

Evaluating the Accessibility and Content of Plastic Surgery Training Program Websites

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Sir,

The educational experience of plastic surgery training has had many changes over the last 2 decades. A large number of programs transitioned to a 6-year integrated format, allowing applicants to apply directly into plastic surgery upon graduation from medical school. The integrated plastic surgery residency ranks as one of the most competitive residencies for prospective applicants.¹

With the challenges of the current COVID-19 pandemic, residencies and applicants must make changes to their typical methods of evaluation. The American Association of Medical Colleges has provided guidelines for virtual interviews and discouraged visiting rotations this upcoming match cycle. Programs must make information more readily available through web-based resources for applicants to gauge and rank programs for their final match list. Even before the current pandemic, websites have been reported to affect an applicant's program selection for both application and rank list.²⁻⁵ Many studies have demonstrated that there is limited content available on these program sites.^{2,3,5} We investigated the content and accessibility of these websites—the initial source of information available to prospective residents.

METHODS

In May 2020, 3 investigators accessed the websites of 82 plastic surgery programs as listed by the NRMP (National Residency Matching Program). These assessments occurred independently, and criteria were agreed upon before data collection. A Google search for the programs included “program name” and “plastic surgery residency.” A set of 15 criteria, based on other studies, were selected for evaluation, including program description, application information, research, and benefits (Table 1).²⁻⁵ “Life

in the area” was included due to travel limitations for this upcoming cycle.

RESULTS

All programs were searchable on Google with a publicly accessible website. The results are listed in Table 1. The number of criteria contained within these websites varied with a minimum of 3 and a maximum of 14 data points identified. The mean number of criteria listed on these program sites was 8.93 (59.5%). Twenty-three residencies (27.4%) included <50% of the criteria. Sixty-eight programs (80.9%) included <75% of the criteria.

CONCLUSIONS

The mean number of criteria was similar to those reported in other assessments of residency program websites—albeit other specialties.² Plastic surgery sites could improve their current platforms in terms of information dissemination; it is advised that these programs update their website to reflect the aforementioned criteria, which have been reported in several studies.²⁻⁵ Limitations to our study include that only the presence of the aforementioned criteria were recorded and that the websites could have been updated to include the criteria after the data collection.

Many programs are electing to complete social media profiles. For example, a cursory search by our team yielded in July 2020 66 programs (80.4%) that owned an Instagram page. Some hospitals have strict criteria over what can be placed on websites, with long approval times, which make social media a timely option for communication and program information. As many of these

Table 1. Results of the Study

Criteria	No. Program Pages N = 81
Program descriptions	82 (100%)
List of current residents	76 (92.7%)
Application process	71 (86.5%)
Program coordinator contact information	69 (84.1%)
List of faculty	69 (84.1%)
Current resident education	67 (81.7%)
Rotation schedule	58 (70.1%)
Description of research	49 (59.8%)
List of alumni	38 (46.3%)
Alumni positions	33 (40.2%)
List of current and past research projects	38 (39.0%)
Life in the area	31 (37.8%)
Salary	28 (34.1%)
Director contact information	27 (32.9%)
Participation in national meetings	21 (25.6%)

This table includes the criteria selected for evaluation and reports the number of websites that contained the information pertaining to each criterion. Program descriptions were included universally, while information such as participation or funding for national meetings were included in about 25% of the websites listed.

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social media sites are new, it is recommended that programs maintain an up-to-date, comprehensive internet presence to improve the residency process under current limitations.

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DISCLOSURES

The authors have no financial interest to declare in relation to the content of this article.

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