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# Elective time during dermatology residency: A survey of residents and program directors

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## Abstract

Elective time during residency training provides residents with exposure to different subspecialties. This opportunity gives residents the chance to nurture growth in particular areas of interest and broaden their knowledge base in certain topics in dermatology by having the chance to work with experts in the field. The purpose of this study was to assess the views of residency program directors and dermatology residents on the value of elective time through a cross sectional survey. An eight-question IRB exempt survey was sent out to 113 residency program directors via email through the American Professors of Dermatology (APD) program director listserv. Program directors were asked to forward a separate set of 9 questions to their residents. The majority of programs that responded allowed for some elective time within their schedule, often during the PGY 4 (3rd year of dermatology training), but the amount of time allowed widely varied among many residency programs. Overall, residents and program directors agree that elective is important in residency training, but no standardization is established across programs.

*Keywords: elective time, dermatology, dermatology residency*

## Introduction

Elective time during residency in dermatology is a means of allowing residents exposure to dermatology subspecialties. It is perceived that residents interested in post residency dermatology fellowships use elective time to become familiar with institutions of interest for fellowship training. The American Board of

Dermatology currently allows for 3 months of elective time during the course of a three-year residency [1]. To date, there are no studies analyzing the amount of elective time residency programs give their residents. The purpose of this study was to determine the views of residency program directors and dermatology residents on the value of elective time through a cross sectional Q&A survey. This survey was sent out to all programs directors and residents in ACGME accredited dermatology residency programs.

**Methods:** An eight-question IRB exempt survey was developed by the authors via Survey Monkey ([www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com)) and electronically distributed to all residency program directors across the United States through the American Professors of Dermatology (APD) program director listserv. Program directors were asked to forward a separate set of 9 questions to their residents. All responses were anonymous. The questions sought to address the quality and quantity of elective time awarded to residents across programs. The survey also required participants to address their opinions on elective time during training.

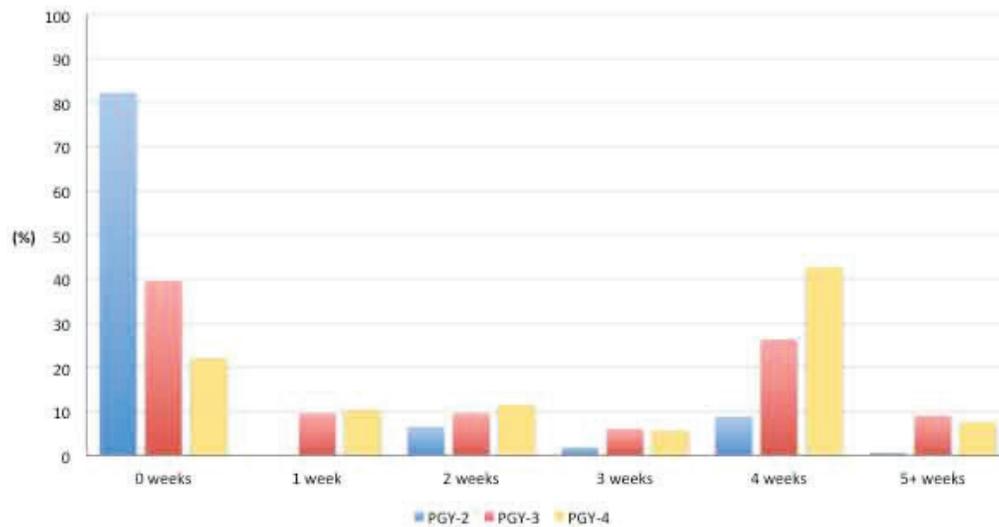
**Results:** A total of 55 out of 113 residency program directors completed the survey for a response rate of 48% (**Table 1**). Of the 399 dermatology residents who received the survey 204 completed the survey for a response rate of 51% (**Table 2**). The majority of programs that responded allowed for some elective time within their schedule, often during PGY 4 (3rd year of dermatology training). The amount of time allowed varied widely, but 42% of programs awarded their residents four weeks during the PGY-4 year (**Figure 1**). Moreover, 88% (n=48) of residency program directors deemed the value of elective time

**Table 1.** Residency Program Director Question Stems. Post-graduate year (PGY).

Residency Directors Question Stems
How much elective time is given to your residents during PGY-2, PGY-3 and PGY-4?
Is elective time during the PGY-3 year mandatory?
How important do you think elective time during the PGY-3 year is in correlation to fellowship match outcomes?
Rate the importance you place on residents seeking elective time at the following
Is increased scheduling preference given to residents implicating an interest in dermatology fellowships versus residents not applying to post residency fellowships?
Are residents in your program expected to work autonomously to find a place to do their elective or are they given guidance and resources from the department?
What percentage of PGY-4 residents who applied to fellowship last year matched?
What percentage of PGY-4 Residents have gone into fellowship in the last 10 years?

to be somewhat important. In that respect, many residency programs (53%, n=29) allow the residents to seek their own elective rather than giving them guidance regarding which elective they should pursue. Program directors responded that sponsored electives or electives at academic institutions are more educationally beneficial than elective rotations in the private practice setting. More specifically, 49% (n=27) considered elective rotations at private practices to be unimportant, whereas 62% (n=34)

the value of elective time during residency to be very important and 50% (n=97) consider current allocated elective time to be too brief (**Figure 2**). However, residents that are planning to pursue fellowship training valued elective time as a way to determine to which academic programs they will ultimately apply for fellowship. Residents overwhelmingly believed (96%, n=190) that completing an elective at an institution aided their decision in applying to that institution’s fellowship program. Moreover, almost all residents (94%, n=186) agreed that completing an elective at an institution of interest strengthened their chances of matching into its fellowship program.



**Figure 1.** Number of weeks of elective time awarded.

and 56% (n=31) considered elective rotations at academic institutions and through sponsors to be of importance, respectively (**Table 3**). Residents and program directors agree that elective time is an important way to gain exposure to subspecialties even if they are not planning to pursue a fellowship. Based on the survey, 72% (n=144) of residents deemed

directors a better understanding of the perception of elective time from the residents’ point of view. The results address the mutual understanding by program directors and residents that elective time allows residents the ability to broaden their scope in dermatology and target their interests within the field. There were very few programs that exercised

**Table 2.** Resident Question Stems. Post-graduate year (PGY).

Resident Question Stems
Are you a PGY-2, PGY-3, or PGY-4?
How much elective time does your residency program allocate to you during your: PGY-2, PGY-3, PGY-4?
What year do you prefer to have elective time?
How important is elective time to you?
What field are you applying for a post residency dermatology fellowship in? (mark all that apply)
Do you believe that completing elective time at an institution of interest will strengthen your chances of matching into a fellowship program?
Does completion of elective time at an institution aide in helping you decide if you will apply to that institution’s fellowship program?
Do you believe that the amount of elective time allocated to you is enough to give you adequate exposure to a field of interest prior to applying for fellowship in that field?
For Residents NOT applying for a post residency dermatology fellowship only. What subspecialties have you done electives in? (mark all that apply)
Resident Question Stems
Are you a PGY-2, PGY-3, or PGY-4?
How much elective time does your residency program allocate to you during your: PGY-2, PGY-3, PGY-4?
What year do you prefer to have elective time?
How important is elective time to you?
What field are you applying for a post residency dermatology fellowship in? (mark all that apply)
Do you believe that completing elective time at an institution of interest will strengthen your chances of matching into a fellowship program?
Does completion of elective time at an institution aide in helping you decide if you will apply to that institution’s fellowship program?
Do you believe that the amount of elective time allocated to you is enough to give you adequate exposure to a field of interest prior to applying for fellowship in that field?
For Residents NOT applying for a post residency dermatology fellowship only. What subspecialties have you done electives in? (mark all that apply)

the 3 months allowed by the American Board of Dermatology for residency training.

Based on comments, residents felt that the ability to rotate in different subspecialties allows them to explore career interests and gain an understanding about subspecialties. Moreover, many residents (94%) considered elective time as a key means to network with other institutions that they were interested in for fellowship training, which may warrant further investigation as to the effect of elective time on the match rate at given institutions. Whereas 50% of residents believed that elective time at their institution was too brief it suggests that 50% of them also believe that elective time is adequate. It appears

that elective time needs to be considered in the broad context of the entire residency program. Elective time must be balanced against all educational needs during residency, such as time allocated to pediatrics, melanoma clinic, lymphoma clinic, cosmetics, and research. Furthermore, it is important to effectively balance maintaining longitudinal care amongst residents and patients, while allowing residents to participate in ‘away’ electives. Although residents may benefit from additional electives in their schedule, it may be difficult to have the responsibility of specific patients and establish care over time when additional rotations do not allow continuity. Further studies are warranted to help accommodate all these facets of residency education and prioritize them effectively.

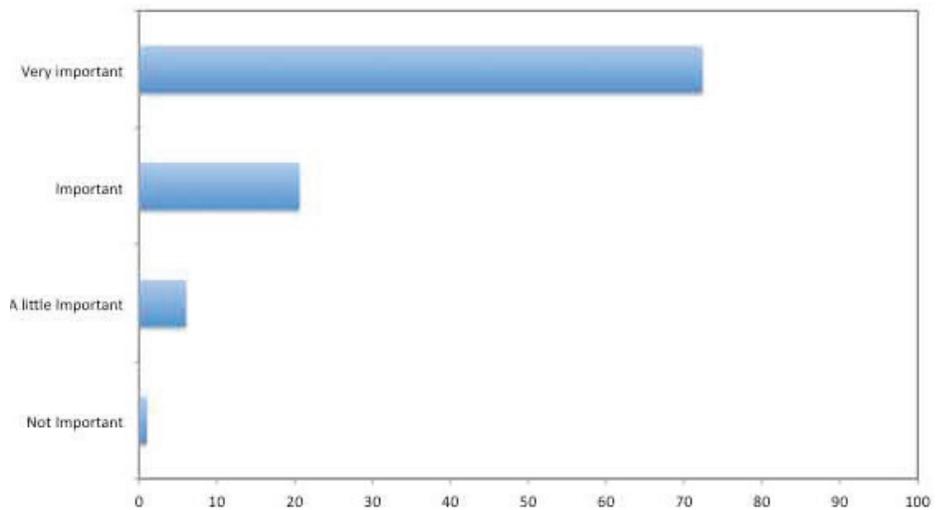
**Table 3.** Program directors' perceived value of electives, grouped by host.

	Not Important	A little Important	Important	Very Important
Other Academic Institutions	10.91%	27.27%	36.35%	25.45%
Through Sponsors	12.73%	30.91%	22.73%	23.64%
Private Practices	49.09%	29.09%	14.55%	7.27%

Furthermore, the noted variability in elective time awarded between programs can be attributed to many factors. Program directors of some institutions felt that they already provide their residents with substantial exposure to different subspecialties as part of their core curriculum, thus less elective time was built into their rotations. At other programs, elective time might be minimal because of the lack of studies published to date comparing elective time between programs. Educational demands can also play a role in allocation of elective time. For instance, larger programs with multiple subspecialties may not need to grant elective time to their residents, whereas smaller programs may offer more time away from their institutions to adequately expose their residents to various fields.

However, in order for changes to be made a mutual understanding of the value of elective time is warranted among the ABD, residency directors, and residents alike. The results of the study help validate the value of elective time as both residency directors and residents stress the importance of elective time during residency training. Although the majority of residency directors value 'away' electives at other institutions, many of them do not provide scheduling preference or guidance to residents who wish to seek out an 'away' rotation.

As for the limitations of this study, the data collected was subjectively reported. Thus, results may differ from the actual time awarded to residents. Moreover, the data may be biased based on participants' strong opinions on elective time during residency training, thus making them more likely to respond.



**Figure 2.** Importance of electives to residents.

### Conclusion

Based on the results of the survey, it is apparent that elective time during residency is considered to be of importance to residents and program directors alike. Elective time can serve numerous purposes including, but not limited to, exposure to subspecialties within dermatology, ability to learn about fellowship training options, and allowing for time to pursue well-established 'away' electives that national programs such as the American Academy of Dermatology and Women's Dermatologic Society offer. The data gathered from this study helps shed light on the current attitudes towards elective time and will allow program directors to tailor elective time at their institutions as they see fit. With that in mind, further investigation is warranted to discern whether there is any relationship between elective time offered and its effect on matching into a fellowship program.

### References

1. American Board of Dermatology. Guidelines for Determining Adequacy of Clinical Training. 2017. Available from <https://www.abderm.org/residents-and-fellows/primary-certification-examination/requirements-to-take-the-certifying-exam.aspx#AdeqClinTrn>. Accessed July 5, 2017.