

Applicant Selection Procedures in Endodontic Specialty Programs in the United States: Program Director's Perspective

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Abstract

Introduction: The purpose of this study was to determine the criteria evaluated by directors of endodontic specialty programs in the United States when selecting their residents and their satisfaction with the current process. Besides this, the study also aimed to determine the expected effect of the change in National Board Dental Examination (NBDE) score reporting to pass/fail on applicant evaluation. **Methods:** A 38-question web-based survey was distributed to the 54 endodontic specialty program directors (of 55 programs) in the United States. Questions regarded general program information, information obtained from applications, the interview process, the decision process, a retrospective view of the selection process, and director demographics. **Results:** Twenty-six (48.1%) responses were returned and analyzed. The most important application factors were interview ratings, dental school class rank, and general practice residency or advanced education in general dentistry experience. The most preferred sources for letters of recommendation were endodontic pre- and postdoctoral program directors and other academic endodontists. Desirable applicant characteristics included enthusiasm, listening skills, and verbal skills. Program directors indicated concern regarding the initial screening of applicants after the NBDE scoring change but not as much concern relating to final selection. Respondents generally supported a uniform acceptance date but did not support participation in the Postdoctoral Dental Matching Program (the Match). **Conclusions:** Some important criteria when selecting prospective residents were identified. Program directors did not appear overwhelmingly concerned with the changes in NBDE score reporting. In addition, the establishment of a uniform acceptance date may resolve the biggest problem most respondents have with the current selection process. (*J Endod* 2014;40:797–804)

Key Words

Application, endodontic residency, Match, National Boards, program director, ranking, selection, survey

Applying to an advanced postgraduate education program in a dental specialty imparts considerable stress on any prospective applicant. Endodontics is no exception to this; according to the most recent American Dental Association Survey of Advanced Dental Education (from 2010–2011), only 211 positions are available each year for almost 3400 applications (1). One source of stress for these applicants may be the lack of definitive information on important factors to consider before applying. Part of the difficulty in determining these factors could also be varied selection procedures among each postgraduate endodontics program.

With vast amounts of submitted materials in each application, there is no standard approach to evaluation. Each program will undoubtedly prefer certain applicant characteristics to others, but studies undertaken in medical and other dental specialties suggest that deducing generalities among program preferences is a reasonable goal (2–4). Beyond these preferences, previously used application materials may become obsolete, leading to the need for different selection criteria. As an example of this, the National Board Dental Examination (NBDE), which provided a score in the past, became a pass/fail examination in 2012. The loss of this criterion could make applicant selection more difficult.

This study is the first to evaluate the applicant selection procedures in endodontic specialty programs through a survey of program directors. Similar prior studies in other specialties showed that although there are some constants across different disciplines (3–5), each specialty tends to have different preferences in terms of application materials and applicant characteristics. With no prior studies of these selection procedures in endodontics, interested parties must try to apply characteristics of other specialties in an attempt to deduce how directors of endodontic specialty programs select their residents. This study is also the first known survey to evaluate the projected impact of the change in score reporting of the NBDE to pass/fail in 2012 on selection procedures in a dental specialty.

Materials and Methods

A modified 38-question survey based on that of Spina et al (3), Yuan et al (4), and Galang et al (5) was distributed to the 54 program directors of the 55 endodontic specialty programs in the United States. The research protocol received approval from the University of Illinois at Chicago Institutional Review Board (protocol 2012-0993). The web-based instrument was sent to directors on December 13, 2012, with a due date of

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January 13, 2013. Subjects who had not yet completed the voluntary, anonymous survey received a reminder e-mail on January 4, 2013. Upon receipt of completed surveys, IBM SPSS Statistics v20.0 (Armonk, NY) was used for statistical analysis. Data were analyzed, descriptive statistics (mean, median, mode, and standard deviation) were compiled, and tabulation and ranking were performed when appropriate.

The survey consisted of 6 sections. Section A related to general program information, including the setting (university or hospital-based), number of residents, and most recent number of applicants. Section B pertained to information obtained from the application, which included ranking the importance of different application materials and the source of letters of recommendation. It also addressed the recent change in scoring methodology to the NBDE. Section C focused on the interview process, including a rating of varying applicant characteristics. These characteristics received a positive, negative, or neutral rating, which allowed for later rankings. Section D asked respondents to elaborate on the decision process, including whether or not they would support a uniform acceptance date or participation in the Postdoctoral Dental Matching Program (the Match). Section E sought to determine each director's satisfaction with the current resident selection process and his/her current residents via a retrospective view. Section F requested some demographics on the program director.

Results

Twenty-six program directors completed the survey, giving a 48.1% response rate. Respondents did not always answer every question, so the number of responses to individual questions did not always equal 26. Responses to all items are presented in [Appendix 1](#).

General Information

The vast majority of respondents (80.8%, $n = 21$) indicated that they were part of a university-based program. Most programs (61.5%, $n = 16$) received between 51 and 100 applications during the most recent application cycle (2012 for the class entering in 2013). About half of the responding directors (53.8%, $n = 14$) felt at least 61% of applicants met the minimal screening criteria. Programs admitted an average of 3.73 residents each, with a range of 1–7 (6 residents and 1 fellow). Less than half (41.7%, $n = 10$) of the directors accepted at least 21% of their resident class from their own institution. Internationally trained dentists are considered by 53.8% ($n = 14$) of programs although most of the programs indicating they accept these clinicians stated there was no quota in place. An average of 3.15 residents per program will graduate in the current class. Directors expect the majority (81%–100%) of these graduates to remain in the United States.

Approximately one third of programs changed their size within the past 10 years. Six programs (23.1%) increased their size, 2 (7.7%) decreased their size, and the majority (69.2%, $n = 18$) remained the same. The majority of respondents (92.3%, $n = 24$) stated they had no size changes planned.

Interview Process

All responding programs require an interview as part of the applicant selection process. In the most recent selection process, programs invited an average of 12.48 applicants for interviews. A committee composed of the program director, department chairman, and full-time endodontic faculty generally made the final decision pertaining to whom to invite for interviews. In general, interviews tended to last 4–8 hours. Informal events such as an evening social are part of the interview process at 42.3% ($n = 11$) of institutions. Those conducting the interviews generally include the program director, department head, full- and part-time endodontic faculty, and current residents.

Decision Process

The program director, department head, and full-time endodontic faculty provide input in the vast majority (100%, 80%, and 84%, respectively) of programs, whereas part-time endodontic faculty and residents provide input in just over half (57.7%, $n = 15$). Final selection decisions typically fall on a selection committee (76.9%, $n = 20$).

Less than half (46%, $n = 12$) of the respondents claimed their programs use the American Dental Education Association's Postdoctoral Application Support Service for application submission and evaluation. A preponderance (65.4%, $n = 17$) of program directors supported the concept of a uniform acceptance date for endodontic specialty programs, whereas only 23.1% ($n = 6$) supported the use of the Match system.

Retrospective View

Almost all respondents (92%, $n = 23$) were at least somewhat satisfied with the current selection process, but only 38.5% ($n = 10$) of the directors stated they would select all of their current and/or former residents from the last 5 years again. Every respondent stated they were satisfied with the current applicant pool to their program, with 42.3% ($n = 11$) asserting they were very satisfied. In general, the directors felt that applicant credentials either increased (42.3%) or did not change (42.3%) in the last 5 years. Regarding changes in the quantity of applications, program heads were fairly evenly split, with 26.9% ($n = 7$) receiving more, 34.6% ($n = 9$) receiving less, and 38.5% ($n = 10$) claiming no change over the past 5 years.

Program Director Demographics

An even distribution concerning the age of endodontics program directors was noted; 26.9% ($n = 7$) indicated they were between the ages of 41 and 50 years, 30.8% ($n = 8$) were between 51 and 60, and 38.5% ($n = 10$) were between 61 and 70. Only 1 respondent was over the age of 70. Most respondents (96.2%, $n = 25$) were men. Current terms as program director ranged from 1–20 years, with a mean of 7.94 years. The total time served as a program director ranged from 1–33 years, with a mean of 9.60 years. All but 1 respondent (96.2%, $n = 25$) indicated they were board certified.

Application Information

Survey questions 12, 13, and 22 related to the importance of certain factors in the application and interview process from only the program director's perspective and not those of the others also involved in the selection process. Mean scores with standard deviations were tabulated for each selection factor and ranked in descending order of mean scores ([Tables 1–3](#)). The 3 most important factors regarding applicant selection were interview ratings, dental school class rank, and general practice residency (GPR) or advanced education in general dentistry (AEGD) experience.

Letter of recommendation sources are presented in [Table 2](#). Letters from endodontic program directors (pre- and postdoctoral), department chairs, and faculty were found to be of the highest importance.

The interview allowed for the identification of different applicant characteristics, which are presented in [Table 3](#). Enthusiasm, listening, and verbal skills were considered the most positive traits, whereas anxiousness and aggressiveness rated as the most negative characteristics.

Discussion

Similar to previous studies in medicine and other dental specialties, endodontic program directors believed the interview to be the most important part of the entire application process ([2](#), [4–6](#)) although this is not universally reported in the literature ([7](#)). There

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