

Volunteer and work experiences among dermatology residency applicants



To the Editor: We read with interest the research letter by Ezekor et al,¹ which showed a stark increase in the number of publications and research experiences of matched applicants from 2007 to 2018. Although research accomplishments can show intellectual curiosity and scholarly activity among applicants, volunteer and work experiences can also showcase character traits such as empathy, professionalism, and perseverance. We hypothesized that, unlike research experiences and number of publications, the number of volunteer and work experiences over time was not significantly different between matched and unmatched applicants.

A review of the National Residency Match Program's *Charting Outcomes in the Match* between 2009 and 2020 identified the mean number of volunteer and work experiences by US allopathic graduating senior dermatology applicants.² A paired *t* test was performed between the mean number of volunteer and work experiences by matched and unmatched applicants over this time period. From 2009 to 2020, the average number of volunteer experiences for matched dermatology applicants increased from 7.7 to 9.4 and increased for unmatched applicants from 7.2 to 8.8 (Fig 1). The average number of work experiences for matched

dermatology applicants rose from 2.7 to 3.7 and for unmatched applicants went from 2.5 to 3.4. There was no significant difference between the average number of volunteer ($P = .07$) and work experiences ($P = .86$) of matched versus unmatched applicants.

There has been a sharp rise in the mean number of publications and research experiences for matched candidates,¹ but neither volunteer nor work experience has seen a comparable increase. This discrepancy suggests that both applicants and residency programs are placing more weight on research accomplishments. Students of racial/ethnic minority groups and those with low income have cited the burden of taking a research year, poor accessibility to mentors, and socioeconomic concerns as barriers for applying to a dermatology residency.³ Increasing focus on publication numbers could worsen these existing disparities. On the other hand, volunteer and work activities may allow applicants to showcase traits such as leadership potential, commitment to service, and work ethic. We also believe that these quantitative data represent only 1 metric with which to measure applicant involvement in volunteer and work activities, so an effective system is needed to assess other important factors, such as the type, recency (eg, involvement during medical school), and continuity of an experience. A limitation of our analysis was the inability to discern the quality of applicant volunteer and work experiences from the National Resident Matching Program database.

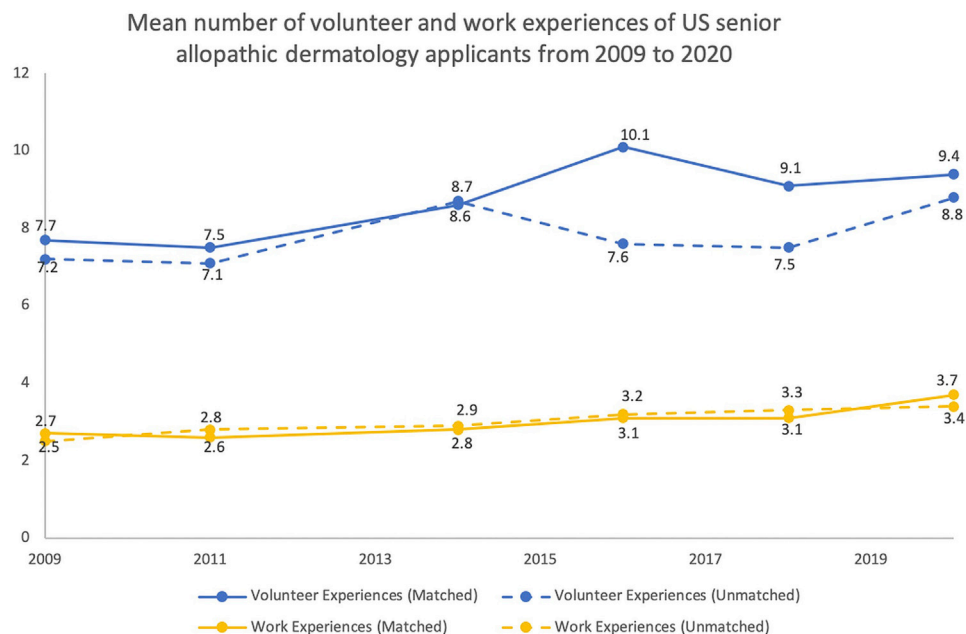


Fig 1. Mean number of volunteer and work experiences of US senior allopathic dermatology applicants from 2009 to 2020.

There has been a call to improve diversity in dermatology, with recommendations to reduce emphasis on test scores and publication numbers.⁴ Although scholarly merits are an important aspect of medicine, real-life experiences should also factor into candidate selection. A holistic approach to the residency selection process, valuing volunteer and work experiences in addition to research achievements, can attract diverse applicants with unique strengths and genuine passion for our field.

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