the winter to express interest in coming to rotate in Summer/Fall. Leverage any resident/attending mentor you have to vouch for you to come for an away rotation/sub-internship at their program.

Mentorship: The 3 Levels Everyone Needs - identify and build rapport with ASAP

- Near-Peer (MS4): most relatable, are living through the interview/match cycle (but lack the "other side of the curtain" insight)
- Resident: actually evaluates students + sits on interview side, approachable, understand the system from both sides.
- Attending: harder to access and develop relationship with initially, but important for LOR + overall career trajectory guidance.

The Bottom Line

Matching your top choice residency isn't just about test scores. It's about stacking the right boxes early so that when MS4 comes, *you're already positioned to win.*

This playbook was created by the expert residency advising team at [Matchpal](#) – a DO-founded advising & tutoring platform that helps hundreds of students crush USMLE/COMLEX and match their dream specialty every year.

[Click here](#) to schedule a free consultation with our team to learn more about how we can help you in your road to matching your top choice program and specialty!

