LETTER
Considerations in Determining the Ideal Pharmacy Residency Candidate

To the Editor: We would like to thank Phillips and colleagues for their article in the June 2016 issue of AJPE that identified characteristics of candidates who had a greater likelihood of receiving interviews for and matching to a postgraduate year one (PGY-1) pharmacy residency program. This article expands the literature and discussion of screening pharmacy residency candidates for residency program utilization and knowledge for hopeful residency candidates. Interestingly, the researchers found students who matched had a higher median pharmacy school GPA (3.7 vs 3.5; p < .035), yet no difference was found in the frequency of leadership positions, organizational memberships or work experience among their sample.1 Even though objective characteristics, such as GPA, may identify successful applicants, a residency program focused on candidates with high GPAs may overlook other highly qualified and motivated candidates.

Every year the American Society of Health-System Pharmacists Match for pharmacy residency programs becomes more competitive as the pool of applicants outnumbers available pharmacy residency positions. Since 2012 to 2016, the number of prospective PGY-1 applicants enrolled in the match has grown from 4500 to more than 5700.2 Meanwhile the number of available PGY-1 positions has increased by only 38% and continues to fall short with only 3332 PGY-1 positions available in 2016.2 With the overwhelming number of PGY-1 applicants, programs are forced to streamline the applicant review process using objective screening tools prior to offering initial interviews.1,3,4 In contrast to exclusively using an objective screening tool to identify specific academic and professional achievements and activities, residency program directors continue to value letters of recommendation and letters of intent in their selection criteria.3,5,6 These documents supply important details about an applicant’s character, aspirations, and examples of their professionalism.7,8 By devaluing these qualitative documents through a scoring tool, residency programs are limiting their pool of potentially successful residents.

If residency applicant committees focused solely on information found in a curriculum vitae (eg, GPA, awards, and the number of leadership positions), highly qualified and motivated candidates may be overlooked. These candidates include individuals with average academic performance or minimal involvement in extracurricular activities due to special circumstances, such as families or financial needs requiring them to work at higher volumes than the average student. This increased volume of patient care experience may take away from a student’s ability to academically perform, but would improve their knowledge, attitude and skills in other areas, such as communication with patients or providers. Other excellent candidates may have realized later in their PharmD programs the motivation to complete a residency by understanding the benefit of what further training may bring to their careers. These groups of applicants may not score high based on the objective characteristics found in their applications, but have the passion necessary for success. Additionally, these gifted applicants often demonstrate superior communication skills, unwavering dedication to patient care, and professionalism expressed in their letter of intent. They receive strong support to continue their clinical pharmacy training and accolades from their mentors, who can speak to their success despite adversity, in their letters of recommendation.

Applicants with stellar academic performance earning 4.0 GPAs or higher class rankings may not make the best residency candidates. After four to six years of pushing themselves to reach the top of their class and outperform their peers, these applicants may find themselves burnt out.9 This is concerning since burnout has been attributed to medical errors, increase risk of substance abuse, severe depression, and relationship difficulties among trainees.9 While these students appear as strong candidates on paper, they may not have taken the opportunities to further develop their communication skills through work experiences, demonstrated their involvement in professional activities, or maintained a balanced life outside of pharmacy school. Their strong exam performance and extensive knowledge may limit their success in residency to cohesively apply their knowledge toward patient care.

Pharmacy residency programs seek applicants who demonstrate the passion to learn, ability to work on a team effectively, and commit to patient care.6-8 Both objective attributes and subjective information found in an application paint a richer picture of each candidate based on their dedication toward the pharmacy profession, passions outside of pharmacy, and the ability to communicate their preparation for the next step in their pharmacy training.4 The authors successfully point out qualities of successful student candidates and illustrate the importance to excel academically, network, and develop skillsets for the work environment.1 However, the process of applying for a residency position cannot be limited to objective
characteristics in order for programs to secure high-quality residency candidates.

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REFERENCES