Frequently Asked Questions: Introduction to the APPIC Match

Updated July 14, 2023

1. What is the APPIC Match all about?

In May of 1998, the APPIC membership voted to change the process by which applicants are chosen for psychology internships. The implementation of a computer-based Matching Program was probably the most significant change to internship selection in the nearly thirty years that APPIC had governed the selection process. This change was effective beginning with the 1999 APPIC Match, which was used to fill internship positions for the 1999-2000 training year.

Please note that the APPIC Match is for doctoral internship positions only, and is not used for postdoctoral positions.

A Matching Program provides an orderly process to help applicants obtain positions in doctoral internships of their choice, and to help internship programs obtain applicants of their choice. For both applicants and programs, it alleviates many of the factors that generate inequities, unfair pressures, and premature decisions in the making of offers by programs and the acceptance or rejection of offers by applicants. Similar Matching Programs have been used for many years in the placement of medical residents in North America, as well as in other health professions, including dentistry, pharmacy, optometry, podiatry and others.

National Matching Services Inc. (NMS) was chosen as the company to administer the APPIC Match because of its expertise in the specialized field of Matching Programs and because of its excellent reputation across disciplines. NMS was established in 1985 and specializes in the development and operation of Matching Programs for the competitive recruitment of positions. The senior professional staff of NMS individually have over thirty years of experience in the development, implementation, and operation of Matching Programs for professional recruitment. They have developed proprietary software that enables the automation of all aspects of the Matching Programs that they administer. They have experience in operating Matching Programs with as many as 40,000 applicants for 25,000 positions offered by 4,000 different employers.

The Roth-Peranson matching algorithm is at the core of the APPIC Match. This algorithm is based on the deferred acceptance algorithm, but has been adapted to accommodate complexities that arise in applying matching to real-world markets. The algorithm was designed by Alvin Roth and NMS President Elliott Peranson. It was key to Roth's winning the 2012 Nobel Prize for economics. The algorithm is stable, strategy proof, and is used in a wide variety of market design applications around the world.

2. How does the Matching Program work?

A brief summary of the process:

1. Applicants apply directly to the internship programs in which they are interested, and applicants and programs interview each other independently of the Matching Program.
2. Upon completion of interviews, each applicant submits a Rank Order List of desired programs, in numerical order of preference (first choice, second choice, etc.). Applicants may rank as many programs as they wish. Each internship program similarly submits a Rank Order List of their desired applicants, listing as many applicants as they wish, in order of the program's preference. These lists are submitted to National Matching Services via the internet by a predetermined deadline. The lists submitted by both applicants and programs are considered strictly confidential.
3. The Matching Program places applicants into positions based entirely on the preferences stated in the Rank Order Lists. Each applicant is placed with the most preferred program on the applicant's Rank Order List that ranks the applicant and does not fill its positions with more preferred applicants. Similarly, each internship program is matched with the most preferred applicants on its Rank Order List(s), up to the number of positions available, who rank the program and who do not receive positions at programs they prefer.
4. Applicants and Programs are notified of the results on a predetermined release date. Results are distributed via e-mail and the internet.

Since all offers, acceptances, rejections, and final placements occur simultaneously, the Matching Program is a fair and effective means of implementing a standardized acceptance date. It allows programs and applicants to evaluate each other fully before determining preferences. Furthermore, the Matching Program alleviates many common adverse situations from the recruitment process, such as applicants hoarding multiple offers, and applicants or programs reneging on a prior acceptance in order to accept a more preferred program or applicant that has subsequently become available. Also, a program can be assured that it will not be matched with more applicants than it has available positions.

3. What benefits do applicants and programs experience from the Matching Program?

Prior to the first APPIC Match in 1999, APPIC utilized a "Uniform Notification Day" (UND) or "Call Day" approach, in which internship sites would tender offers via telephone to applicants according to a pre-defined set of rules. Internship applicants were required to accept or reject their offers on that day. Over the years, numerous articles were written about the difficulties that students and programs experienced under this UND system, both procedural (e.g., applicants hoarding multiple offers, applicants or programs reneging on their agreements) and emotional (e.g., the high level of stress and anguish that occurred on UND).

The implementation of a computer-based Matching Program in 1999 was probably the most significant change to internship selection in the nearly thirty years that APPIC had governed the selection process. Feedback from applicants and programs clearly demonstrated that the Matching Program was a significant improvement over the UND approach.

The APPIC Match provides applicants and programs with the following benefits:

1. Applicants and internship programs are assured of receiving the best match possible. The previous UND system could not provide such assurance. Many internship sites, out of fear of having their offer "held" by an applicant, made offers to less-preferred candidates whom they believed were more likely to accept an offer. In addition, some applicants would accept offers from less-preferred sites, due to not wanting to keep an offer on "hold," because of a desire to quickly end an anxiety-ridden process, or because the more-preferred offer was made too late. In the Matching Program, internship sites and applicants do not have to worry about these issues. All parties can be assured of the best match possible based on the rankings submitted. Decisions by applicants and programs regarding rankings can be based on the applicants' and programs' true preferences for each other, without the need to speculate on the likelihood of subsequent offers being made or accepted. The bottom line: applicants and programs achieve better results under the Matching Program than under the previous UND process.

2. It eliminates much of the stress and pressure that occurred for applicants and programs on Uniform Notification Day, as well as the time required to make and respond to phone calls on that day.

3. Both applicants and programs can re-focus their efforts on getting the best internship / applicant available, rather than on how to "play the game" or "manipulate the system." For all participants, the best possible outcome is achieved by providing one's true preferences to the Matching Program.

4. Applicants can rank-order their true preferences without regard to the likelihood of obtaining a position at any particular program.

5. Similarly, internship programs may rank applicants without concern about how likely each applicant is to accept an offer. Thus, internship programs have little incentive to pressure applicants to disclose their rankings or to otherwise "break the rules."

6. Under the previous UND system, some programs would make more offers to applicants than they had positions available. They did this with the expectation that some offers would be rejected, in order to ensure that they made their offers early to desirable applicants, before the applicants accepted other positions. However, in some cases programs received more acceptances than they expected, and then had to renege on some of the offers to avoid overfilling their positions. With the Matching Program, internship programs can be assured that they will get the most desirable applicants available to them, without the risk of overfilling their positions.

7. The Matching Program provides couples far greater flexibility in coordinating their internship acceptances than under the previous system. A special procedure allows couples to submit coordinated Rank Order Lists, providing such options as requesting placement at the same agency or within the same geographical area.