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“Differences in accessibility to program directors indicates a potential greater burden upon female program directors”

Introduction: The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent limitations on in-person interviews and away rotations have necessitated residency program directors and prospective applicants alike to rely disproportionately upon electronic means of communication relative to years past. Program directors (PDs) play a key role in providing information about their program to applicants, however it is unknown how accessible PDs are to prospective applicants. The objective of this study was to explore differences in accessibility to PDs via their use of individual, general (programmatic), or administrative-assistant email addresses in the FREIDA database.

Methods: The FRIEDA database was queried for all US-based internal medicine programs. Information was recorded for the listed PD and administrative assistant. The email address for each respective individual was classified as either an individual PD’s email address (dr.jane.doe@hospital.edu); a general program address (medicine@hospital.edu); or the administrative assistant's email address (assistant.john.smith@hospital.edu). Program-specific websites were also used to identify the public-presenting gender of PDs according to the PD’s chosen photo.

Results: A total of 560 IM programs were included in this study. PDs were majority male-presenting (n=365, 65.7%) versus female-presenting (n=192, 34.3%). Male PD’s were less likely to provide their individual email address (n=183, 49.7%) and more likely to list the administrative assistant’s email instead (n=114, 31.0%) relative to female PDs (individual: n=113, 58.9%; administrative: n=36, 18.8%) (Chi-square, p=0.0081). PDs did not differ in their reliance upon general programmatic email addresses (male: n=71, 19.3%; female: n=43, 22.4%).

Conclusions: Female PDs are more accessible to residency applicants who use the FRIEDA database. While this may be a benefit for trainees due to increased availability of the PD to them, it also indicates a potential greater administrative burden upon female PDs relative to their male counterparts. As programs continue to receive increasing numbers of applications, a standardized approach should be considered in order to alleviate these gendered differences. Moreover, standardization should be accomplished to ensure that residency applicants may engage consistently with all programs of interest and to facilitate a successful, equitable match.