

Orthodontics Residency

Notes from the Orthodontics Residency Series - Updated March 2024

This information is a result of the annual ADEA Residency Series, co-sponsored with the Office of Career and Professional Development and UCSF ADEA chapter. Faculty, residents, and D4s on a panel shared their thoughts about the qualities of an outstanding candidate in their specialty and gave advice to D1s, D2, & D3s about the application process and residency experience.

EXPLORING ORTHODONTICS

1. Why did you choose orthodontics?

A: Panelists offered several pieces of advice. Start getting prepared by the end of your 2nd year of dental school and make sure ortho is what you want to do. Join the Ortho Club, and get involved in Ortho Electives. Use your research elective to help you decide who to do research with; your research does not have to be ortho-related, but instead focus on doing something you're passionate about. Elective courses in craniofacial anomalies are helpful. Also, many residents encouraged students to come assist.

2. How did you choose between orthodontics residency programs?

A: One resident wanted to do research on craniofacial anomalies during residency—an area for which there can be a 2-year waiting list. He indicated that if an applicant is not interested in research, he or she should not apply to research-focused schools. Another resident applied to more than 20 programs but dropped or ruled out several along the way. He took into consideration cost, location, the length of the programs, whether they offered master's degrees, and the residents at the site. Others ranked programs based solely on cost and location. Panelists mentioned speaking with 4th-year students and residents about their opinions on the application process, program focus, the environment, work/life balance, and the “typical week in the life of a resident” at each program.

3. How many orthodontics programs are there and how do they vary?

A: There are 50-60 ortho residency programs in the US. Ortho programs vary as to whether or not they offer master's degrees, and in their length, which can be 2 or 3 years (UCSF is 3 years). Longer programs are more likely to offer master's degrees, and most programs are 3 years. Residents often receive no stipends and may pay tuition (at UCSF residents pay tuition). Applicants can find information about programs by calling them directly. Braces.org is a great website for basic program information and phone numbers.

4. What are the benefits of 2 versus 3-year programs?

A: Panelists acknowledged that in a 2-year ortho residency program, one can graduate faster and earn income more quickly. On the other hand, a 3-year program allows a resident to see a large number of complicated cases from treatment inception to completion.

5. Which ortho programs do current residents recommend?

A: Panelists recommended the University of Michigan, University of Tennessee, UCSF, UCLA, USC, University of Maryland, University of Washington, University of Oregon, University of Florida, St. Louis University, University of Texas, Columbia University, University of Oklahoma, Harvard University, Virginia Commonwealth University, University of Pennsylvania, and University of Minnesota. Panelists recommended not applying to UNLV.

6. What do you enjoy about UCSF's ortho program?

A: According to panelists, UCSF is a cutting-edge center of research, particularly in cone-beam CT imaging. Ortho residents can also gain valuable experience in UCSF's oral surgery department, which other programs lack. In addition, UCSF treats a unique patient population and is one of only a few clinics that treat cleft palates.

LIFE AS A RESIDENT

7. What is a typical day like for an orthodontics resident at UCSF?

A: Residents shared that at UCSF, a typical day begins with an ortho diagnosis and treatment planning class from 8-9 am. Residents are in the clinic from 9-12pm and participate in seminars, journal club, or lunch-and-learn from 1-2 pm. It is sometimes necessary to eat lunch during class. Afternoons include clinic sessions from 2-5pm, followed on rare occasions by night classes. There are master classes on Wednesday mornings, guest speakers on Friday afternoons, and occasional courses or seminars on weekends relating to private practice. The clinical requirements include giving 8 case presentations. Also, practice management courses are given frequently at UCSF. Alumni give guest lectures to 2nd and 3rd year residents. There are also opportunities to shadow. Approximately 5 residents are accepted each year, and there are currently 15 residents at UCSF.

8. Why did you choose this specialty?

A: Several panelists mentioned having worked in an ortho office, appreciating that patients are cheerful and eager to come in, and enjoying ortho electives and seminars.

9. What is your social life like? Do you have free time?

A: One resident on the panel reported being as busy as he was in dental school; another resident felt twice as busy. Residents mentioned having much more work than expected, including reading articles, summarizing cases for other residents, taking master classes, and writing a thesis.

10. What do you love about being an orthodontics resident? What are some challenges?

A: Residents mentioned enjoying diagnosing and treatment planning, which involves synthesizing large amounts of information (clinical exams, X-rays, available technologies) for each particular case. Residents also enjoy working with a young, healthy patient population—"teenagers who are fun to be around, and ask for and want their treatments." The day you remove a patient's braces is highly satisfying. According to panelists, ortho is a fast-paced, interdisciplinary field that continually utilizes new technologies and offers rewarding results. Some residents found continually learning new technologies frustrating.

PREPARING THE RESIDENCY APPLICATION

11. What are some qualities of outstanding candidates in orthodontics?

A: Qualities of outstanding applicants include good GRE scores, strong letters of recommendation (especially for institutions such as UCSF with a Pass/No Pass system), research, participation in extracurricular activities (volunteer and leadership experience), mastery of foreign languages, and evidence of an investigation into the specialty of orthodontics (e.g. contacting and shadowing local orthodontists in private practice). Applicants should find out whether this specialty is right for them. One speaker said, "Don't apply to every program, only those that you know you would be excited to attend."

12. What examples of extracurricular activities make you "well-rounded"?

A: According to panelists, it is possible to get into ortho residencies without doing research. However, many programs prefer candidates with research experience. It is also helpful to publish research articles. Residents

suggested students take advantage of ortho-related opportunities on campus, such as ortho electives. Some panelists participated in student government, community service, and volunteering.

13. What letters of recommendation are needed?

A: An applicant needs one letter from the Dean of his or her dental program and three more from clinic leaders, research faculty, or other appropriate sources. Some programs require letters from an ortho program faculty member and a clinical professor as well as the Dean.

14. How can you obtain excellent letters of recommendation?

A: Ideally, you should ask for letters from professors or clinicians you trust and who believe you are and will be a great orthodontist. Several panelists recommended when asking faculty members to write recommendations, add the caveat, “if you believe you have the time and feel you know me well enough to write a strong letter of support.” Residents also noted that if you sense any hesitation, you should thank the professor for considering the request and find someone else. If the faculty member agrees, you should give him or her a copy of your personal statement, CV, and program application at least 30 days before the deadline. Some residents recommend preparing a bulleted list of your qualifications. In many cases, applicants compose the actual letters (one resident wrote 2 of 4 letters, one wrote 3 of 4, and one wrote all 4). If you write the letters, be interesting, thoughtful, and polished, and practice good writing skills. It is important to make the letters fair and that all four letters are different; however, “this is no time to be humble—you need to distinguish yourself from other applicants.”

15. How did you prepare for the GRE?

A: Panelists suggested using flashcards for the verbal section and practicing solving math problems. One resident stated that the experience is similar to the SAT, and that speed is important. Another panelist added, “It is a nasty test that makes you feel like you suck and want to leave.” However, the test is required in 80% of programs and is a high priority in programs such as Harvard and UCSF. Several panelists shared that the GRE goal should be about 600 per section; others on the panel added that the minimum should be 600 for each section.

16. Should you apply immediately after dental school?

A: All of the panelists applied immediately after school, feeling there was no reason to wait.

17. When should you begin putting together your application?

A: Many of the panelists agreed that the end of 3rd year is the best time to begin working on applications, but to work on your CV throughout your time in dental school.

18. If you could change one thing about your application, what would it be?

A: Make contact with faculty at a particular program before applying (e.g. do an externship).

19. How many schools did you apply to? How many interviews did you do?

A: The number of applications and interviews varied. The program director stated that he felt applying to more programs should not increase your chances. The residents present applied to about 11 programs.

20. What types of things are discussed in a residency interview?

A: Have a good grasp of why you want to do ortho. Do not talk about items already mentioned in your CV or your scores—you need good scores to get the interview, but once you have it, they mean nothing. Several panelists mentioned being asked about their research, so it’s good to be well-versed on your research.

Remember that “people like people who like them,” so decide to “like” everyone you meet before you visit the program, then visit and have fun! Most questions are of the “get-to-know-you” type; be personable, unique, and likable. Be thoughtful and take time to answer each question.

21. How do you prepare for interviews?

A: Several panelists reported that they read journal articles and researched each school, including faculty names, research focus, etc. Some panelists suggested that candidates practice interviewing, not just reviewing questions but also giving clear, concise answers with good body language and posture. Panelists recommended practicing interviewing at the Office of Career and Professional Development.

22. How many faculty members interview you at the same time?

A: According to panelists, the number of faculty members varies and can be up to 9 people.

23. What are some questions that you were asked at your interviews?

A: Panelists shared the following: “What did you like most/least about dentistry?” “Why not work for a while before you do a specialty program?” “What are some trends you see changing in ortho?” (Good answers currently include 3D imaging, using a cone beam, and use of mini-screws in the jaw.)

24. What was the hardest interview question you were asked?

A: Panelists mentioned difficult questions about research and different craniofacial diseases. Panelists encouraged applicants to be aware of current events because they are often part of the conversation.

25. What should a UCSF student be sure to mention in an interview?

A: Panelists stated that UCSF’s Pass/Fail grading policy is almost always brought up by interviewers. If you are applying outside California, indicate your particular interest in the new location (e.g. say you have been there before or that you have family or another connection to the place). One speaker said that “Committees tend not to believe Californians ever want to leave their State.”