

Plastic Surgery Research Year: An Equalizer or Disparity?

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The research year has become more popular among plastic surgery applicants over the last several years, with more applicants taking them.¹ A dedicated year for these applicants allows ample time to carry out research that they may not have had the opportunity or time to do while in the midst of preclinical or clinical years. For some, the interest in the evolving field of plastic surgery pulls them in; for others, the research year is a means to an end.

Interestingly, there are a similar number of applicants with a home program taking gap years when compared with those without a home program.² Still, it is obvious that those with no home program have less access to academic research and may take the research year to improve their odds of matching by having a healthy number of publications when the time comes to apply for residency. This approach makes judicious sense and does in fact lead to an increased chance of matching into a plastic surgery program.³ When applicants with less access to academic research take a dedicated year to focus on this area, it would seem the application process has been equalized.

Although the research year may put an applicant with few publications on the same playing field as an applicant with a home program having more access to academic research, we argue that this may not be equitable. Many research opportunities require students to take an enrichment leave of absence, which leaves them subject to the variability of their institutional policies, some of which allow financial aid disbursement and others do not.⁴ This often strips individuals of their student status, and student loan repayment starts shortly thereafter. Furthermore, many research year opportunities remain unpaid. This may not be a problem for applicants coming from affluent families who have the means to support their aspirations. However, low-income students or those with little to no family support are left with the

Table 1. Barriers Faced by Students Pursuing Plastic Surgery Residency and Solutions Offered That Could Eliminate These Hardships

Barriers	Solutions
Lack of research opportunities at home medical school	Institutions offer students virtual research opportunities during preclinical years
Disadvantaged student financial background	Institutions hosting research years provide need-based aid through grants
Loan repayment due to loss of student status	Home medical schools implement a “for credit” research year policy preventing the loss of student status

difficult decision of applying as a less-competitive applicant or taking a research year while struggling to meet basic needs.

It would be naive to believe that the research year remains a realistic option for the applicants described, but there are steps that academic institutions can take to make the research year a more equitable experience. Every year, there are numerous grants dispersed for clinical research, but only a few plastic surgery research positions are paid opportunities.⁵ If institutions become intentional about allocating funds for paid research years, fairness may better be established in this competitive specialty. Although research funds are often limited at institutions, in efforts to achieve equity, we must advocate for these paid positions. The journey to plastic surgery may never be completely fair, but the process, as it stands, has led to no change in the demographics of plastic surgery applicants over the last decade, depriving patients from access to a diverse and representative healthcare team.⁶ We offered in Table 1 solutions to the barriers we discussed within this viewpoint.

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