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BRIEF OPINION

# Recruitment Challenges and Opportunities for Radiation Oncology Residency Programs During the 2020-2021 Virtual Residency Match

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Over the last few years, multiple radiation oncology (RO) residency programs have been unsuccessful in filling all spots during the main National Resident Match Program process.[1-3] For example, in 2019, the unmatched rate was 14.5%, which was substantially higher than the average rate of 2.5% over the last 8 years.[2] This recent development in RO has been partially attributed to concerns about an oversupply of graduating RO residents.[4] The 2020-2021 RO National Resident Match Program presents an added challenge to the Match: The COVID-19 pandemic has placed unprecedented limitations on the usual instruments of recruitment, such as away rotations and in-person residency interviews. In the current climate, a successful recruitment strategy requires an effective online presence for informing and engaging future applicants.

In this study, we assessed the online presence of RO residency programs participating in the 2020-2021 residency Match. Between June 9 and July 6, 2020, we searched for Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube accounts of RO residency programs or RO departments. We also sent a survey to residency programs regarding plans for creating a virtual away rotation (VAR) experience this year. Finally, RO residency websites were evaluated for the presence of key features pertinent to perspective residents.

We identified 91 RO residency programs. Our survey on VARs yielded a response rate of 71% (65 of 91). Of the 65 responding programs, 21 (32%) planned VARs, 10 (15%) were exploring the possibility, and 34 (53%) were not considering VARs. A minority of programs had active social media accounts highlighting resident activities, ongoing research, or initiatives in the department. Although the majority had departmental websites highlighting facilities, research, and curriculum, few included key information such as why residents chose a particular residency program, accolades of current residents, or the employment locations of alumni (Table 1). In summary, utilization of and engagement on social media platforms are low, websites are missing key details germane to prospective residents, and a minority of programs are planning VARs for the upcoming academic year.

It is important to note that although the current concerns of workforce disequilibrium in RO are valid, ongoing efforts to recruit strong candidates remain essential to maintaining the vitality of the RO specialty, while still

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**Table 1** Online presence of radiation oncology residency programs

| Active* social media accounts | No. (%) of programs with accounts | Social media account activity |
|---|---|---|
| Twitter | 27 (30%) | Median followers 402 (range, 0-1280)<br>Median tweets 112 (range, 0-1181) |
| Instagram | 7 (8%) | Median posts 21 (range, 3-316) |
| Facebook | 4 (4%) | Median multimedia posts 463 (range, 159-706) |
| YouTube | 2 (2%) | Median videos 1 (range, 1-1) |
| **Departmental website features** | | **No. (%) of programs with key features** |
| Departmental facilities and resources | | 75 (82%) |
| Research initiatives and opportunities | | 61 (67%) |
| Residency curriculum and features | | 79 (87%) |
| Profiles of current residents | | 69 (76%) |
| Why residents chose the residency program | | 18 (20%) |
| Accolades of residents/ residency | | 32 (35%) |
| Employment location of alumni | | 35 (38%) |

* "Active" was defined as accounts that provided meaningful content, which was defined as information that highlighted resident activities, ongoing research, or initiatives in the department.

formulating a sustainable solution for the challenges of the current labor market. Consequently, for RO program directors, the goal of the 2020-2021 Match continues to be to successfully recruit the most highly qualified, passionate, and motivated candidates.

In prior years, RO away rotations have accounted for 28% of residency matches, with home rotations facilitating another 24% of matches.[5] For the upcoming cycle, the COVID-19 pandemic has thrown these traditional recruitment practices into disarray, which underscores the importance of cultivating an effective online presence to highlight the strengths of a residency program. This may be particularly important for small to medium-sized residency programs without "brand recognition." Additionally, VARs may prove to be essential to maintaining a talented and diverse pool of candidates for the field, particularly those from groups historically underrepresented in medicine or from schools without a home RO program. Barriers to creating a successful VAR are many, but the Radiation Oncology Virtual Education Rotation initiative, a virtual RO rotation by the RO departments of Stanford University and Oregon Health and Science University, may provide a blueprint to guide other residency programs exploring ways to implement virtual initiatives.[6]

Although this year's residency match process presents several challenges, opportunities nevertheless abound for innovative and novel recruitment strategies. Engaging applicants and disseminating critical information to candidates via social media platforms and other online platforms can provide RO residency programs with the means to present themselves effectively. We call on RO residency programs to explore these strategies to increase their reach and chances of success in the upcoming Match process and to ensure the vitality and diversity of the pipeline of talent in our field.

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