

Choosing your fourth-year rotations wisely

There are numerous approaches that students take in selecting advanced pharmacy practice experiences (APPEs) for their fourth year of pharmacy school. Some students prefer rotation sites that are close to home, some attempt to gain a wide variety of practice experiences, while others prefer to narrow their sights on a specialized area of pharmacy. Unfortunately, some students select rotations with a reputation for being less challenging and less time-consuming. Although there is not one correct way of approaching the process, this article will provide some perspective that may be beneficial when navigating the rotation selection process.

Never choose the “easiest” rotations. This topic must be addressed in an honest manner. Some preceptors or practice sites get labeled “easy” by students. You are selling yourself short if you choose this route, and you will likely regret it in the long run. Going home early, never being challenged with developing clinical decision-making skills, and having an overall low-stress rotation may seem appealing, but as a practicing pharmacist you will be expected to know the answers to tough questions or be able to quickly find

them. It is better to be challenged now when you still have a preceptor to review your work than to wait until you have no backup. Furthermore, the more stimulating your rotations, the better prepared you will be for the North American Pharmacist Licensure Examination.



Addressing the distance. In an ideal world, rotations would be selected based on preferred specialty and practice site. In reality, the logistics of both proximity and availability of practice sites tend to influence the selection of rotations. Most students also have to abide by strict budgets. If you simply select nearby rotations, you will likely miss some prime opportunities. Student loans provide a cushion, albeit small, for additional expenses during your fourth year. If you have a specific rotation in mind and

would have to incur extra expenses to be there, determine whether the experience outweighs the expense. If the primary appeal of the rotation is that it sounds fun, without being beneficial to your career, then you should probably remove that choice from your list. You will earn a good salary in a few years and be able to afford to go on vacations for fun, though whether or not you will have the time and freedom in the future to enjoy long periods away is debatable. You have to weigh a fun rotation against one that may be more beneficial to your career. On the other hand, if the rotation site is also where you may want to complete a residency or if the rotation would really boost your knowledge or enhance your curriculum vitae, you are choosing wisely by being long-term goal oriented and should view the rotation as an investment. Determine exactly

how much each of your long-distance APPEs would cost. Some factors to consider are housing, fuel, parking, time away from your part-time job, and airline tickets. Balance the cost with the long-term benefits of each rotation to determine which are the best for your budget and career goals.

Don't put all of your eggs in one basket. If you have one particular practice location in mind for your residency, it is not necessarily wise to select the majority of your rotations to be at that site. Yes, the decision-makers there may get to know your name, and you may make a good impression on them, but can you be on the top of your game for months and months on end? Chances are you are going to have some bad days and not perform to your full potential. Poor

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performance on off days may be the impression that sticks with the residency director and preceptors, and that may cost you the residency spot come Match day.

Another important aspect to consider is that a varied collection of knowledge—gained from rotations at different practice sites—makes you an asset. Completing multiple rotations at the same site could deprive you of the range of information and practice philosophies that you could gain from a more diverse selection of locations. In short, you may have nothing new to bring to the table if you apply for a residency where you have done multiple APPEs.

Another possible outcome of completing multiple rotations where you might like to serve as a resident is discovering that you do not enjoy the area of study or the particular site once you are there. I recommend spending no more than one third of your time at a particular site (if it offers multiple areas of focus) or in one particular area of focus. If half of the rotations you have selected are extremely similar and you unexpectedly do not like them, not only will you have a miserable time but you also will have forfeited the opportunity to discover what really interests you.

Fine-tuning your areas of interest. If you have already identified the pharmacy specialty that you want to pursue, you are fortunate. You have likely

researched your options and developed a focus. Keep in mind, though, that your fourth year of pharmacy school is the only time in your career that you will be able to explore different specialties and locations free from long-term commitments. Take advantage of this! Of course, you can spend some time in the area you think you like most and affirm your desire or discover it is not really as appealing as you thought. You should also explore other areas that pique your interest. These areas are likely to be similar to your primary interest but may involve a different patient population (e.g., inpatient versus outpatient, pediatrics versus neonatal). By varying your schedule with complementary rotations that interest you, you are sure to enjoy your year, gain a wider depth and breadth of knowledge, and likely find your niche.

If you are not sure what you specifically want to do in the profession, make your scope even wider. Research what options are available to you and really reflect about what sparks your interests. You may go about this in a reverse fashion as well by thinking about what areas you definitely do not want to pursue. If your school provides a list of available rotations, highlight those that you want to know more about and delete those that you have absolutely no interest in. After you have done this, meet with one or more professors who know you well

and discuss your options. By having an honest conversation about your likes and dislikes, your professors can help you select the right variety of experiences that will help you explore plausible rotation options.

Final thoughts. Think of your fourth year of pharmacy school not only as a time to sharpen your clinical skills but also as a yearlong discovery process. Once you graduate and accept a position as a pharmacist, it is certainly not impossible to change your area of practice, but you will likely have to leave your current job not fully knowing what awaits you on the other side. Now is your time to explore various areas of pharmacy and hone in on the area that is the right fit for you. Choose wisely!

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The author has declared no potential conflicts of interest.

DOI 10.2146/ajhp130682