



***Residency Guide:
A Resource for Nontraditional Candidates and Residents***

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INTRODUCTION

Purpose

The purpose of this resource is to help you as a nontraditional resident, either prospective or current, to:

- Maximize your chances for entering a residency program
- Be successful during residency
- Address the unique challenges that come with being a nontraditional resident

Definition

A “nontraditional” resident in the context of this resource is defined as a pharmacist who does not enter postgraduate year 1 (PGY1) residency immediately after graduation from pharmacy school or does not begin postgraduate year 2 (PGY2) residency immediately following their PGY1 year. Other definitions of nontraditional residents are outside the scope of this document. A “traditional” resident in the context of this resource is defined as a pharmacist who enters postgraduate residency training immediately after graduation from pharmacy school.

Example Reasons Pharmacists Find Themselves as “Nontraditional”

Attempted to enter residency and did not successfully match

Intentionally took a different career path other than residency (e.g. retail or community pharmacy)

- Financial concerns made residency less appealing or unaccessible
- Initially thought that the alternative career path was the best fit
- Previous work experience presented job offers prior to graduation

Personal and Social

- Burnout from pharmacy school
- Child-bearing or raising children
- Life events - marriage or divorce
- Government-affiliated service
- Health issues - self or family
- Partner or family discouraged residency training
- Inability to geographically relocate
 - Already purchased or owned a home
 - Need to be within proximity of family

TIPS FOR NONTRADITIONAL CANDIDATES APPLYING FOR RESIDENCY

Obtaining a residency position is becoming increasingly competitive every year. Not only are there a higher number of pharmacy graduates, there are also more pharmacists deciding to pursue residency training.¹⁻³ Additionally, the pool of nontraditional candidates applying for residency is also growing.¹ The following are some tips to consider if you are applying for residency as a nontraditional candidate:

1. Aim for ASHP-accredited programs

Residency programs that are ASHP-accredited are dedicated to standards and objectives conducive to resident learning, whereas non-accredited residencies are not governed by the same standards. Additionally, graduates of non-accredited PGY1 programs are not eligible for entry into ASHP-accredited PGY2 programs. As such, it may be in your best interest to apply to ASHP-accredited residency programs.

2. Use your time wisely

Residency Program Directors (RPDs) appreciate and even expect disclosure regarding how you kept up your professional pursuits during any gaps between pharmacy school and your application to a residency program. For example:

- How have you maintained your clinical skill set?
- How have you addressed any deficits due to gaps in practice?
- How have you kept up with the professional literature and new developments in disease state management?
- Did you pursue additional training or education that have enhanced your skills and marketability?
- Did you work with a unique health population that enhanced your clinical skills?
- Were you involved with research? If yes, did you publish your results in a poster presentation or professional journal?

Did you become involved in any local, state, or national pharmacy organizations?

Residency training is an intense time commitment. RPDs are screening for candidates who are able to manage their time in a manner that suggests they can juggle multiple obligations at once while still yielding progress on and accomplishment of focused goals.

Ideas for maintaining your professional activities during gaps include:

- Authoring a clinical article
 - Tip: In addition to pursuing publication in a national or international journal, don't forget about opportunities that exist at your employer or within your local or state affiliate
- Completing CE credits in relevant inpatient topics to maintain knowledge base and demonstrate dedication to pursuing residency training
- Developing a medication monograph
- Maintaining ties with a local pharmacy school and assisting in precepting patient case studies or labs to maintain your clinical skill set, especially if hospital pharmacist jobs are unavailable to you
- Performing a medication use evaluation
- Presenting a poster at a local, state, or national pharmacy meeting

3. Highlight your work experiences

Research shows that many nontraditional residents tend to have more work history or applicable life experience compared to traditional residents⁴ as well as a stronger work ethic. Nontraditional candidates should highlight that they have already made the difficult transition from student to pharmacist and are used to working long hours. Other important strengths to highlight include: communication skills, managerial/administrative duties, precepting experience, and conflict resolution with staff, patients, or other healthcare providers.

Use your past history to your advantage to make yourself a more appealing residency candidate. For example, consider mentioning your experience with inter-professional relationships and team projects. Speak to how these opportunities expanded your skill set and helped you become a better pharmacist. Alternatively, share how being a parent or the caregiver of an aging family member enhanced your perspective on the important role of the pharmacist. Rather than feel self-doubt about your nontraditional path, emphasize the insight you gained from facing these unique challenges and how they shaped you into an emotionally stable, self-aware, and mature residency candidate.

4. Consider disclosing unique challenges

The majority of RPDs realize nontraditional residents come from varied backgrounds. Although there is no requirement to disclose *why* you did not pursue residency in the expected successive timeline, sometimes disclosing the reason for a gap can lend respect for or understanding of your life choices. In disclosing some of this information, you may also give the RPD peace of mind that the obstacle is no longer a distraction allowing you to focus completely on your residency training. For example, an interviewer at a residency program observed that candidates interviewed during Phase II of the Match were ranked higher when they were

forthright about the lessons they learned while going through Phase I of the Match and not successfully matching.

Perspective from a residency program interviewer:

We interviewed a candidate who stated that she made a mistake by being overly-confident in her marketability and had limited herself geographically when applying to residency programs. She explained that many of her professors and peers had told her she would easily get into any residency program she wanted because of her excellent grade point average and her role as chapter president of her school's largest pharmacy organization. She stated that she was both shocked and embarrassed when she did not match; however, she said that this experience was humbling to her. The candidate realized that if residency is really something she wanted, she would have to work hard for it. She pursued a resident position thinking it would be easier for her than the average person, but after self-reflection, she was faced with the reality of not even having the opportunity to obtain residency. She explained how much she wanted residency and why. The vulnerability of her disclosures left a positive impression on all of the interviewers in the room.

We all face challenges and setbacks when striving to reach our goals. The stronger residency candidate is the one who has faced adversity and learned from it rather than the one who has not yet faced adversity.

Personal experience from a nontraditional resident:

I had a family member diagnosed with cancer during my 4th year of school. I applied to residency programs all over the country but secretly hoped to stay close to home to be with family during this difficult time. I received multiple interviews but none of them were near my family. I ultimately withdrew from the match to move closer to family during this season of our lives. When I decided to pursue residency several years later, I did not disclose the fact that a family member passed away from cancer in my letters of intent; however, I did disclose the fact that I originally withdrew from the match due to family illness and outlined the steps I took during that time to stay involved and now that season of my life had passed and I was excited and ready to focus all of my energy towards residency training. I received positive feedback from several program directors expressing their respect that I was able to make a difficult decision to be with my family but that they appreciated the reassurance that the difficult season of my life had passed and I would now be able to focus my attention and energy on residency training.

5. Find a mentor

A mentor serves as a valuable resource when contemplating major career decisions or experiencing important career milestones. For example, prior to applying for residency, someone with experience in your area of interest can provide valuable insight regarding their day-to-day life, challenges they have faced, and opportunities within the profession. Throughout the residency application process, a mentor can assist with curriculum vitae (CV) review, program selection, and interview tips. During residency, a mentor can provide advice related to problem solving, time management, opportunities for advancement, and transitioning to the workforce.

Choosing a mentor may require reaching out to several individuals with experience in your area(s) of interest. Start by contacting practitioners you already know to gauge their interest. In addition, ASHP offers a free online Mentor Match program that allows ASHP members to connect with pharmacist colleagues from various backgrounds with a wide range of experiences. Details about the ASHP Mentor Match can be found at the following link: <https://www.ashp.org/new-practitioner/new-practitioners-forum/programs-and-awards/ashp-mentor-match>.

CONSIDERATIONS UNIQUE TO NONTRADITIONAL RESIDENTS

Congratulations if you are a nontraditional resident who matched with a pharmacy residency program. Being a nontraditional resident may invoke unique barriers or challenges that traditional residents are less likely to encounter. The following tips are intended to help you successfully navigate this next stage of your career.

1. Licensing or continuing education requirements might differ

Certain states may not require continuing education (CE) credits for the first renewal cycle of your pharmacy license, which minimizes the burden for pharmacy residents who begin residency immediately following graduation from pharmacy school. Remember, some nontraditional residents have been licensed for years before pursuing residency, and therefore would be responsible for obtaining required CE credits. Check with your state pharmacy licensing agency for details.

Pharmacists who graduated from pharmacy school in a foreign country may need to meet additional requirements prior to being eligible to pursue a U.S. pharmacy residency program. For example, they may face several complex hurdles, including acquiring a visa and completion of the “academic, linguistic, and legal requirements.”⁵ If you received your pharmacy degree from a foreign country, it is important to check the requirements for each residency program you are interested in pursuing as well as the respective state Board of Pharmacy website to ensure you meet all licensing and eligibility requirements.

2. Caregiving can be challenging

Being a parent or a primary caregiver during residency can be particularly challenging. For example, most daycares tend to have months-long waiting lists. Even if you are able to enroll your child(ren), the hours might not extend long enough to cover the time commitments you have during residency. Ideas for overcoming these challenges include:

- As soon as you know where you matched, start investigating daycares in the area to determine:
 - If you need to put your name on a waiting list to be eligible for entry
 - If there are any centers with extended hours
- Consider having your partner or another family member take over the bulk of childcare or elder care responsibilities
- Consider hiring a nanny or other live-in care worker
- Determine if your institution offers assistance with caregiving, such as:
 - Flexible spending accounts which allow for dependent care expenses to be removed from your paycheck without pre-tax penalty
 - Subsidized back-up or short-term illness childcare
- Consider connecting with other parents or local groups to discuss tips for overcoming caregiving challenges and obtain support
- Have a back-up care plan in place for the times when your primary caregiver is not available (e.g. daycare is closed, nanny is on vacation, etc.)
- Determine how accommodating your residency program is in regards to you leaving work in the event that your primary caregiver is not able (e.g. picking up a sick child from daycare, relieving a sick caregiver, etc.)

3. Prepare for a financial and time transition

Pursuing and obtaining residency training is both cost and time intensive. It is not a quick, overnight process to apply, interview, and match with a residency program. Therefore, it is important to start saving and planning in advance.

In particular, nontraditional candidates and residents may experience significant financial transitions since most residency positions may only pay 25% to 50% of a typical pharmacist income.^{6,7} Residency might also require relocation and moving expenses. Furthermore, nontraditional candidates and residents will have already entered repayment on their student loans. Since they cannot defer these payments during residency, they will often incur large monthly expenses. If you find yourself in a similar situation, be sure to explore your available options, such as an income driven repayment plan, to make your monthly installments more manageable during residency.

Residency activities often challenge even those who excel at financial and time management; however, with careful planning and budgeting, you can successfully overcome these obstacles. Keep in mind that completion of residency will also provide you with opportunities that otherwise would not have been available to you.

Advice from a nontraditional resident:

When I decided to return to residency, my wife and I made the decision in September, to allow plenty of time for me to research programs, work on my letter of intent and get advice from my mentors. This gave us 9-10 months before we relocated to plan, adjust our budget and start saving. Accumulating a significant savings account will help with relocation costs, as well as ease the financial burden of returning to residency.

4. Be cautious in not overstepping your place

Sometimes previous clinical experience boosts your confidence, which can be a positive benefit when entering residency. However, residency might also bring about role transitions between you and others with whom you have previously worked. For example, a colleague might all of a sudden be your preceptor.⁷ Therefore, it is prudent to remember that you entered residency to gain additional knowledge and skills. No matter what you may already know, there is always more to learn.

Advice from a nontraditional resident serving in the U.S. Air Force:

Know your role and be careful in not overstepping your role. Having learned from folks in the military, you don't want to be perceived as the person that comes in and says, "Oh...at my last base, we did things like..." You're there to learn. Respectfully and carefully navigate the learning environment if you've previously been in practice or leadership.

5. Work-life integration

Effectively integrating work and life activities is not a problem uniquely experienced by nontraditional residents. However, it is important to recognize that these individuals may have an increased number of competing priorities that make integration critical and complex. For example, many traditional residents connect socially on weekends they are not staffing. Nontraditional residents might find themselves unable to participate due to external family commitments. Additionally, they may not even be invited to social events due to the assumption they would be unable or unwilling to attend. As a result, nontraditional residents,

particularly those who are several years older than their co-residents, might feel excluded from social events hosted by their peers.

Regardless of the situation, it is important that all residents, including nontraditional residents, find time to unwind from the stresses of residency and recharge their batteries. Ideas for creating better work-life integration as a nontraditional resident include:

- Talking with your co-residents to try to plan activities in advance so you can proactively make the necessary accommodations to attend
- Hosting a game night with your co-residents so they can get to know you better
- Getting a babysitter so that you can take your significant other on a date Making routine exercise a priority, despite your overwhelming to-do list
- Splurging on a massage or spa day
- Treating yourself to a meal delivery service to minimize shopping and cooking duties or a cleaning service to minimize household duties

6. Struggling with confidence

As a nontraditional resident, you may feel less confident than your co-residents who have just graduated with an up-to-date and seemingly more retrievable knowledge base. It is important to refrain from comparing yourself to your colleagues as you, like everyone else, earned your place to be there. Residency is all about improving your clinical skills from your baseline. If you feel as though you need a clinical refresher, the ASHP Pharmacotherapy Therapeutic Modules are a valuable resource for drug therapy and disease state management review.

Personal experience from a nontraditional resident:

After working for almost a full year at a community hospital as a staff pharmacist, I thought that I had a pretty good foundation and knowledge of several disease states in acute care management. After starting PGY1 Pharmacy Residency, I found that I still had significant clinical knowledge gaps and I would often feel that my previous experience did not help me much. I developed a habit of apologizing to my preceptors every time I felt I had disappointed them for not knowing a piece of information that they expected me to know. At a certain point during residency when I was known for incessant apologies, I had a preceptor firmly tell me to stop apologizing and to take the workload and responsibilities one day at a time. It was a real eye opener to me because residency is demanding and often makes you feel that you have to know everything all at once, especially if you have had some experience prior to starting residency. A big take-home point that I have learned during residency was understanding that although it is a good skill to be aware of what you don't know, each project, presentation, or patient case can present an opportunity to build upon your knowledge base, and in turn, can build your confidence with time.

7. Fitting in with traditional co-residents

As a nontraditional resident, you may face challenges when interacting and developing relationships with your co-residents who entered the program immediately following graduation from pharmacy school. Sometimes, these challenges are more internal than external, as people harbor certain expectations or fears regarding how to relate to others who differ in age, pharmacy experience, and life circumstances.

Personal experience from a nontraditional resident:

I felt very different from my co-residents because there was an age gap (i.e., I was at least 7 years older than my peers), and unlike any of my co-residents, I had work experience directly after pharmacy school and had also accumulated more bills and expenses. The rigors of residency affected all of us in very similar ways and it was because we were all essentially experiencing the same thing that allowed us to get to know each other and form a long-lasting bond. Some social activities we did together to make our experience more enjoyable during residency included: gathering for potluck-style holiday dinners, coordinating outdoor activities such as hiking, having movie nights, decorating our office space, and of course, studying or working on assignments together when appropriate.

NONTRADITIONAL RESIDENCY PROGRAMS

You may be wondering what nontraditional residency programs are and if they are worthy of pursuit. Nontraditional residency programs are different from the standard residency track in that they are completed over 2-3 years instead of a 1 year timeframe,^{2,3,8} which can lessen the resident’s financial and time burdens. Although these programs are eligible to be ASHP-accredited similar to traditional residency programs,^{2,3,7,8} nontraditional tracks often have limited eligibility since many programs restrict applications to internal candidates, with the intention of developing pharmacy staff who may not have pursued or were denied residency training earlier in their career.² However, some nontraditional residency programs were developed to attract candidates to remote locations.⁸

For more information on nontraditional residency programs, it is recommended that you seek out specific details from institutions that offer such programs. There are approximately eleven known nontraditional residency programs in the United States.⁷ Though not an all-inclusive list, the following institutions have publicly posted information regarding their nontraditional residency programs, which is provided for informational purposes only (Table 1).

Table 1. Sampling of Institutions with Nontraditional Residency Programs

Institution	Website
The Johns Hopkins Hospital	https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/pharmacy/residents/programs/Non-traditionalFlex_PGY1.html
Lebanon VA Medical Center	https://www.lebanon.va.gov/clinical_training/PharmacyResidency/NonTraditionalPGY1PharmacyPractice2012-2013.pdf
Medical University of South Carolina	http://academicdepartments.musc.edu/pharmacy_services/residency/programs/Program_Descriptions/PGY1%20Pharmacy%20Practice%20Residency%20Non-traditional_MUSC_%20Description.pdf
Rush University Medical Center	https://www.rush.edu/sites/default/files/NTRPGYI-residency-program-showcase-handout.pdf
The University of Kansas	https://pharmpractice.ku.edu/non-traditional

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