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Evaluation of accredited trauma, surgical critical care, and acute care surgery fellowship web sites



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ABSTRACT

Objectives: Surgical residents are increasingly pursuing fellowships and rely heavily on fellowship programs' web sites as a primary source of information. Accessibility, quality, and content of a program web site can encourage or deter an applicant from applying to a particular program. The goal of this study was to perform an analysis of trauma, surgical critical care, and acute care surgery fellowship program web sites.

Materials and Methods: A list of trauma, surgical critical care, and acute care surgery fellowship programs was obtained from the Eastern Association for the Surgery of Trauma (EAST) web site. The existence of a functional hyperlink in the EAST program directory and a systematic Google search was assessed to determine web site accessibility. Twenty-one content criteria were used to evaluate accessible web sites.

Results: The EAST directory contained 102 fellowship programs. Ninety-one programs had web sites accessible through a Google search. No web site contained all 21 criteria. Only 29 web sites contained at least half of the evaluated content criteria. The most common data point included was program description (97%), while role of seeing patients in clinic (4%) was the least common criteria present.

Conclusions: Many programs in the EAST directory lack functional links and accessible web sites. Content that has been deemed important to applicants is lacking in varying degrees. Incorporation of this missing content may benefit both applicants and programs, allowing for more informed decision-making when choosing a program, thus promoting better fit of fellows with programs during the application process.

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Introduction

The trend of graduating general surgery residents pursuing fellowship training has been steadily increasing for more than 15 y.^{1,2} One path graduates are increasingly pursuing is

trauma, surgical critical care (SCC), and acute care surgery (ACS) fellowship training. A major source of information available to postgraduate medical trainees looking to apply to residency or fellowship training programs is publically available web sites found through the internet. This online

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information has the potential to greatly influence applicants' decisions on where to apply and the order of their rank lists.³⁻⁷

The process of applying to fellowship programs burdens the applicant, as well as the programs, with monetary and opportunity costs.⁸ In the analyses of other residency and fellowship programs' web sites, it is theorized that costs to both applicants and programs could be minimized with improved accessibility and content of each program's web site.^{3-5,9,10} A survey of fellowship applicants found that the information they valued the most was operative experience, program faculty, fellow autonomy, and program prestige.¹¹ This improved information during the application process could lead to more ideal matches for applicants and programs alike, while decreasing the costs associated with the process.

With only 73% of available SCC fellowship positions filled in 2016, an analysis of programs' primary source of information, their web sites, is warranted.¹² The goal of this study was to analyze the accessibility of accredited trauma, SCC, and ACS fellowship web sites and objectively evaluate the content contained within.

Methods

This study was exempt from Institutional Review Board approval. Analysis of accessibility and collection of data was performed in May of 2017. A comprehensive list of accredited trauma, SCC, and ACS fellowship programs was obtained from the Eastern Association for the Surgery of Trauma (EAST) fellowship directory.¹³

Web site accessibility was assessed based on a Google search using any combination of the keywords "program name" and "trauma surgery" or "surgical critical care" or "acute care surgery" and "fellowship program." Only the first page of results was viewed. This was due to the fact that appropriate results were never displayed on later pages and applicants searching for a fellowship program web site were unlikely to look past the first page of results.

A comprehensive list of 21 data points for content criteria was constructed using a pre-established list of data points that had been refined many times by previous web site analyses of other fellowships and residencies.^{3-5,7,9,10,14,15} Variables relating to fellow recruitment and education included program description, description of the application process, salary information, rotation schedule, case description, call expectations, role of seeing patients in clinic, teaching responsibilities, program coordinator contact information, program director contact information, journal clubs, intrainstitutional meetings, national meeting attendance sponsorship, and research factors such as opportunities, requirements, and current and previous research. Other variables evaluated included list of current fellows, medical school and residency of current fellows, list of previous fellows, current job choice of previous fellows, and faculty involved.

Independent web site analyses were performed by two authors, and an agreement of 97% of data points was observed. A mutual decision was made when discrepancies arose in the collection of data.

Information on which programs were filled, partially filled, or went unfilled was obtained from the National Residency

Match Program's Program results.¹⁶ The 2018 match year was used due to the web site analysis occurring after the 2017 match and during the time that 2018 applicants would access these web sites for information. Programs that were completely filled were compared with programs that were partially filled or unfilled for number of total data points present, as well as the presence of individual data points.

Results

One hundred two fellowship programs were identified in the EAST fellowship directory, offering 236 fellowship positions. Types of fellowship programs in the directory were subdivided into trauma only, critical care only, trauma and critical care, and ACS. Eleven programs offered 18 positions for trauma only fellowships, while 77 critical care only fellowship positions were offered by 69 institutions. Seventy-four programs offered a combined trauma and critical care fellowship, totaling 99 positions. Forty-two ACS fellowship positions were offered by 32 institutions. More than one subtype of fellowship program was available at most institutions. Many web pages contained information for multiple types of fellowship paths, while a few created separate web pages for each. Trauma, critical care, trauma and critical care, and ACS fellowship web pages were all evaluated collectively in this study due to the overlapping web sites that were often not directed toward either program type. This made it impossible to group web sites based on their program type.

Of these one hundred two programs, 57 (56%) contained hyperlinks in the directory, but only 37 (36%) were functional. Ninety-one (89%) programs had web sites accessible through a Google search. Eleven (11%) programs lacked web sites entirely.

Content contained in the web sites for all 91 programs varied greatly. No program web site contained all 21 content criteria. Sixty-two (68%) web sites contained less than half of the evaluated criteria. The average number of content criteria contained was 9.27 criteria per web site. The most and least number of criteria contained in a single web site was 18 and 2, respectively. The most common data point included was program description (97%), while role of seeing patients in clinic (4%) was the least common criteria present. Complete results for the 21 assessed content criteria can be found in [Table 1](#).

Sixty-one programs reportedly filled all of their offered fellowship positions in 2018. Four of these 61 (7%) programs did not contain a web site. Seventeen programs, 1 (6%) of which did not contain a web site, filled a partial number of their offered fellowship slots. No slots were filled at 17 programs with 2 (12%) of these programs offering no web site. Thirteen programs were listed in the NRMP's Program Match sheet that were not contained on the EAST Fellowship Directory, while seven programs listed in the EAST Fellowship Directory had no match data for 2018.

For the 57 programs that had web sites and were completely filled, the average data points contained was 9.51 criteria per web site. Partially filled and unfilled programs averaged 8.8 criteria, with 8.3 and 9.4, respectively. Of the 22 web sites, which contained more than half (12 of 21) of the evaluated criteria, 17 (77%) were completely filled, 1 (5%) was

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