

The importance of publications, research, volunteer, and work experience in dermatology residency applicants



To the Editor: We read with great interest Atluri et al's letter¹ in response to our article.² The authors argue that volunteer and work experiences are important qualities in dermatology applications because such experiences provide insight into the applicant's character, including compassion, kindness, and professionalism. However, we believe one detail is missing from both of our articles: if objective criteria guide the interview process—whether it's the number of publications or volunteer experiences—applicants are incentivized to bolster those numbers.

When we consider the components of the dermatology residency application, we need to view it from both perspectives. Applicants are trying to sell themselves, and training programs are seeking the most desirable applicants. Very quickly, research experiences become useless for determining who has an interest in scientific study; volunteer experiences becomes useless for determining a candidate's altruistic tendencies. We doubt programs believe that the most desirable applicants are the ones who most effectively bolster these numbers. Programs want to train people who will be forthright, honest, self-motivated, bright, pleasant, caring residents and physicians. The numbers of publications and volunteer activities are likely useless for assessing these characteristics.

It is difficult to delineate the most important components of an application. Although surveys are sent to program directors asking them to rank the importance of certain application components, they are limited by inconsistent response rates.^{3,4} Furthermore, these surveys do not ask program directors to rank the importance of publications and volunteer, work, and research experience. Because there is insufficient research evaluating the importance of volunteer and work experience in dermatology applications, a conclusion assessing whether publications and research experience provide a higher chance of matching than volunteer and work experience cannot be drawn.

There should be importance in work and volunteer experiences, especially because research experiences can be difficult to come by. With the US Medical Licensing Examination Step 1 is becoming a binary pass or fail, there will likely be an increasing number of dermatology applicants. Although qualitative criteria—like personal statements, letters, and

interviews—are far from perfect, they may be the best we can do. The good news is that the vast majority of dermatology residency training applicants are, in our opinion, terrific. How to ensure that all the accepted applicants become terrific dermatology residents and, later, physicians is not something we have the answer to. We hope future research may evaluate whether the criteria used actually select dermatology residents who become terrific dermatologists. Nonetheless, approaching applications in a holistic manner may be the future trend in assessing dermatology applicants.

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