Coping with the residency scramble: The need for national guidelines

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For pharmacy students and others seeking postgraduate pharmacy residency training, March has become the most stressful month of the year. While 2011 brought the highest fill rate for residency positions since the ASHP Resident Matching Program was launched in 1979, the demand for postgraduate pharmacy training far exceeded the supply of residency training programs.

With approximately 1250 postgraduate year 1 (PGY1) residency applicants unmatched and 146 positions available after the Match results were announced in March 2011, unmatched applicants were competing with an average of more than 8 other applicants for each remaining position.1 This daunting task is known as the “scramble”—a hectic time when applicants try to quickly identify programs that will meet their career objectives before the positions are taken by competing applicants.2,3

Over the last two years, stories of how stressful and unorganized this scramble process can be have surfaced. Applicants are often frustrated and forced to make quick decisions on residency programs about which they know few details, such as the organization, structure, and goals and objectives of the residency, as well as lifestyle information on the host city.

Likewise, in a rush to fill positions, residency program representatives may only perform a short telephone interview and pressure an applicant into choosing their program without weighing the relative merits of other candidates. While many good matches do occur during the scramble, the majority of applicants who still cannot secure a residency are left with a sense of failure and a lack of direction about what to do next. Residency programs are potential losers as well, because many outstanding candidates who may have been a perfect fit for a program are overlooked in an effort to quickly fill vacant positions.

The purpose of this article is threefold: to offer guidance to pharmacy students and other applicants on how to navigate the post-Match scramble, to offer suggestions on how a residency program can identify the best prospective trainees on its list of unmatched candidates, and to work toward establishing national guidelines on the scramble process.

Advice for applicants. To position themselves for success, applicants should fully understand exactly how the scramble works. After the official Match results are sent to residency programs and selected applicants, a list of unmatched positions is sent to the unmatched applicants, and a list...
of unmatched applicants is simultaneously sent to programs with open positions; this notification process gives programs and applicants an opportunity to look for good matches. Applicants then contact program directors, typically by telephone or e-mail, to express their interest. Likewise, program directors review the list of applicants and contact those they are interested in having apply.

It is important for applicants to know that there are currently no rules or guidelines for the scramble and no established protocol for what should happen next. Some programs, in an effort to fill a vacant position quickly, conduct phone interviews, accept application materials via fax or e-mail, and offer positions within a few hours of receiving the list of unmatched candidates. Other programs follow a more formal process of requiring the usual application materials (e.g., letter of intent, letters of recommendation, transcripts), performing onsite interviews, and using objective criteria to identify the best candidates.

Applicants can do several things to ease the stress of this process. They must prepare well in advance for the possibility of going unmatched, as the level of preparation will greatly increase the likelihood of success. If an applicant is a pharmacy student, he or she should notify preceptors of the Match results date to let them know that time away from their practice sites on that date may be needed to help organize a strategy. All applicants should have electronic versions of their curriculum vitae and a cover letter ready.

Before Match day, student applicants should identify a preceptor, a faculty member, or a faculty advisor to act as a mentor to help review and identify the open residency positions that are best suited to their goals. Such a mentor may be able to make direct contact with program directors to promote the student’s candidacy. Applicants should never underestimate the power of networking. In addition to pharmacy school contacts, applicants should consider enlisting the aid of a faculty member, preceptor, or current trainee at the residency program sites where they served on student rotations; the recommendations of such people could go a long way in distinguishing the candidate from others. Moreover, applicants should notify any person who initially wrote a recommendation letter on their behalf that they might request another letter (with a quick turnaround) after the release of the Match results. Pharmacy students should phone or e-mail the programs already prioritized with their application process, and immediately start fulfilling the requirements.

Applicants should not rule out any program they contacted at any point during their residency search, provided that the program continues to be aligned with their career goals. This category includes programs ranked before the Match but did not, in turn, rank the applicant, as well as programs that did not initially invite the applicant for an interview. Such programs are likely to feel much more comfortable with an established contact than someone who only recently expressed an interest in applying. Also, applicants should remember that some newly created residency programs do not yet participate in the Match but may be good options to consider; there can be many benefits to being the first resident in a new program.

Finally, applicants should work with a mentor to develop a post-Match action plan. They should logically rank all residency options. If no programs completely meet their training objectives, applicants might consider working for a year and then reapplying to programs that are high on their list. A mentor can be an invaluable resource in weighing the pros and cons of the available residency program choices and other possibilities.

While the scramble can be quite stressful, with good preparation and the help of a trusted mentor, the process can go smoothly.

**Advice for program directors.** Residency program leaders should understand that an unmatched position does not reflect poorly on their program. Most residency programs have had an unmatched position at some time. There are many factors in a candidate’s life that may change over the course of the matching process. Candidates that the program ranked early in the process, perhaps even believing them to be certain matches, may have made life-altering decisions that led them to rank another program higher or withdraw from the Match altogether. It is not uncommon to hear program directors say that one of their favorite and best-performing residents was first identified from the list of unmatched applicants.

Program directors should have a plan established well before Match day to prepare for the possibility of unmatched positions. They should establish a standardized process by which the program will select applicants to contact and interview and determine how the program will assess applicants who inquire about unmatched positions. They should determine what application materials will be required and have a prepared set of instructions for all candidates to follow. Ideally, the required materials and instructions will be similar to the pre-Match application process (with compressed timelines, of course). Residency programs should have a selection process using pre-established criteria on who will be interviewed and how the final selection will be made; these criteria should be the same as those used to develop the
pre-Match interview selections and ranking list. An established interview process should be used, and program directors should compare the pros and cons of onsite interviews and alternative methods. Conducting a videoconference using Skype technology (Skype Division of Microsoft, Redmond, WA) or another Internet tool can be a good substitute for actual “face time,” especially if time is short or an in-person interview is not practicable.

Ongoing communication with all candidates under consideration is a must, so they know where they stand in the selection process.

Above all else, residency program directors should not rush the process, and they should never pressure candidates to make a quick decision that either or both parties may regret later. There are many outstanding candidates on the list of unmatched applicants, so it is important that programs take the time to find the best fit for their program.

A call for national guidelines. The post-Match scramble is stressful for everyone involved and does not provide enough structure for either residency applicants or residency program directors to know how decisions should be made in an efficient and equitable manner. Currently, this system is lacking both guidance and governance. Therefore, we propose that ASHP develop national guidelines that give clear instructions on how the scramble should be conducted by all parties. Such guidelines would benefit both applicants and residency programs. Proposed guidelines could include a mandatory wait time between the release of the list of unmatched applicants and the offering of positions. A universally agreed-on “offer date,” with an established timeline for candidates to contact a residency program about their decision, might be helpful. Applicants would have time to investigate all available programs to find the one best suited to their interests and career goals, and they would have more time to discuss options with mentors. Program directors could better evaluate applicants against the same criteria used earlier in the selection process. The wait time would also help to prevent residency programs from pressuring applicants into quick decisions while reducing the number of e-mails and phone calls program directors receive from applicants who want to know where they stand. As another step toward a more equitable residency scramble, post-Match application materials should be standardized to make it easier for candidates to have the proper materials ready to send by the newly established deadline.

We believe the need for national guidelines is clear. The demand for residency positions will likely continue to outpace the number of available positions for a variety of reasons, including the increasing number of graduates seeking residencies, the increasing number of pharmacists who failed to get a residency position immediately on graduation from pharmacy school and want to try again, and an increasingly competitive job market. A set of guidelines would be an important first step in reducing the stress created by the post-Match scramble and leveling the playing field for applicants and residency programs alike.

References