

Guide To Selecting Third-Year Electives

Overview

1. General Themes:

This guide will give you a broad overview about how to think about and select your electives. The information in this guide does **not** supersede the individualized guidance you receive from your specialty advisor or career advisory dean. It is meant to provide general themes in your approach to selecting electives that are important to keep in mind.

- i. Third year electives are meant to facilitate specialty exploration, skill acquisition, scholarship, and vacation. Each of these topics will be discussed individually in this guide.
- ii. To obtain the most from third year electives you should reflect on your current state of professional development – where do your interests lie? What fields would you like to explore further? What personal needs do you need to make time for in your third year?
- iii. Consider taking the AAMC Careers in Medicine (CiM) [Medical Specialty Preference Inventory](#) (MSPI) *before you select electives*. This can provide valuable information on specialties that might be a good fit for you and can help guide your choices.
- iv. Electives are also needed to meet graduation requirements. All SMHS graduates need to take a minimum of 26 weeks of elective to graduate. You can take up to 8 weeks of elective during your third year, leaving 18 required elective weeks left for fourth year (though you can always take more than 26 weeks total if you wish as there may be time in fourth year for additional electives!). Some people elect NOT to utilize all of those 8 weeks in the third year for credit-bearing electives, and instead use some of it for “independent study” (vacation, personal time, etc). It is fine to do this; just bear in mind you will need to take more electives in the fourth year to meet graduation requirements, and sometimes it can get tricky to schedule these requirements. Please see Appendix A for additional details. Discuss it with your advisory dean if you have questions.
- v. When considering an elective, make sure you review the prerequisites to ensure that you are eligible to take the course.
- vi. Third year elective grades are not included in the class rank or adjective calculation for your medical student performance evaluation (MSPE – aka. “Dean’s letter”). See more details below in “Third Year Electives and the Residency Match.”
- vii. Comments from third year electives are not typically included on your MSPE.

2. Purpose of third year electives

- a. **Career Exploration:** Third year electives are a great opportunity to explore different fields. Although the required clerkships provide ample exposure to those core specialties, several related specialties and/or specialties that interface with the core clerkships, some students may wish to have additional time in a particular field to confirm that it is their definitive choice, or may simply wish to have early exposure to another field of medicine. Several medical specialties are represented in the required clerkships, and many of these provide sufficient exposure for career exploration during the third year. The amount of career exploration desired differs based on each student’s level certainty about specialty preference. Broadly speaking, students enter the third year with one of three frames of mind with regards to specialty choice:

- i. Fully committed to 1-2 specialties
- ii. Leaning towards a general theme (generalist/primary, procedural, or tertiary)
- iii. Uncommitted and very open to a variety of specialties

If you are unsure what specialty to choose as your start third year, you are not alone! The AAMC [Medical Specialty Preference Inventory](#) (MSPI) is a great way to get a handle on what specialty might fit your interests. There are additional resources to guide you on the [SMHS Advising webpage](#) and [Roadmap to Residency program](#). You can explore further by reviewing some of the [AAMC specialty profiles](#) and exploring the national societies for the specialties you are considering, as they often have medical student resources. Finally, talk to your attendings, residents, deans, and others you meet in the fields you are exploring. These [informational interviews](#) can be helpful to determine if a specialty is the right fit for you!

- b. **Skill Acquisition:** Electives are also a great opportunity for development of specific skills. Many electives are focused on specific subspecialties of medicine and provide students enhanced exposure and opportunity to develop useful clinical skills. For example, a student wishing to improve their skill in reading EKG could consider MED 340 (Electrocardiography) or MED 360 (Clinical Cardiology-VAMC). There are many reasons a student may wish to focus on developing a certain skill set. Some common reasons include, but are not limited to, the following:
 - i. Enhanced focus in an area that would complement their scholarly concentration and fourth year goals. For example, a student in the Global Health scholarly concentration with an asthma prevention project planned for their 4th year, could opt to take MED 447 (Pulmonary Medicine at GW) to obtain increased knowledge and skills in pulmonary medicine
 - ii. Student identified an area for improvement from CAP or previous rotations that they wish to address in a lower stakes environment.
 - iii. Help gain level of comfort and familiarity with a field before entering into a core clerkship. For example, taking a peds ID elective before starting your pediatric core rotation.
- c. **Research:** Elective periods are a great time to start small research projects such as review articles or case reports. You can also utilize this time to put the finishing touches on existing research projects. The two main electives that are taken for purposes of research are IDIS 363 and IDIS 369. Other fields can have their own dedicated research/independent study option (such as Emergency Medicine) Please check the course catalog for important details of these offerings.
- d. **Vacation and personal commitments:** There are many important life events and personal needs (family events, vacation, Step 2 study time, residency interview time, etc.) that you may encounter in your clinical years. You can take personal time during your elective period. This is typically designated with a placeholder “IDIS999” or independent study and does not appear on your transcript. Students have 14 weeks of Independent Study (IDIS999) to address these personal needs that can be utilized between the third and fourth year of medical school. For a more detailed description please see Appendix B

3. Third Year Electives and the Residency Match

- a. Third year elective grades are listed on your transcript. However, most residency program directors have far more focus on your core clerkships, as well as your performance in acting internships, specific electives in the field you are pursuing or advanced electives. When thinking

about the importance of electives it can be useful to review the most recent NRMP program directors survey. This is a public document that is easily accessible over the Internet. In addition, your career advisory Dean can help you interpret the results of the program director survey and what this means in your career decision making process.

- b. When applying to residency, every student will get a “dean’s letter” or “Medical student Performance Evaluation” (MSPE). The MSPE is not a letter of recommendation – it is a summary document that summarizes your performance in medical school, with particular emphasis on the core clinical clerkships. Each student gets a summary “adjective” to categorize their overall performance on core clerkships compared to their class. There are five “adjective categories”: outstanding, excellent, very good, good and satisfactory. (For more information see Roadmap to Residency YouTube channel – the [R2R Playlist](#)). **Electives *do not* factor into the MSPE adjective.** The MSPE adjective is determined by your overall grades in the seven core clerkships only. Under most circumstances, 3rd year elective grades and comments are *typically not included* on your MSPE, unless it is related to the specialty you are pursuing for residency training.

4. Guiding principles in selecting third year electives

- a. **Know the pre-requisites and time appropriately:** Depending on the cohort that you are in you may not have the necessary prerequisites to take a given elective. For example, an elective might have Internal Medicine as a prerequisite; therefore, you can only take that elective after you have complete MED305. It is very important to review the clinical course catalog paying particular attention to the prerequisite requirements. The School of Medicine has numerous electives that do not have prerequisites as well and these may also be excellent options to meet your career exploration goals.
- b. **Two-week rotations:** Some electives offer 2-week experiences. If you want to get a taste of a field or a specific subspecialty, a two-week rotation can be a great place to start. This amount of time allows you to get a reasonable sample of the patient population, typical workflow and usual procedures of a field, and to interact with clinicians and get their perspective on careers in this field. Doing a 2-week elective can also flexibly be added into many different cohort schedules. Finally, taking a variety of 2-week electives can also give a student a wide breadth of educational experiences that can further inform career decision making and broaden your skills as a budding physician.
- c. **Four-week rotations:** Some electives either offer a 2-week or 4-week option or can *only* be taken for 4 weeks. When a course is offered for two OR four weeks, a student might choose the 4-week option in order to get more in-depth exposure to a field and possibly to secure a letter of recommendation for residency. Four weeks allows the attending or the team to observe your performance give feedback and see subsequent growth, and to learn more about your personal interests and priorities. For students who have a strong interest in a particular field, a four-week rotation could be an optimal choice to further explore the field and potentially secure a letter of recommendation.
- d. **Vacation weeks:** Students have the option of taking vacation during their elective periods. Many students will use this time to address family or personal commitments, as well as simply for their own well-being and recovery. Utilization of elective weeks for this purpose is absolutely valid and just as important as using electives for career exploration. Please note: Taking some non-credit bearing personal time during the 8 weeks of possible electives in third year will require that

you take some additional *credit*-bearing elective time in the fourth year to meet graduation requirements. See Appendix A and C for details.

- e. **Consider completing graduation requirements (NEURO 380, ANES 302):** In lieu of taking an elective during your elective weeks, a student can also opt to complete one of their core requirements that can be completed in the third OR fourth year. These core requirements are the 4-week Neuroscience clerkship (NEURO380) and the 2-week Anesthesia clerkship (ANES302). Taking either of these clerkships can be an extremely effective use of elective time as it will expose you to two additional fields of medicine AND free up space in your 4th year schedule. All students will take these courses before they graduate, but if a third-year student is interested in these fields, or is having a difficult time deciding upon which elective to take, then taking one of these two required clerkships could be a great option if it is available and fits your schedule.
- f. **Extramural (non-GW) Electives:** As is the case at other medical schools, students are *not* permitted to take extramural electives until all core clerkships have been completed and passed. Also note, that it is typically standard practice to take your home GW specialty-specific sub-internship or acting internship before taking an extramural elective. For example, a student going into orthopedics would take their ORTHO380 sub-internship, before taking an extramural elective in orthopedics at another institution. You can read more about extramural electives in the “SMHS Guide to the 4th Year and Advanced Clinical Practice.”
- g. **Add/drop of Electives:** If you change your mind about an elective that you are taking, you can request to change it using the [add/drop form](#). Please use this system to alter your schedule when needed. If you request a change less than 30 days in advance, you will need to email your career advisory dean to request approval of this last-minute change, upload a PDF of the email of approval from the career advisory dean with your [add/drop form](#), and you will need to email the course director of the course you are dropping to notify them of this change.

5. Obtaining Guidance and Selecting Electives

- a. **AAMC [Medicine Specialty Preference Inventory \(MSPI\)](#):** it's very beneficial to take or retake the MSPI before selecting 3rd year electives. This exercise can serve as a useful framework to consider which specialties could be of potential interest to you. Please note, this exercise does not tell you which specialty to go into, it simply helps identify the top 3-4 fields that match your interests/priorities. It serves as a starting point for additional conversations with your career advisory dean and potentially specialty advisor as to what electives could be worth further exploration.
- b. **Specialty Advisors and Specialty Nights:** Two great resources to help you choose your electives is from specialty advisors and from attending specialty night. Specialty advisors are integral members of the broad GW School of Medicine career advisory system. Specialty advisors have in-depth knowledge of their fields as well as expertise in helping students match in their respective fields. Consequently, your specialty advisors are in the best position to know which electives will add value to your own unique professional portfolio. While specialty advisors can meet one-on-one and give customize recommendations, they are also available in a small-group setting during specialty night. Specialty night is a valuable resource for students who want a broad overview of the field, to learn about the typical steps required in pursuing a particular specialty or to discuss electives could be of benefit for career exploration. Specialty night occurs twice a year (fall, mid-winter) and is attended by the key specialty advisors from each specialty.

Here are some resources to guide you on the types of “[informational interview](#)” questions to ask specialty advisors that may help inform your career decisions.

- c. **Career Advisory Deans:** Your career advisory deans are a great resource for discussing specialty selection and overall career decision making. Specifically, your advisory deans can help you understand the implications of timing, the logistics, and the overall historical trends in GW when selecting an elective. Given that your advisory deans are able to review your entire professional portfolio, they are in a position to take a holistic perspective and make recommendations as to what would be the best use of your elective time if you are uncertain what to take. For example, an advisory dean could help you make a decision as to whether you should consider research, vacation, or a clinical elective during any given elective period. Your specialty advisor could then supplement this with guiding you as to which specific elective to take in that specialty.
- d. **Peer Resources:** Your fellow colleagues can be a great source of information regarding the student perspective on an elective. They may provide guidance on things you might take into consideration that would not be fully captured by speaking with anyone else. Please note, that while peers are a great source of information they are only **one** source of information that should be utilized in conjunction with all elements of the overall career advisory system in place at the GW-SMHS.
- e. **Clinical Course Catalog:** This is an excellent resource to obtain an overview of an elective as well as obtain all the logistical information pertaining to the elective. In the [clinical course catalog](#), you can filter for electives based on specialty, prerequisites, and length of the elective. It's highly worthwhile to familiarize yourself with the clinical course catalog before making any elective decisions.
- f. **Add/Drop request:** Students have the opportunity to make changes to their elective selections throughout the year. It is not uncommon as students progress through the clinical phase of practice that their interests or needs change. When this occurs students can make these changes to their scheduled electives by following the add/drop process located [here](#).

6. Specialty specific considerations

- a. **Anesthesiology (ANES)** currently offers six elective offerings, ranging from classic anesthesia (in the OR) to ICU to pain management. Many of these elective offerings can be taken without any prerequisites or by reserving (gaining permission to take the course from the course director) at least three months in advance. Over the past 10 years, high numbers of students have chosen to pursue Anesthesiology as a career choice. All students are required to take at least 2 weeks of anesthesia (ANES 302) to graduate – either in the 3rd or 4th year. Choosing to take ANES 302 as an elective choice in the third year could be very beneficial for career exploration, as well as meeting a core graduation requirement.
- b. **Dermatology (DERM)** currently has 2 intramural elective offerings. These dermatology electives can be taken in either 2- or four-week intervals. The Dermatology clinic (DERM 380) requires that a student have completed their internal medicine core clerkship before they are able to enroll. Pediatric dermatology (PED 303) requires that students complete their pediatric core clerkship before being able to take this elective.
- c. **Emergency Medicine (EMED)** currently has seven course offerings. Many of the course offerings for emergency medicine require completion of all core clerkships. Consequently, most students take emergency medicine electives in the 4th year (advanced clinical phase of practice). All students are required to take one Emergency Medicine rotation (EMED302 or PED 405) in

- the 4th year. If you are interested in Emergency Medicine, you will likely take EMED 302 very early in the 4th year. Emergency medicine is a very popular specialty choice among students and frequently ranks in the top five of residency programs that students enter upon graduation.
- d. **Interdisciplinary Medicine (IDIS)** currently has over 25 course offerings and is home to an exciting and diverse selection of courses that students can take, including elective courses in research, implicit bias, public health and culinary medicine just to name a few. With these broad course offerings, students can strategically pick electives that complement their professional portfolio. For example, a student working on a project involving education through social media channels, could opt to take the elective *Using Media to Share Health Information* (IDIS 306), to complement their research.
 - e. **Family Medicine (IDIS-390)** currently offers an extramural acting internship that is taken in the 4th year after all core clerkships are completed. Students arrange for IDIS 390 via the AAMC Visting Student Learning Opportunities (VSLO), which is the traditional system used to apply to and arrange for away rotations. Students looking to gain more exposure in the field of family medicine should discuss the possibility of placements with family medicine physicians during their primary care or LPCC clerkships, or discuss with family medicine specialty advisors or with career advisory deans. As the GW-SMHS establishes its new family medicine residency, we would expect the number of course offerings in this very popular and vital specialty to increase.
 - f. **Medicine (MED)** currently has over 30 course offerings, many that have no prerequisite requirements. Course offerings in medicine can be taken in two- or four-week intervals. Medicine has elective offerings in all the major clinical subspecialties such as infectious disease cardiology and nephrology to name a few. In addition, medicine offers asynchronous and online electives that can give a student greater flexibility and opportunities to learn skills to complement their professional portfolio.
 - g. **Neurology (NEUR)** currently has four course offerings. Many of the courses offered in neurology have no prerequisites. All students are required to take one neurology course (NEUR380) in their 3rd or 4th year. If you are interested in neuroscience, choosing NEUR380 in the 3rd year can be helpful for career exploration and meeting a graduation requirement. An “adjacent” specialty that is housed in the Neurology department at GW is **Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation (PMR)**. PMR has been increasingly popular in recent years. Students may wish to learn more about this field can consider taking a two- or four- week adult PMR elective (NEUR397) or pediatric PMR (PED403) for further career exploration.
 - h. **Neurosurgery (NSUR)** currently has two course offerings – one at GW, and one extramural (outside of GW) experience. All neurosurgery course offerings require completion of all core clerkships. Students interested in the field of neurosurgery are advised to take the GW neurosurgery rotation before an extramural elective, and they are encouraged to contact the neurosurgery specialty advisors for guidance on extramural electives they may consider.
 - i. **Obstetrics and Gynecology (OBGYN)** currently has 7 elective offerings. All of these electives require either completion of the OBGYN clerkship (OBG303) or all core clerkships. Consequently, students interested in OBGYN may choose to take an additional elective to deepen their exposure to the field after they have done the core clerkship in the 3rd year, or in their 4th year (advanced clinical phase of practice).
 - j. **Ophthalmology (OPHT)** currently has two course offerings – one at GW, and one extramural (outside of GW) experience. The home rotation can be 2- or 4- weeks in duration and requires permission/reservation from the department. There are no other prerequisites. If you are considering ophthalmology or want to enhance your clinical skills with this organ system, this can be good elective to take.
 - k. **Orthopedics (ORTH)** currently offer 6 elective courses from classic orthopedics to sports medicine. Three of which do not have prerequisites, and three offer 2 or 4 weeks experiences.

These can be excellent electives to take if you are interested in orthopedics, interested in a field that may encounter frequent musculoskeletal complaints or want to improve your clinical skills in musculoskeletal medicine.

- l. **Pathology (PATH)** currently offers 5 electives, most without prerequisites. These courses can be helpful for students interested in pathology or for students looking to deepen their understanding of laboratory medicine, tissue analyses and autopsies.
- m. **Pediatrics (PEDS)** currently has over 35 course offerings many of which have no prerequisites. Course offerings in pediatrics can be taken in two- or four-week intervals. Pediatrics has a rich selection of elective offerings in all the major clinical subspecialties such as oncology, cardiology, medical genetics, dermatology and orthopedic surgery to name just a few. Pediatrics has consistently been one of the top three most popular specialty choices of students over the past decade. Given the broad scope of elective offerings, Pediatrics can robustly support a student in career exploration and building their professional portfolio.
- n. **Psychiatry (PCHI)** currently has eight course offerings. The majority of psychiatry elective course offerings require the completion of all core clerkships, or multiple elements of the core curriculum. Consequently, most students take psychiatry electives in the advanced clinical phase of practice. Over the past 10 years, psychiatry has greatly increased in popularity, and is frequently within the top six of specialties selected to pursue as career upon graduation.
- o. **Radiology (RAD)** currently has eight course offerings. Most of the course offerings do not require a prerequisite. This makes radiology a very interesting and accessible specialty for third year students to investigate and explore. Radiology has maintained its popularity over the past ten years and recently the field of vascular interventional radiology has increased in popularity among students. It should be noted, that the majority of electives in radiology require four weeks and this should be taken into account during elective planning.
- p. **Surgery (SURG)** currently has 16 course offerings. The majority of surgery course offerings require the completion of all core clerkships. Consequently, most students take surgery electives in the 4th year (advanced clinical phase of practice). It should be noted that the three surgery electives pertaining to the field of otolaryngology, only require students to complete SURG303, or in the case of *otolaryngology for 3rd year medical students*, have no prerequisites at all.
- q. **Urology (UROL)** Currently has four course offerings. Third-year medical students interested in the field of urology are recommended to take *Urology for third year medical students* (URO 303) for further career exploration

Appendix: A

Graduation Requirements in addition to the Core Clerkships*

| Course Name | Duration | Comments |
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| Intersession IV | 7 days | Intersession IV occurs during 2 days in Spring semester of your clerkship year plus Monday through Friday during week 44 at the start of your 4 th year. There are longitudinal assignments throughout 4 th year for this course. |
| Acting Internship | 4 weeks | Any one of the following satisfies this requirement: An Acting Internship in Medicine or Pediatrics or General Surgery or Critical Care/Anesthesiology (GW Hospital Intensive Care Unit), inpatient Family Medicine (IDIS 390 extramurally), or Pediatric Intensive Care. See Appendix B for more details. |
| Anesthesiology (may be completed in the third year) | 2 weeks | ANES 380 or ANES 302 satisfies this requirement. If taking the 4-week ANES 380 course, this counts for the 2 weeks anesthesia requirement and 2 weeks free choice electives. |
| Emergency Medicine | 4 weeks | Adult (EMED 302) or Pediatric Emergency Medicine (PED 405) satisfies this requirement. |
| Neuroscience (may be completed in the third year) | 4 weeks | All students register for NEUR 380. This may be taken in the third or fourth year but must be completed at GW/affiliates. Students will be assigned to various local sites according to a lottery system and will receive information via email about the site lottery about one month prior to the block. Choices will include adult and pediatric neurology and neurosurgery sites and will include both outpatient and inpatient experiences. |
| Transition to Residency | 4 weeks | Taught weeks 36, 37, 38 and 39, coinciding with Match Day. All graduating seniors are required to attend this course at GW. No other course work can be scheduled at this time. |
| Free Choice Electives in MS3 + MS4 years | 26 weeks minimum | These 26 weeks include any electives completed for credit during the third year or fourth year. On-campus electives are listed in the online course catalog. Off-campus "away" or "extramural" electives may be arranged by the student through VSLO with the approval of the appropriate GW department and the dean's office. (more on this later)** may be impacted by COVID. |
| Independent Study | 14 weeks maximum | This is flexible time to be used for USMLE study, interviews, making up missed clerkship time, vacation etc. This does not count towards your elective 26-week elective requirement. |

*in addition to completing all required clerkships. See MD Coursework Requirements:

<https://smhs.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaskib1151/files/2023-04/courseworkrequirementsmddegreeclass2023-beyond12-6-22.pdf>

Appendix B

Acting Internship

Core Acting Internships are those that satisfy GW's core Acting Internship graduation requirement. Other existing “advanced” courses can still be called AIs or Sub-Internships for the purposes of transcripts, letters, residency applications, etc. GW's Guiding Principles for core Acting Internships are that these are experiences on services where students can have primary patient responsibilities (rather than serving as a consultant). Typically, our core AIs are predominantly inpatient and prepare students to admit and care for patients throughout their hospital course, including interdisciplinary care and discharge planning. A core Acting Internship should function to prepare any student for internship, regardless of specialty choice or career path.

| The following Acting Internships satisfy GW's <u>core</u> Acting Internship graduation requirement |
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| MED 332 Medicine Acting Internship at GWUH |
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| MED 334 Medicine Acting Internship at the VA |
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| ANES 384 Intensive Care Unit at GWUH |
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| PEDS 362, 364, 366 (and 361 if available): Pediatrics Acting Internship hospitalist teams and PHAST unit |
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| PEDS 379 Pediatric Critical Care |
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| IDIS 390: FAMILY MEDICINE Acting Internship that is approx. 80% <i>inpatient</i> , extramural (apply and arrange through VSLO) |
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| SURG 380, 382, 383, 388, 400, 402 (surgical teams include a mix of General, Onc, Thoracic, Hepatobiliary, Transplant, MIS, Vascular, Trauma, Critical Care, Colorectal, and/or Breast) |
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Appendix C

Independent Study & Specialty Elective Maximum

You will have 14 weeks of independent study time that you are free to include in your schedule at any time in your fourth year or during elective time in the third year. Remember that in addition to time for relaxation, you will use independent study weeks to study for step 2, make up any missed clerkship time, and to interview for residency. In addition to these 14 weeks, students have a mandatory additional vacation during week 1, June 27 – July 3, 2022 plus winter break (weeks 26 and 27) that is not counted in the 14 weeks. Any third-year clerkship make-up time or any time spent doing non-credit accruing academic work in year 4 is deducted from your Independent Study time. Remember that during the 4th year (advanced clinical practice phase) the holidays are not guaranteed to be off (see [duty hour policy](#)).

While we want you to use your fourth year to help you find a residency and gain experience in the field of your interest, we need to assure that every student has broad educational exposure to the many facets of medicine. We have accordingly employed a policy that restricts the amount of time a student can spend in a specialty area to 12 weeks. This applies to individual specialties, not broad specialty areas. For instance, you could take 6 weeks of general surgery, 4 weeks of trauma surgery, and 4 weeks of colorectal surgery without violating the rule. However, 14 weeks of general surgery electives would not be permitted; if you were to do this, 12 of the 14 weeks would be counted for elective credit, but the additional 2 weeks would not count toward your graduation requirement of 26 elective weeks. Likewise, a mixture of medical, pediatric or surgical subspecialties are permissible, but you are not permitted to do more than 12 weeks of adult cardiology for instance. Note: you can spend more than 12 weeks in a specialty area, but anything above 12 will not count towards your elective requirements for graduation and will be deducted from your independent study time.

School of Medicine
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