

The ins and outs of the residency process

By Renee Ahrens, PharmD



When I started thinking about doing a residency, I had no idea how to go about looking for one. I stumbled my way through the process, wishing I had a guide or a mentor to help. Looking back, I see how confusing the process can be, but the outcome is well worth the work. My residency was one of the best experiences I have had, and it prepared me well for my current career.

The residency process can be broken down into four parts: research, application, interview, and result. The process officially starts in the final year of pharmacy school, although you may informally start researching programs sooner. It is good to begin the process as early as you can, but it is never *too late* to start, so do not be discouraged if you are already behind in the timeline described here.

The research part of the residency process usually starts during the summer before and the first few months of the fall of your final year. Start considering the different types of residencies available (e.g., pharmacy practice, community, association management). Talk with residents in a variety of settings to learn about the different practice settings. Find out what residents in different roles enjoy and dislike about their experiences. Think about whether you have a geographic preference. Is there a place that you would like to live, or conversely, where you definitely do not want to live? Look on APhA's (www.aphanet.org/development/compharm.html) and the American Society of Health-System Pharmacists' (ASHP, www.ashp.org) Web sites for listings, descriptions, and locations of residencies. You may choose to attend the ASHP Midyear Clinical Meeting in early December for the annual Residency Showcase. The showcase gives you a chance to talk with program directors and current residents in ASHP-accredited residency programs and emerging programs.

The research portion of the residency process is also the time when you should be updating your CV. Think about who you would like to ask for letters of recommendation, such as preceptors, faculty at your school, or employers, and approach them in the fall about providing a reference for you. Most of the applications for residencies are due at the end of December or the beginning of January. Since this is a busy time for most people, it helps if referees can work on letters for you before the holiday season. You may also think about asking an extra person to serve as a reference for you to ensure you will end up with enough letters for each program.

Applications and interviews

The fall is also the time you will typically choose your rotations. It may be wise to think about asking for February off in your rotation cycle. This is the month when most interviews are conducted, and planning interviews is easier if you are not coordinating them with a rotation schedule. Most preceptors will understand if you

must take time off to interview at residency sites, so it is not a detriment if you cannot take the month off. You may also want to choose a rotation in either the same physical location or a setting similar to that of the residencies you are seeking. This allows you to take a "test drive" to see if you like the setting before you commit to a residency.

Once you have found residency programs that interest you, contact them via e-mail or letter to get more information and an application. Pay close attention to application deadlines to ensure you do not inadvertently miss them. Take time to fill out the applications; remember, your application may be the only impression the residency program has of you. Programs get many applications, so you want to make sure yours stands out for the right reasons. Proofread it carefully, ensuring there are no spelling or grammatical errors, and have others review it for clarity. Most applications require a completed information page, a cover letter/letter of intent, a CV, a transcript, and letters of recommendation. It is a good idea to talk with your school's registrar before you start filling out applications to find out the process and timetable for requesting a transcript. Most programs will not look at an application until it is complete. Another tip is to get your application in before the deadline; you might be invited for an early interview.

Interviews for programs generally occur between January and March of your final year of pharmacy school. Submitting an application does not guarantee that you will be invited to interview, so you may want to apply to several programs. On the other hand, any interview costs are your own—residency programs do not pay any of your travel expenses—so you need to consider how many programs are realistic for you to visit based on your budget. The interview typically runs half a day to a full day and consists of meetings with program directors, preceptors, and current residents. You may be asked to give a presentation or to look at a case. You should also be given a tour of the residency site and, if applicable,

Table 1.
Residency timeline

September–December

- Research programs
- Update your CV
- Attend meetings/visit exhibits
- Initiate contact with programs of interest
- Obtain applications
- Ask referees to write letters for you

January–March

- Applications are due in late December/early January
- Apply for the match program by early January
- Interviews occur
- Offers made for nonparticipants of match programs
- Match lists due in early March

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the affiliated university. Make sure you have researched the program before the interview, so you can ask targeted questions. You will not make a favorable impression if you know nothing about the program! Dress professionally, and send a thank you note after interviewing. My best advice for the interview process is to be yourself. These interviews are a time for you to get to know the individuals in the program as they get to know you. Be thinking about whether you could see yourself in this setting and working with the people you meet.

Making the 'Match'

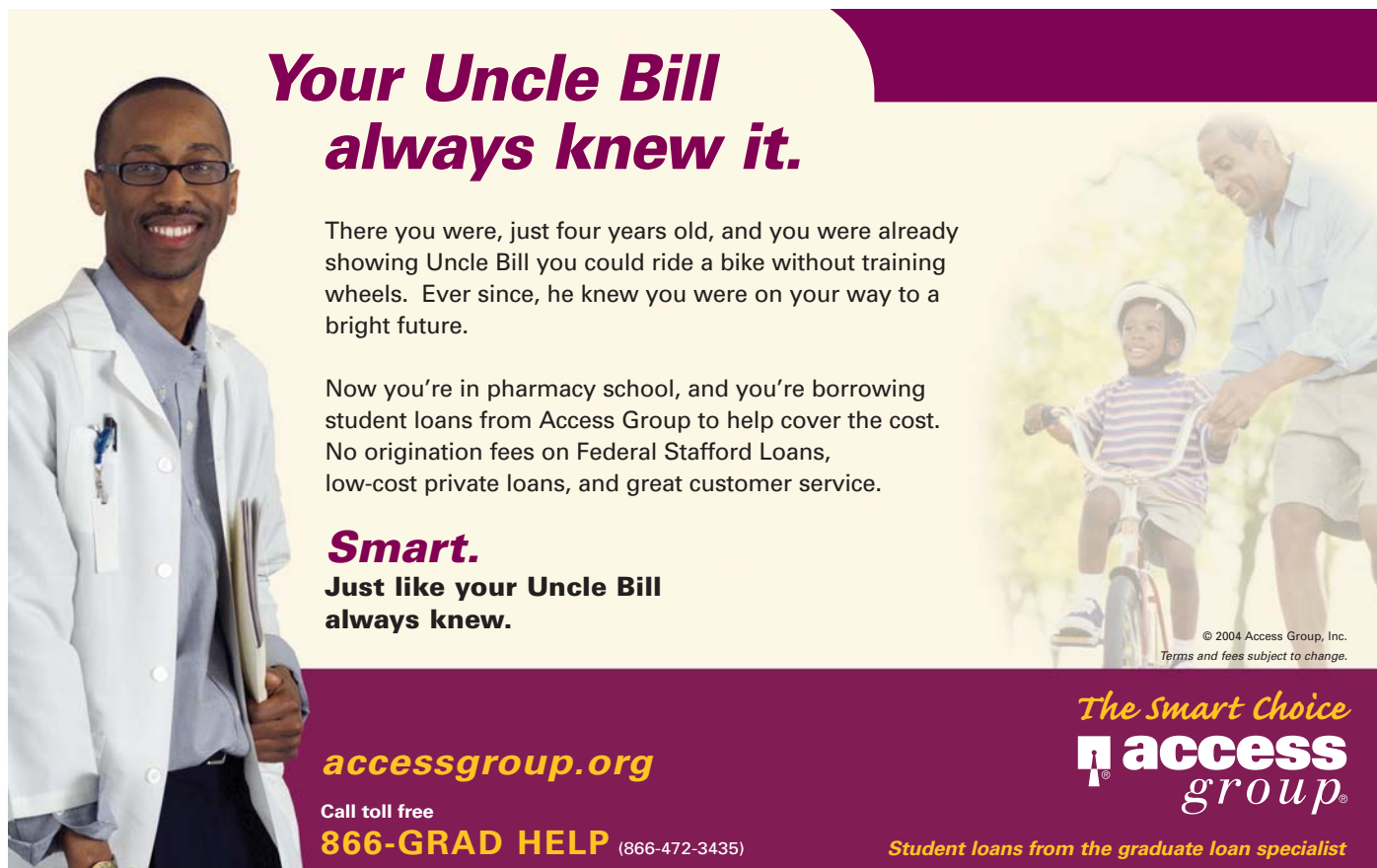
The majority of accredited pharmacy practice residency programs participate in the Resident Matching Program, "the Match." However, for accredited pharmacy practice residency programs with an emphasis in community care and managed care, the Match is currently optional. If the residencies you applied to participate in the match process, by mid-January you will need to apply (and pay the fee) to the National Matching Service (NMS) to be in Match. In early March, you submit your Match list to NMS after you have completed your interviews. Your Match list includes the programs in priority order where you would want to be a resident. Your Match list is considered a binding contract, so do not list a location if you are unwilling to do your residency there. Residency

programs also submit a rank ordered list of candidates in priority order to NMS at the same time. The matching process then uses the preferences submitted by both the programs and the candidates to put the candidates into residency positions at the respective programs.

Most community residencies and specialized residencies do not participate in the match program. These programs generally make their placement offers in late January or February. When an offer is made, you should be given time to make your decision. Since offers may be staggered and not made at the same time, you may need to contact other programs you interviewed with to see when they will be making offers. Be polite in explaining your situation, and you will find most will be willing to work with you.

The residency process can be daunting, but careful preparation will make it easier to navigate successfully. Find a mentor or someone who knows something about the process to help you. I can guarantee it is worth it! The residency experience will prepare you to make a difference in the profession of pharmacy. Good luck!

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