



Residency Fairs: A How to Guide

Many AMSA chapters have found residency fairs to be a relatively easy and very profitable (up to \$5000+ for a single chapter) fundraising activity. They also have been a major source of funding for regional workshops and the Annual Convention. This is a step-by-step guide to coordinating a residency fair at your school or regional workshop.

Deciding to Have a Residency Fair

A residency fair is a super fund-raising idea, but it may not be right for every chapter. If your school already sponsors one, a second fair each year may be of little interest to students and residency program directors. Because there's quite a bit of work involved, especially during the week of the fair, a chapter with fewer members willing to contribute quality time can buckle under the weight of such a large activity. If you are going to do this, you must do it well; otherwise programs will not want to come back year after year. Your chapter needs to plan months in advance and get commitments from several people in your chapter.

You will want the blessing of your school's administration. Before you invite the residency programs, discuss with a dean the educational and financial goals of a residency fair. Ask for his/her help. The dean's office may be willing to provide school stationary, envelopes, copying, postage or even food on the day of the event. Some deans will be enthusiastic, but some may not warm up to the idea of the fair until it becomes an AMSA tradition at your school.

Decide as a chapter when the fair will be held. Fall and spring are popular times, although fourth-year students who are searching for programs to apply to may prefer fall. Plan for a time and place that's most accessible and convenient to students. For some schools, it may be a weekday evening or around lunchtime; others will prefer a Saturday morning (although most program coordinators would not because that takes away from their free weekend). Try to plan for an evening when all third-years are available; this would be ideal, e.g., at some schools, no one is on call the first night of a rotation. Check with other schools in your city; if two schools are planning fairs during the same three-week period, the chances for success are diminished. One option is to do a joint venture and split the costs, work and profits. This might also help draw more programs because they will know that the audience is larger. For a regional conference, an all-day fair may be considered, but otherwise, three to four hours is ideal. Anything longer might be too long for the residency directors to handle. Of course, allow an hour for both set-up and break-down/clean-up.

Discuss ideal locations. It should be a large enough area to hold 20-30 large tables. There should be easy access to the parking lot, as most programs will bring boxes of brochures and bulky display materials. Perhaps you'll want a place where students who weren't planning to attend could walk by and be attracted by the activity. One suggestion is in an atrium or other central gathering area near classrooms. First- and second-year students coming out of class would likely stop by if the fair were immediately after their classes (perhaps starting at lunch time). Reserve the space you choose as far in advance as possible. Confirm the reservation often, and visit the site a week in advance to make sure that everything is OK. Make arrangements for set-up of tables and extension cords.

Once your chapter is committed to sponsoring a residency fair, has chosen a date and place, and has received approval from the administration, you're ready to go! Your last step is to call the national office at (800) 767-2266 and inform them about your event.

Whom to Invite

Target residency programs in your own and neighboring states. In general, primary care programs are more likely to attend; however, there have been many fairs with anesthesia, radiology, surgery and rehab programs in attendance. Please also consider inviting programs that do not participate in the match such as Preventive Medicine. Students appreciate the greater variety. If your school has data from any career interest surveys, you may be able to use this to draw programs in fields that are particularly popular among third-year students. Another possibility is to invite programs with which your school's graduates have recently matched (your dean's office may be able to provide that information).

Check to see if your school supports a FREIDA residency computer program, which lists all the residency programs in the country by state and specialty. FREIDA (<http://www.ama-assn.org/go/freida>) will print out mailing labels for the programs selected. Be sure to invite all the programs at your own school and its affiliated teaching hospitals. Usually, personal phone calls to directors are the quickest, easiest method of securing programs for the fair. Target programs that have attended previous fairs, as they are very likely to return the next year.

Your chapter may want to consider inviting medical publishers, board review services and medical supply companies as well. Make sure these vendors complement and do not outnumber the residency programs. One idea may be to have these vendors donate books and other items of interest in lieu of paying the table fee. Just make sure their donations are of equal or greater value than the table fee!

Inviting the Residency Programs

This is the first major task to be completed. Invitations should be sent to residency program directors at least four months in advance of the planned date you wish to hold the fair. The letter should explain the purpose, date, time and location of the fair. Discuss the activities of your local AMSA chapter, including community outreach programs, education projects and student well-being symposia. Because much of the funds raised will be used for attendance at a regional workshop or national conference, discuss the educational benefits of such an experience.

The average rates for tables at a single-school residency fair is \$150-\$250 and up to \$350 for regional conferences. It is standard practice to provide either partial or full payment when reserving a table.

Include with the initial letter a registration form that programs can use to respond if they choose to participate. Describe the table size they will be allocated and ask if they will need a bulletin board or an electrical outlet and/or video equipment rental. Ask how many people will be representing the program at the fair. If you plan on feeding the attendees, be sure to ask about any special needs, like vegetarian vs. non-vegetarian or any food allergies. Remember to ask the name, address and telephone number of the program's contact person.

Confirming Participation

Send a letter confirming a program's participation and receipt of payment. With this letter, provide a map of the area and directions to the school from major roads, airports and train stations. Include a map of the fair site, indicating the building in which the fair will be held, where program representatives should park. Provide parking stickers or validation if at all possible. Suggest local hotels where you have previously arranged for reduced rates for fair participants. If you will be serving food during the set-up period or the fair itself, indicate this in the letter. Once again, thank the program for their participation and provide the names, addresses and telephone numbers of the student coordinators of the fair. Be sure to provide the student affairs office with all the necessary information about your fair. If you have a good relationship with them, you may be able to arrange for calls to be accepted by a staff member on the day of the event in case residency directors get lost en route. If that is not possible, try to have a phone line set up for any questions on the day of the fair.

Getting the Students to the Fair

Start publicizing the fair several weeks in advance. Use flyers, e-mail, the school newspaper and most importantly, word of mouth. Make announcements at first- and second-year classes one week before the event, stressing the importance of their learning to interact with program representatives, which is vitally important during the interview/residency selection process. If necessary, send letters/postcards to the home addresses of third-year students. Making reminder phone calls to the third-year class the night before the fair can also be effective and quick if divided up among several people. Ask the deans to send a memo notifying rotation coordinators about the fair and encouraging students to attend the fair. Contact students at nearby medical schools as well. Be sure to explain what a student can gain from attending the fair and indicate which programs plan to participate.

Consider serving food. Ask the school/hospital food service, a local deli or pizzeria to donate their services in exchange for recognition as a fair sponsor. If you can't get donations, invest some of the profits to buy food for the students. Nothing gets a student to an activity like free food!

Another way to increase attendance is to hold a raffle. There are three potential sources for acquiring donations for the raffle. First, try the campus bookstore. Oftentimes the bookstore has connections with vendors and can arrange for a substantial number of prizes. In addition, the bookstore may be able to give away tickets to local sporting events. Next, try the vendors themselves. If you have vendors using a booth at the fair, you can ask them to donate items to the raffle in lieu of a table fee. Finally, try contacting local businesses, especially restaurants. Many restaurants will donate gift certificates in exchange for the mere mention of a name. To run the raffle, distribute tickets to the different programs manning the tables, and then they can give tickets to students after they have spoken with them. This encourages students to visit all of the tables. Hold the drawing toward the end of the fair to ensure that students will have a chance to visit all the tables.

The Day of the Fair

Have the plant/housekeeping staff arrange tables, bulletin boards and extension cords before the fair and check the arrangements. Have a central welcoming table (with a phone, if possible) staffed by AMSA members to greet program representatives and direct them to their assigned tables. A simple welcome packet for the program representatives, including a welcome letter from the fair coordinators, information about your school, information about any tourist attractions in your area (free from the chamber of commerce!), evaluation forms,

gum, etc. is a nice touch. Carefully plan out the arrangement so that different specialties and/or program locations are closer together to evenly distribute student traffic. If the fair is in a lobby or another public area, arrange for crowd control using ropes, stations, signs and AMSA members to direct traffic. If food is being served, keep it away from the public areas, but central to the tables so directors don't feel that students are being pulled away from them toward the food. Introduce the AMSA members who coordinated the event to the program directors. Make it a priority for you to visit each table yourself and act interested. It is a very kind (and welcome) gesture for you to provide lunch for the program directors. A small buffet line for directors only is appropriate, and this should be done during setup, before the students arrive.

After the Fair

Thank the program directors again for their participation, and ask them to complete a written evaluation you've prepared before leaving. Afterward, send a thank-you note to each of the programs that attended, expressing the positive feedback from students and the hope that they will return to the next AMSA Residency Fair.

This is a highly rewarding fund-raising activity that requires a modest amount of work and a greater deal of careful planning. Most schools are very pleased with the outcome and look forward to this annual AMSA event. Be sure to keep the list of participants to make the next years fair even easier to plan. Remember, the first fair is the hardest, but each year gets easier!

Good Luck Planning and Executing Your Residency Fair!