

## **Best Practices in Selecting Residents 2014 AAP Postdoctoral Educators Workshop Outcomes**

The 2014 Postdoctoral Educators (PD2) Workshop, "Selecting Our Residents in the Pass/Fail Environment" focused on selecting future residents by evaluating recommendation letter and assessing candidates from pass/fail dental schools. This document summarizes best practices from the Academy's top education leaders.

### **Introduction**

Candidates are selected for specialty programs based on whether the school's administration believes the candidates are suited to that specialty, can complete the program with high marks, seem personally a good fit with the specific program, and ultimately become proficient, ethical practitioners. Gauging the potential of periodontal resident candidates is a delicate process and should be done with the utmost care. Assessment should be practiced through various forms and each candidate should be considered, whether their dental school transcripts include traditional or pass/no pass grading systems.

### **Candidates from Pass/No Pass Dental Schools**

It is ethically important to consider every candidate with the same unbiased attitude. Having information of the exact level of candidates' knowledge is extremely helpful. However, there are many traits which cannot be scored. For example, clinical course competence and many personal characteristics are determined by observation.

Programs that have accepted residents from pass/no pass dental schools have found that they possess many characteristics important to ensuring they are able to excel in a specialty. These residents have not only intelligence, but the highest levels of empathy, understanding, professionalism, patient and staff relations, and accountability. In dental school, the student body is more diverse, providing added experience and understanding. Residents tend to be more congenial and collaborative with each other and perform more community service than those from traditional schools. Including these candidates in the selection process can benefit not only the program and institution, but ultimately, provide communities with highly intelligent and professional practitioners.

### **Candidate Traits**

Intelligence is only one factor to consider when choosing residents. Many traits are necessary to excel in professional oral health care, including the drive for excellence, personal and professional integrity, respect, innovation, accountability, leadership, and social responsibility. The ADEA PPI is one way to assess the extent of necessary traits, with ratings of the following educational categories: knowledge and creativity, communication skills, teamwork, resilience, planning and organization, and ethics and integrity.

## Candidate Assessment Methods

According to a 2014 AAP survey of periodontal program directors, the following components are used to evaluate residency candidates overall. They are listed in rank order:

1. Personal interviews
2. Resident feedback
3. Honors/blue ribbons, etc.
4. Letters of recommendation
5. Community service
6. Leadership in organized dentistry
7. Portfolio
8. Research experience
9. National Board Dental Examination (DBDE) scores
10. Personal statements
11. Graduate records
12. Personality tests

Making the decision to ask a candidate to come for an interview is extremely difficult. To do that many of the above criteria must be reviewed. The following is extended information on many of those measures.

### Honors Courses and Commendations

There are several ways in which pass/no pass schools assess achievement without traditional grades, including honors courses and commendations. These, along with pass/no pass grading guides can assist directors in comparing resident candidates.

At least four pass/no pass schools identify high achieving students with an honors (H) mark in specific courses, which would most likely appear on candidate transcripts. Many schools also present commendations which could appear in the transcript or in the narrative of the dean's letter.

### Faculty and Dean Recommendation Letters

Most, if not all educators will not write a negative letter for fear of legal reprisals. Thus, recommendation letters may all seem to look alike and state that the candidate should be considered. This is not always the case however, and recommendation letters can be decoded by reading between the lines, talking with faculty who wrote the letters and assessing which faculty did not write letters. Directors should consider the following variables when reading recommendation letters:

#### *Who wrote the letter and the extent of details*

- Who the letter is written by
- How long and how well they know the candidate
- Letters that are not included, but probably should be (i.e. from the clinical coordinator)
- Assess the overall mix of letter writers
- Honest and genuine writing with a narrative of candidate accomplishments such as:
  - Honors courses
  - Commendations or awards
  - The candidate's demonstrated interest in periodontics
  - Whether there is a balance of positive and potential concerns
  - Leadership and community service activities
  - Research experience
  - Non-boilerplate closing recommendation with an overall assessment

### *Look for questionable comments*

Most candidates will ask those educators whom they know will write “good” letters, and some educators will write letters for those they are unsure as to whether they would succeed and make excellent specialists. Therefore, scrutinizing the letter is a must and directors should look for the following information:

- Consider the amount of detail about the candidate’s work and accomplishments
- Determine whether the letter is bland and boring or enthusiastic and passionate
- What is NOT stated in the letter is most important
- Compare letters written by the same educator who recommended different candidates; does one letter speak louder than the next?

Below is a list of possible comments that could be viewed as highest recommendations to lowest. These comments are not representative of what any institution does, or should do.

1. Enthusiastically recommend and without reservation
2. Highly recommend
3. Recommend
4. Request fullest review

Comments such as these may be coupled with phrases like these:

1. Outstanding candidate
2. Outstanding academic record
3. Demonstrated leadership
4. Commitment to community service
5. Overcome obstacles

Additional comments and possible interpretations:

1. I give my highest recommendation – the candidate is outstanding and will make an excellent specialist
2. I strongly/highly recommend – the candidate is good and would most likely make an excellent specialist
3. I recommend – the candidate is so-so and may struggle in specialty training

The most common words directors search for in these letters, according to the AAP survey are: excellent, teachable, responsible, outstanding clinician, work ethic, team player, productive, communicative, and sincere.

### *Speak with letter writers*

In order to fully appreciate a recommendation letter, it is best to speak with the person who wrote it. This allows administrators to ask additional questions and gauge the level of recommendation. Many people will be unable to hide their true feelings, which will clearly come through by the tone of their voice and hesitations during discussion. A phone call is best; as email is in written form, it may cause reluctance for honesty.

## Personal Statements

Personal statements can be misleading as one will always portray themselves in a positive manner. Sincerity, honesty and uniqueness in these essays can assist directors in choosing those that speak to them. That same 2014 AAP survey also found that most directors discuss the statement with the candidate during the interview and consider the candidate's motivation and why they are choosing periodontics as most important. The top factors directors look for in personal statements are:

- Why the candidate chose periodontics and their sincere level of interest in the specialty
- Knowledge and experience with periodontics; commitment over time
- Personal, unique information such as future goals, achievements, challenges, experiences, motivations, aspirations and passions, as well as how they handle adversity and stress
- Grammar/spelling mistakes and writing capabilities
- Whether the statement is generic or tailored to the institution

## **Assessment Resources**

There are many means which can be used to assist in assessment including guides to decipher grades, the ADEA PPI and other ADEA resources.

## Grading Resource Guide

The 2013 ADEA Council on Hospitals and Advanced Education Programs (COHAEP) Symposium on Advanced Dental Education Admissions focused on ways to evaluate postdoctoral program candidates. Pass/no pass dental school grading systems were presented by seven schools, identifying how achievement is determined and what graduate program directors should look for when evaluating a candidate. The proceedings and speaker presentations from that meeting can be found on the ADEA website at: [http://www.adea.org/about\\_adea/governance/ADEA\\_COHAEP/ADEA\\_COHEAP\\_Resources.html](http://www.adea.org/about_adea/governance/ADEA_COHAEP/ADEA_COHEAP_Resources.html).

Additionally, ADEA developed the *Grading Resource Guide* that includes information such as whether or not the pass/no pass dental school offers class rank and their scoring policies. ADEA is currently updating that guide, but the original information is still relevant and can be found within these AAP Workshop Outcome resources.

## Application Requirements

Directors may want to add criteria to their application requirements asking for a detailed explanation of the school's grading system, including whether they award honors marks, commendations, awards, or any other indication of higher achievement. Additionally, it is important to know the average number of high achievement marks that candidates from the same school historically receive and which courses offer those marks, if any. For example, during the 2014 Postdoctoral Educators Workshop, speakers from the University of California, Los Angeles outlined a range of "units" earned via commendations and honors, stating that by the end of the third year in dental school, students historically earn between 2 and 39 "units" out of 156 "units" (the maximum that could be earned by the end of that year). This type of information provides a baseline to measure all candidates from that particular school.

## ADEA PASS Application and PPI

The ADEA Postdoctoral Application Support Service (PASS) allows candidates to complete one standardized application for over 600 participating advanced dental education programs. The following assessments and tools are provided to program directors for each resident candidate who applies through PASS:

### Application

- Personal Potential Index (PPI)
- Professional Evaluation (PEF)
- Institution Evaluation (IEF)
- NBDE (as reported by the dental school)
- Dental school transcript
- Resume/CV
- Background check through Certiphi Screening
- The Postdoctoral Dental Matching Program

### WebAdMIT (electronic application organizer)

- Online review by multiple faculty
- Communication tracking
- Email merging
- Interview scheduling
- Custom fields
- Photo
- Standard and personalized reporting

The ADEA PPI is intended to assist program directors in assessing the extent of non-cognitive traits. Three to five evaluators will rate and comment on a candidate's characteristics listed below:

- Knowledge and Creativity
- Communication Skills
- Teamwork
- Resilience
- Planning and Organization
- Ethics and Integrity
- Overall Evaluation

Each PASS evaluation report is an opportunity to review a candidate's strengths. Programs should consider the entire report, including numerical ratings and written comments, along with the candidate's undergraduate grades, test scores, recommendation letters and other information. Directors should review the individual ratings in each of the categories and the comments provided by the evaluators. Focusing only on the mean ratings on the first page of the evaluation report will give a false assessment. Small differences in PPI ratings should not be used to make distinctions among candidates. Evaluators should be contacted if there are questions about their evaluations.

## **Interviewing**

The face-to-face interview is the most important determining factor in finalizing a resident choice. Applications and scores are important, but spending time with the candidate is the key to understanding the whole person. There are several methods that can be employed together or selectively.

It is best to get multiple opinions about each candidate. Interviews should be scheduled with various staff and faculty members and residents who will all look for different characteristics. Psychologists have also been used to gain a better understanding of a candidate's potential fit with the institution. No matter who is interviewing, all reviewers should use the same rating system and have the same weighted vote.

### Psychologists

Having a psychologist participate in the interviewing process can be extremely helpful. One of the keys to understanding a candidate is to create an interviewing environment they are comfortable with, which psychologists understand how to achieve. This allows the candidate to breathe easier and the ability to act more like him or herself, giving interviewers a more realistic sense of the person. Questions by psychologists will usually be asked in the exact same way for each candidate and then assessed and compared using a psychological scale. Psychologists should have the same vote as the other interviewers.

### Program Directors

Aside from the formal program director interview, it is important for the candidate to spend the day with the director shadowing him or her going about business as usual, while getting to know each other with discussion along the way. Directors will get a sense of a candidate's enthusiasm for periodontics and understand how they will behave and handle situations on a daily basis.

### Residents

Residents can be one of the most important people assisting in the candidate interview and review process. Often times, residents will spend a great deal more time with the candidate than faculty, going out for dinner and drinks, showing them around campus, etc. This allows residents to get a more personal perspective and a better understanding of the candidate's commitment to periodontics, their ethical sense, and how they will fit with the program's culture.

### **Decision Making**

The selection committee should meet with the faculty and residents to discuss each candidate. Each interviewing member should have the same weighted vote. Discussion should center on the candidate's personal character traits and their passion for periodontics and excitement to be a part of the program itself.

It is important to review every piece of information and use all available resources in the evaluation. Having many different types of people participate in the interview process, and getting opinions of those with even minimal contact with the candidate, will increase insight into a candidate's potential and fit with the program. No matter who the candidate is or their grading system, they should all be considered, assessed, and treated in the same manner.