



Pressure to Publish: a Student's Perspective on the Role of Research in Residency Applications

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Publish or perish—the academic mantra haunts me as I prepare my residency application for psychiatry. It is not just me—in a landscape where applicants outnumber coveted residency positions and psychiatry becomes an increasingly competitive specialty, applicants face mounting pressure to produce research publications to distinguish themselves from their peers.

It was apparent early in my medical school training that engaging in research would benefit my future residency application. I dutifully emailed faculty members throughout the psychiatry department looking for a research project to join and ended up working with a preceptor who encouraged me to develop a project on a topic of my choosing. Over the next several months, I designed a small survey study of mental health professionals, assessing their interest in alternative therapeutic interventions. I came across several challenges along the way, including having to navigate a confusing ethics approval process and learning how to analyze and present survey data. In the following months, my project was submitted for publication and rejected several times. By this time, my second year of medical school was in full swing, and my preceptor had seemingly begun to lose interest in salvaging my project. Eventually, we stopped submitting my paper altogether.

Fast-forward 2 years, and I find myself on the brink of my fourth year, wondering if I have enough research experience to be a competitive applicant in psychiatry—and why it seems so important in the first place.

It turns out that my frustrations are not unique. While research publications have not historically been a mainstay of the residency application in psychiatry, medical students understand that publications serve as a marker of our productivity. With applicants outnumbering residency positions and Step 1 becoming pass/fail, students are looking for ways to stand out and demonstrate their interest in psychiatry.

The perceived importance of research is apparent in the National Resident Matching Program's "Charting Outcomes in the Match," which notes that the average number of research products listed by applicants is increasing every year. In 2022, the average number of abstracts, presentations, and publications among applicants who successfully matched into psychiatry was 6.2 [1]. In comparison, the average number of research products among applicants who matched in 2018 was 4.8 among allopathic applicants and 2.5 among osteopathic applicants [2, 3]. Medical students are not the only ones who value research. When asked about the characteristics that are most important in selecting applicants to interview and how to rank them, psychiatry program directors consistently rate "involvement and interest in research" as a valuable factor on par with volunteer experiences and letters of recommendation [4].

Of course, there will always be a subset of students who are genuinely passionate about conducting research. However, most of us are simply trying to keep up with the rest of the applicants. Even students who seek out research during medical school come up against barriers to achieving publications. The reality is that publishing research requires lots of time, funding, supportive mentors, and some amount of luck. In contrast, medical students have very little time, funding, or research expertise. Given these constraints, it is a tremendous task for students to produce multiple research products during their training.

Part of the problem may lie in a difference in expectations. Faculty members may view student participation in research as an extension of their education as physician-scientists. Encouraging students to design projects based on their interests can be educational and, as a bonus, does not require research funding. Meanwhile, medical students care less about learning the ins and outs of research methodology and more about having their work published before residency applications are due. If the average number of research products among successful applicants is 6.2, it is no surprise that students feel incentivized to produce research, even if it

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means spending less time exploring other professional interests. Combined with our limited resources, it is much easier to produce mediocre projects that can be listed on an application than to commit to the demands of high-quality research.

As I begin to assemble my residency application, I wonder: What are the traits of an exceptional applicant? Or an exceptional psychiatrist? The characteristics that are valued in residency applications help shape the values of the next generation of psychiatrists. Could the consequence of prioritizing applicants based on their research accomplishments inadvertently cultivate psychiatrists who value productivity over patient-centered care? As residency positions in psychiatry become increasingly competitive, it is worth reflecting on what traits are deemed valuable when selecting future psychiatrists.

Declarations

Disclosures The author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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