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# The Virtual Residency Fair: A Legacy of the COVID-19 Era and an Opportunity for the Future



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The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has impacted oral and maxillofacial surgery in a myriad of ways. The residency application process has been particularly affected, such as the cancellation of in-person externships and the prospect of virtual interviews. However, the field of oral and maxillofacial surgery has remained resilient in the face of this challenge. On July 29, 2020, the American Association of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeons (AAOMS) organized a novel virtual residency fair. This event sought to help applicants better understand oral and maxillofacial surgery residency programs and recoup, at least in part, some of the takeaways that would have come from externships and in-person interviews in previous years. Although the event definitely has kinks to be ironed out, we believe that this program was a strong step in the right direction in improving the residency application process, regardless of the pandemic. In the next sections, we discuss structural issues that students may encounter during the oral and maxillofacial surgery residency application process and in turn propose suggestions to improve the virtual residency fair in the coming years.

## Areas for Improvement Highlighted by COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted areas requiring structural improvement in the oral and

maxillofacial surgery residency application process. Even before the pandemic, there was a paucity of centralized resources for dental students to learn more about oral and maxillofacial surgery programs. Individual programs had websites offering varying levels of detail, often with little insight regarding resident culture, true operative scope, and daily workflow. Although externships were the gold standard in learning more about programs and gathering information inherently unobtainable through websites, dental schools across the country had widely different curriculums, which often struggled to accommodate students who wished to participate in externships. Seldom could applicants participate in externships at all the programs that they were interested in learning more about before applying. As a result, many applicants had to rely on word of mouth from upperclassmen, current residents, surgeon mentors, and online forums, the latter of which can be potentially misleading and unsubstantiated. Hence, rumors and outdated information about programs can linger for years and hamper both the program and potential applicants. To our knowledge, there are no widely used and frequently updated centralized platforms that allow residency programs to provide updated information and for applicants to get their questions answered. As such, the COVID-19 pandemic presents an opportunity to

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Conflict of Interest Disclosures: None of the authors have any relevant financial relationship(s) with a commercial interest.

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Received September 18 2020

Accepted September 21 2020

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0278-2391/20/31206-4

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.joms.2020.09.037>

improve the oral and maxillofacial surgery residency application process.

## Current Efforts

Although oral and maxillofacial surgery residency programs have the autonomy to make their own guidelines for the application process, there has been a general trend toward extending the application deadlines and conducting virtual interviews for the upcoming cycle.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, many residency programs have organized online resources, such as virtual externships and social media accounts, to help applicants gain a better understanding of their culture and training. Unlike traditional websites, social media platforms are advantageous in enabling rapid and efficient dissemination of information and allowing real-time communication between programs and applicants. A recent study found a growing number of oral and maxillofacial surgery residency programs that use an Instagram account, although this practice is still relatively uncommon, compared with other surgical fields.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, anecdotal evidence suggests that virtual externships held by individual programs may only reach a relatively small number of applicants.

Beyond individual program efforts, the AAOMS held the aforementioned virtual residency fair. Through two 2-hour sessions, attending surgeons and residents from dozens of oral and maxillofacial surgery programs around the country logged onto the platform to answer questions and interact with more than 500 potential applicants via text or video messaging. We are encouraged by this effort to create a centralized platform for programs and potential applicants to communicate. It mirrors efforts in other areas of medicine, such as radiology, which has also centralized and streamlined the virtual resident recruitment process.<sup>3</sup>

## Opportunities for a Centralized Platform

The residency fair is a demonstration of great leadership and resourcefulness by our field, which should be further built on even after the COVID-19 pandemic, to help oral and maxillofacial surgery optimize the application process and attract top-notch candidates to our profession. To this end, we recommend the following:

First, the residency fair should be established as an annually recurring event. This improves the accessibility of information regarding oral and maxillofacial surgery residency training programs for dental students and other applicants. This effort will be particularly helpful for applicants who are working full-time or attending dental schools with less flexible schedules.

Second, the structure and content of the residency fair can be modified and strengthened to be more efficient while remaining applicant centered. Rather than

solely containing individual text messaging, the fair can allow each program a time slot to upload a prerecorded video presentation highlighting their program and new updates. In addition, the AAOMS can send out a prefair survey to accumulate frequently asked questions and areas of concern, so programs can address the bulk of these topics during their prerecorded videos, thus tailoring content to the applicants. This would allow for a direct comparison between programs by the applicants, according to their priorities.

Finally, the residency fair can be rebranded as a residency week during the month of April or May each year. This year's residency fair attempted to fit all program sessions in a single day, which inevitably meant that applicants had insufficient time to spend at each program's booth. With a residency week, programs will be able to hold virtual informational sessions at various times throughout the week to better provide students with most updated information and answers to questions before the applications are due in September. Programs can even opt to include additional events, such as virtual tours, resident-applicant happy hours, and grand rounds. These can give candidates a clearer understanding of each program and afford them a glimpse into the daily activities of the program's residents. In fact, current virtual externships held by various oral and maxillofacial surgery programs around the country provide excellent models for such efforts.

In conclusion, the AAOMS virtual residency fair was both timely and well intended. This event can be greatly expanded and improved on during the coming years, having the potential to become a critical resource for future applicants, regardless of the COVID-19 pandemic. It can provide up-to-date information and valuable insights into residency programs for candidates who may be unable to take time off to personally travel to an oral and maxillofacial surgery program. Therefore, although COVID-19 has been largely disruptive on many areas of oral and maxillofacial surgery, we believe that it will also be remembered as a catalyst for substantial improvement of our residency recruitment process with long-term implications for the future of our specialty.

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