

[back to article](#)



Printed on page BM4

Medical students find their match

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Students at Florida State University's College of Medicine are heading off to begin their residencies in a variety of medical fields and locations around the country.

But just before they actually earned their doctorate of medicine degrees recently, they endured an especially nerve-wracking test that has nothing to do with patients or research or even exams.

Every year in March, fourth-year medical students from around the country find out where they are going to do their residency work in a special ceremony known as Match Day.

It is the culmination of a process that begins in their third year, when they start making decisions about what branch of medicine they want to practice and where they might want to start their careers as interns and residents, said Dr. Bruce Berg, dean of the Sarasota regional campus of the FSU College of Medicine.

All FSU medical students spend their third and fourth years at one of six regional campuses across Florida.

With about 25 in each class, they go through rotations, such as surgery, pediatrics or internal medicine, working alongside doctors in the community and getting the kinds of hands-on experience that typically does not begin until a doctor begins his or her residency.

"In each rotation, it's one physician per student, so it's a true mentoring arrangement," Berg said.

Sometimes the experience leads a student to change career paths, as it did with Dr. Melanie Thomas, a 2009 graduate from the Sarasota campus who is on her way to the Mayo Clinic in Jacksonville this summer.

"Originally, I wanted to do hematology and oncology, she said. "I kept an open mind,



Dr. Eugene Ryerson, left, with Luis Hernandez and his fiancé, Edlin, at Match Day in Tallahassee. PHOTOS PROVIDED BY FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OF MEDICINE

but you tend to go where you feel most comfortable and I felt most comfortable in internal medicine. I really felt like this is where I belonged."

Sarasota campus alumnus Dr. Bill Higgins found the area's medical community remarkably welcoming of the students and interested in their education. It is not uncommon for a local doctor to encourage a med student to return to Sarasota for a job, a comforting thought for those wishing to practice on the Suncoast.

"You develop good relationships with the doctors," Higgins said. "It certainly helps you to be in such a welcoming environment like Sarasota."

Once they have that direction, students start applying, and then interviewing, for residencies.

The students rank their choices of residency programs and the hospitals and universities, in turn, rank the applications they receive. Computers and algorithms take over at that point and med students and residency programs soon begin matching up.

On the Monday before Match Day, which is usually held on a Thursday, students who have been matched to a program are notified with an e-mail saying only that they have been matched, not where they are headed.

Those who don't match must go through what is called "the scramble," which is an apt description for the frantic search for an open slot somewhere.

Thomas, who applied to 15 programs, tried to be philosophical but was thankful that she was matched and would avoid the scramble.

"I tried to feel like whatever it is, it's meant to be," she said. "I was going to have a positive attitude, but it's a huge relief just getting that e-mail on Monday."

Match Day itself is a big event at FSU, where students from all the regional campuses gather with loved ones in an auditorium and, one by one, open the envelopes announcing their destinations.

Having been matched to a program at Wright State University, where she will further her ob/gyn education and experience, Dr. Christine Rojas said she is confident that her experience in Sarasota has given her a good head start.

"The nice thing about the Florida State program is that this experience these past two years makes us stronger in our clinical skills," she said. "It makes you much more prepared for your residency."

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