

SHORT COMMUNICATION

The Rising Importance of Research Output in Dermatology Residency Applications without Step 1 Scores

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Among medical specialties, dermatology is known for its notoriously competitive and sought-after residency positions, with 916 total applicants for 576 positions in the 2024 Match.¹ Historically, high performance on the United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE) Step 1 and Step 2 tests had been a major factor for program faculty (PF) in evaluating and ranking applicants.² However, in January 2022, the USMLE announced that Step 1 would transition from a numerical scored format to a pass/fail model, prompting discussions about the relative importance of other application elements, such as research.³

This year's match cycle included the first group of candidates applying for residency without a numeric Step 1 score. Each year, the National Resident Matching Program (NRMP) releases a report outlining various application components for successfully matched candidates in each specialty. Of these various components, the NRMP compares "Research Output" (RO) between matched and unmatched applicants.¹ The RO metric consists of a compilation of each applicant's average total number of abstracts, presentations, and publications. The mean RO among dermatology residency applicants has tripled over the past decade.

For successfully matched applicants, RO from 2014 to 2024 demonstrated an upward trend when analyzed in two-year intervals, with an average percent increase of 22% per interval from 2014 to 2022. By 2024, the mean RO saw a notable surge, rising by 32.5% from 2022, coinciding with the Step 1 grading shift (**Figure 1**).¹

The long-term upward trend in RO suggests that an increasing emphasis on research has been a consistent characteristic of the dermatology match process. However, the transition to a pass/fail Step 1 model may further amplify the focus on research as a screening metric for applicants. This is supported by the data showing that unmatched applicants in 2024 reported RO levels equivalent to that of successfully matched applicants in 2020 (**Figure 1**).

While RO is a useful aggregate measure, it does not differentiate between the different types of research items, making it relatively difficult to fully assess the extent of the applicants' productivity. Further research is necessary to fully understand the specific types of research activities that have increased and how PF weigh these components in the absence of numerical Step 1 scores. These studies will offer a

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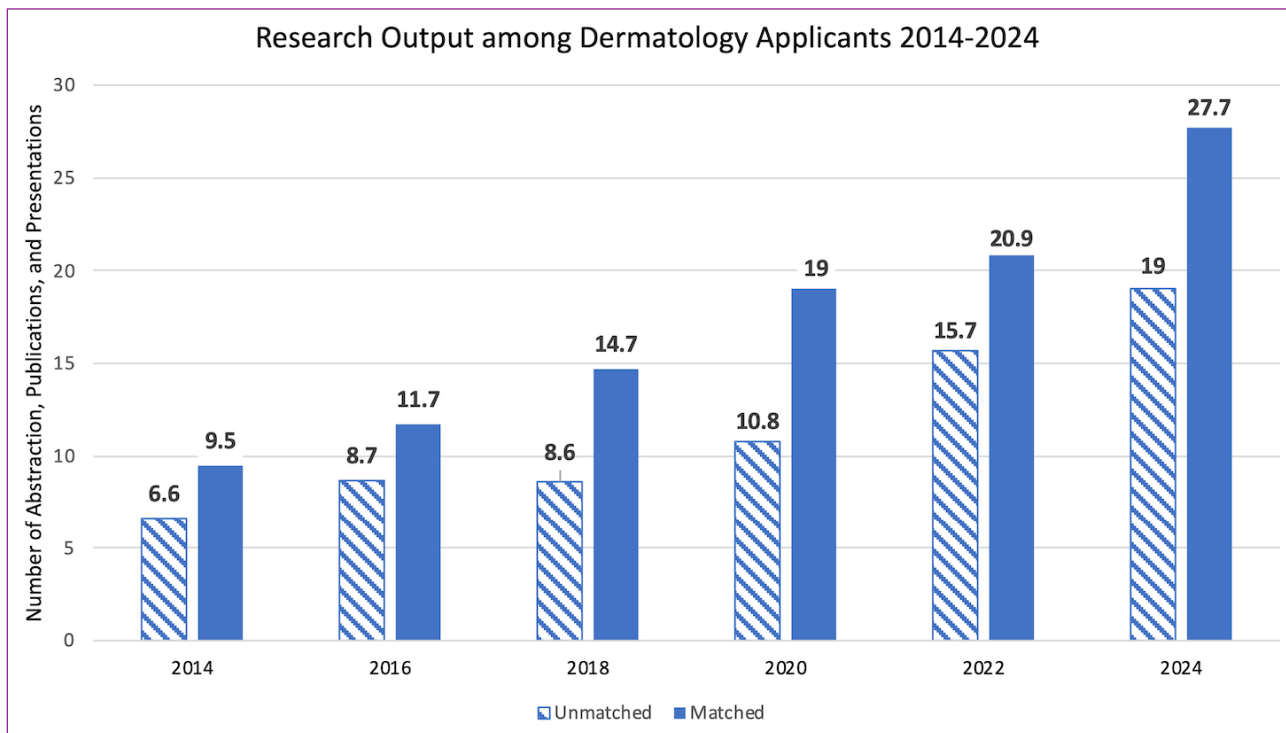


Figure 1. Research output among dermatology unmatched and matched applicants from 2014-2024.

deeper understanding of how the transition to Step 1 pass/fail model has affected the dermatology application and match process.

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