Gastroenterology Fellowship Applicants' Perspectives on GI Program Preferences

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Abstract

Gastroenterology fellowship continues to be highly competitive among internal medicine subspecialties. Recruiting excellent applicants is also important for GI fellowship program directors. We aim to examine factors that influence GI fellowship applicants' perspectives about a fellowship program. The authors conducted an anonymous online survey of applicants focusing on program characteristics including location, faculty, research/clinical opportunities, website, and interview day experience. Anonymous survey responses were recorded regarding program characteristics, and subsequent candidate preferences were evaluated for factors influencing their decision. Candidates were also asked to evaluate their interview experience and share other comments about the program. Though GI fellowship applicants have varying preferences regarding the ideal training program, some opinions converged. The study of these trends can inform program directors regarding areas for improvement that in turn can help attract the best applicants.

Introduction

Gastroenterology (GI) fellowship remains one of the most competitive fellowships pursued after the completion of internal medicine (IM) residency training [1, 2]. Post-match analysis of data published by the National Resident Matching Program (NRMP) notes an incremental increase in the number of programs, available positions, and applicants from 2016 to 2020, which has consequently increased the percentage of unmatched candidates from 33.6% in 2017 to 37.3% in 2020 [3]. Prior studies have outlined prominent characteristics that programs seek in a candidate, including the quality of residency evaluations, letters of recommendation, and scholarly activity [1, 4, 5].

Though these publications may aid candidates in preparing for the fellowship match, there continues to be paucity of the literature regarding factors that an applicant seeks in an institution when applying for a GI fellowship. With this study, we aim to examine the factors that influence an applicant's perspective regarding a GI fellowship program.

Methods

The gastroenterology and hepatology division of the Allegheny Health Network includes 22 physicians including general gastroenterologists, hepatologists, transplant hepatologists, inflammatory bowel disease specialist, advanced endoscopists, and a medical nutrition expert. The GI Fellowship Program, is a university affiliated program, interviews applicants for four fellowship positions each year.

An anonymous post-match survey was developed in collaboration with faculty members who conduct interviews for our GI fellowship program. The survey aimed to assess applicants' perspectives regarding the program and their experiences on the interview day. The survey was modified each year in order to include changes made to the interview day and scheduling of the interview. This survey was uploaded to the online SurveyMonkey® platform (SurveyMonkey Inc. San Mateo, California, USA), and a URL link was generated. An email requesting survey participation was subsequently sent out to all GI fellowship applicants who interviewed for our program from 2015 to 2017 with a follow-up reminder email. These emails were sent out each year after the rank lists were submitted by applicants and prior to the match day.

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Results

A total of 119 applicants were emailed the survey between 2015 and 2017. Applicants had the option to skip questions; therefore, survey response rates were variable for each question. Factors including program characteristics and subsequent candidate preferences that influenced an applicant's decision to rank our program among their top 3 choices were assessed (Table 1). A total of 56 applicants responded to this portion of the survey. Of note, during our initial survey in 2015, we only asked about unfavorable factors influencing rank order list; we included the option to choose favorable factors influencing rank order list between 2016 and 2017.

Fifty-three applicants responded to the interview day experience part of the survey (Table 2). On average, over

3 years, we have offered three different dates for interviews to our applicants. Preference for the weekend (55% $N = 23/42$) and weekday (45% $N = 19/45$) dates were similar. Between 2016 and 2017, 42 applicants were questioned about the usefulness of our program's website, with 95% ($N = 40$) of respondents who reviewed the website finding it helpful.

From reviewing applicant perspectives, the overall program strengths included a formal endoscopic retrograde cholangiopancreatography (ERCP) and/or endoscopic ultrasound (EUS) certification within the 3-year fellowship, a large and diverse faculty, large patient volume, collegiality among fellows, and an enthusiastic program director. For 47% ($N = 17/36$) applicants, limiting factors included the absence of a primary university hospital, as well as a lack of personal location ties (25%, $N = 9/36$) and geographical location (36%, $N = 13/36$).

Table 1 Factors which influenced applicant's decision to rank our program among their top 3 choices

Factors	Number of applicants who rated as a favorable factor (Survey responses 2016 and 2017) (total $n = 20$)	Number of applicants who rated as an unfavorable factor (Survey responses 2015, 2016, 2017) (total $n = 36$)
Program curriculum/structure	7	0
Quality of faculty	13	1
Fellow interactions/collegiality	8	2
Scholarly activity/clinical research opportunities	0	3
Clinical opportunities/resources/electives	4	0
Specific area/focus of GI specialty you are seeking	4	1
University affiliation/status	1	17
General atmosphere	6	3
Local ties	3	9
Geographical location	9	13
Lack of basic science research	0	2
Overall quality of interview day	4	0

Table 2 Interview day experience (answered by $N = 53$ applicants between 2015 and 2017)

Survey questions	Choices for response		
	Too little/few/below satisfactory (n)	Just right/satisfactory (n)	Too much/many/above satisfactory (n)
Total time with faculty on interview day (120 min)	2 (3.8%)	48 (90.5%)	3 (5.7%)
Length of individual interviews (20 min)	2 (3.8%)	48 (90.5%)	2 (3.8%)
Number of individual interviews ($n = 5$)	0 (0%)	50 (94.3%)	3 (5.7%)
Time with fellows (including breakfast, lunch and hospital tours est. 120 min)	2 (3.8%)	48 (90.5%)	3 (5.7%)
Time with division chief (20 min)	7 (13%)	42 (79%)	1 (1.9%)

Discussion

Our survey found that a program's university status was considered the most important factor by applicants while ranking a GI fellowship program. According to the American Medical Association's Fellowship and Residency Electronic Interactive Database (FREIDA), 54% of GI fellowship programs are university programs, 32% are university-affiliated community programs, and 11.5% are pure community-based training programs [6]. University programs may be more appealing to candidates who want to pursue a research track, Masters in Public Health (MPH), Masters in Science (MS), or a post-doctoral fellowship (Ph.D.) training and degrees. Such programs also enable fellows to collaborate with other departments (basic sciences and biomedical engineering) in the university in order to facilitate bench research and device innovation [7]. Community-based programs, which are more clinically oriented with exposure to diverse pathology, help accomplish the goal of training physicians who can serve the community at large.

Another important factor is the geographical location of a GI training program, which can influence an applicant's decisions about applying, interviewing, and eventually ranking a program. According to our survey results, the location of a program was yet another essential factor that influenced an applicant's decision while applying to a fellowship program, 13 out of 36 (36%) reported it as an unfavorable factor and 9 out of 20 (45%) respondents reported it as a favorable factor. A study on factors influencing decision-making while applying for GI fellowships in Canada by Khan et al. noted that program location was the most important characteristic for IM residents when choosing a program [8]. In a 2017 survey of 1489 gastroenterologists who graduated fellowship between 2010 and 2019 found that 71% completed their GI fellowship from the same region as their IM residency [9]. There is a lack of such data amongst US-trained IM residents applying for a GI fellowship. Location of the program is a non-modifiable external factor. Many residents may prefer to remain in the same area that enables a smooth transition from their site of residency to their fellowship. The presence of a well-developed social support system in or around the vicinity is also pivotal. Many residents will have to consider the impact of a location change on their spouse, partners, friends, or family. Other factors that bear on the decision are climate preferences, geography, access to recreational and cultural opportunities, housing affordability, and proximity to nature vs. urban centers. From a program's perspective, as much as these factors are unalterable, they should always be used to advantage by promoting the appealing features of a locale that may not

be familiar to applicants located elsewhere or by improving the overall experience of the fellowship program. For many applicants who seek a career in academia, selecting a program that offers exposure to clinical or bench research with faculty mentors who can inspire and facilitate academic professional growth can be significant. Regardless of academic aspirations, a trainee's involvement in scholarly activity can be due to intellectual curiosity or a desire to present their work at national conferences, providing an opportunity to share their work with larger audiences and open avenues for networking and subsequent future employment prospects [10]. According to our survey, only 14% of the applicants favored bench or clinical research, which is likely due to a selection bias. Our program, with limited opportunities for bench research, is focused on clinical scholarship, usually invites applicants with similar inclinations.

GI is a diverse specialty encompassing a spectrum of diseases and has many subdivisions, including transplant hepatology, advanced endoscopy, inflammatory bowel diseases (IBD), nutrition, and neurogastroenterology/motility [11]. Some GI programs offer fourth-year advanced training tracks in these subdivisions. Alternatively, other programs allow fellows to tailor their training per their clinical interest that is focus on IBD, motility, hepatology, or ERCP/EUS during their third year. Our program offers competency training in ERCP or EUS to selected fellows in their third year. Reviewing comments and perspectives from our survey, applicants favorably weighed having this opportunity during a 3-year fellowship in their decision to rank our GI fellowship program. Perspectives from trainees in programs that offer fourth-year training can further expand on the applicant's preferences.

Scheduling interviews during the match season can be difficult for applicants, since most are in their busy third year of IM residency. As such, our survey noted that applicants prefer having multiple (approximately 3) options rather than a single date to schedule their interview, with almost half of them preferring a weekend; variety of options would require less schedule adjustment by residents facilitating their travel to interviews. According to our survey, applicants appreciate timely interview notifications, the provision of local hotel accommodations, and a detailed information packet sent before their interviews. Social media presence and the official website of a program are important tools used by candidates to get a feel of the program, learn about essential updates or new developments, and prepare for the interviews. It is preferred to have individualized schedules or itineraries for each applicant on their interview day, minimizing wait times between different interviews and providing refreshments for the interviewees. Another important facet of the interview as highlighted by our survey is the amount of interaction that applicants have with the current fellows

and faculty in the program. The latter can provide valuable insight that is essential for candidates to reach conclusion(s) and have a better understanding of the program.

Our study has several limitations. For one, our sample size was small, and therefore generalized applicability of these perceptions to all applicants is not appropriate and changing the survey in mid-course limits interpretation of the data. Secondly, as a single-center study, the findings do not represent a cross section of all applicants who apply to the GI fellowship match, and do not include the opinions of applicants to university based training programs. This study also focused on interviewees alone and excluded other applicants to our program whose records were deleted after the conclusion of each interview season. Additionally, this is a descriptive study that allows us to analyze responses but limits the attribution of causality or of detailed statistical analysis of the data. Therefore, further studies on a national level are recommended to elucidate the factors influencing a GI applicant's decisions to rank a program.

Conclusion

Despite these limitations, our study provides important information to GI fellowship programs regarding factors that are important to applicants while choosing a GI fellowship program. The knowledge about applicant preferences and perspectives can streamline the selection of applications and ensure more compatibility between a GI program and their prospective applicants, hence, furthering an improved recruitment process for the GI fellowship match.

Key Messages

- Currently there are limited assessments of the characteristics of GI fellowship programs and application processes most preferred by applicants
- The knowledge about applicants' preferences and perspectives can streamline the selection process, ensuring more compatibility between a GI program and their prospective applicants

- Factors which influence an applicant's decision to rank a fellowship program can help identify deficits that can be addressed in order to help attract the best candidates

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