

UNSCRAMBLING THE MATCH

As it's currently constituted, the Scramble is a free-for-all. For those applicants unlucky enough to fail to find residency suitors during the main Match, the Scramble becomes a jarring reality. In 2010, nearly 13,000 residency applicants spent precious hours clogging voicemail boxes, fax lines and e-mail inboxes intent on securing one of only 1,060 unfilled first-year positions.

In 2008, a joint task force was established to bring organization and integrity to the Scramble. To much fanfare, the National Resident Matching Program (NRMP) and the Association of American Medical Colleges have partnered to introduce the SOAP, or the Supplemental Offer and Acceptance Program, which will take the place of the Scramble during Match Week 2012.

On Monday of Match Week, unmatched applicant and unfilled program information will be simultaneously released. There will be a "time-out" period during which applicants can send residency program applications through the Electronic Residency Application Service (ERAS), and programs can start interviewing eligible applicants. On Wednesday of Match Week, unfilled programs start making up to eight rounds of time-sensitive offers based on their own preference lists. An applicant who chooses to ac-

cept an offer from an interested residency program is bound to attend and can no longer solicit subsequent offers. The SOAP concludes on the Friday of Match Week shortly after Match ceremonies.

Alvin Roth, a professor of economics at Harvard University who helped design the Match, questions the effectiveness of the proposed SOAP. He predicts that, unlike the Match, where pairing is driven by student preference, pairing in the SOAP will be based on strategic decision-making by both residency programs and applicants. "We'll all come to know after this has operated for a couple of years..." says Roth. "After the first round, the pickings are going to be much thinner."

Furthermore, Roth predicts that the rules of the SOAP will be subverted by both programs and applicants eager to match. "If it's really, really tempting for people on both sides to break the rules," says Roth, "often the rules get broken."

Roth suggests that instead of the SOAP, the NRMP and ERAS should institute a properly organized second match during Match Week.

Mona M. Signer, executive director of the NRMP, disagrees with Roth's prediction that decision-making during the SOAP will be strategic. Instead, she predicts that programs and applicants will continue to pursue their best opportunities. Additionally, as with the Match, should a program or applicant violate prescribed rules, sanctions would be imposed.

As for Roth's suggestion that a second match take the place of the SOAP, Signer is conciliatory. "We studied the feasibility of a two-phased match a few years ago," she says, "and [although] everyone liked the idea of a two-phased match...

nobody liked how long the final match results would be delayed in order to accomplish a two-phased match."

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