

## **Guidelines and Best Practices for Utilizing Signal Tokens in the Radiation Oncology Residency Match**

The use of “signals” will be included in the upcoming radiation oncology residency match process. As we look forward to incorporating this system, the Association for Directors of Radiation Oncology Programs (ADROP) and the Association of Residents in Radiation Oncology (ARRO) leadership teams recognize that there are many outstanding questions regarding the best practices on how to utilize the “signal” system as a prospective radiation oncology applicant. The following document aims to better characterize how different program directors intend to utilize signals during the upcoming residency match cycle.

The following questions were answered with the help of those at the Electronic Residency Application Service (ERAS):

### **1. How many signals am I allowed to send?**

For the 2024-2025 application cycle, applicants get 4 tokens (signals). This may change in subsequent years.

### **2. Am I allowed to opt out from sending signals, and would this be noted on my application?**

It is completely optional for applicants to utilize their program signals. An applicant would simply not assign any of their signals to the programs they are applying to. From the program’s perspective, it would not display signal information to them; there would be no indication that the applicant did not use a signal. There does not appear to be any advantage for not using a signal.

### **3. Can I change my signals after they are submitted?**

No, an applicant cannot revoke, nor swap/change their signals after they have been submitted.

### **4. When should I send my signals to the programs?**

It is recommended to send signals when the applicant submits their application. That being said, applicants can send signals anytime for the duration of the application season as long as they have remaining signals to send. ADROP and ARRO leadership do not recommend delaying sending signals as we anticipate signals will be used primarily for interview selection.

## **5. Should I send a signal to programs where I already have a strong connection (e.g., home institution or away rotation)?**

Applicants should signal their preferred programs regardless of previous connections. ERAS has advised program directors to avoid discouraging students from signaling their home institution or where they have completed an away rotation. Doing so unfairly disadvantages applicants who do not have a training program at their medical school by effectively giving an extra signal token to applicants who do have a program at their medical school. ADROP leadership has followed suit in reiterating this recommendation.

*The following questions were identified to be more subjective. Though there are recommended best practices for utilization of signals, we recognize that individual practice may vary slightly among program directors. To this end, we asked these questions to four separate program directors who represent different size residency programs in different regions. Each question is answered with summarized best practice followed by their four individual answers.*

## **6. What is prioritized more by programs, signals or geographic preference?**

As signals are more specific, the leading perception is that a signal will be prioritized more than geographic preference by program directors.

“Likely signals. Geographic preferences are important but can be more broad and multiple geographic preferences can be selected by an applicant. Given the limited number of signal tokens, that will carry more weight.” – Program Director 1

“Definitely signals. Signals will be a great way for applicants who feel strongly about a program that maybe isn't in their geographic region to indicate to a program that they're serious about it.” – Program Director 2

“Signals likely will be more prioritized as they are program-specific vs. region-specific and are highly limited in number.” – Program Director 3

“I think a signal would be a stronger indication of interest than geographical preference and thus would weigh more heavily in deciding on an application.” – Program Director 4

## **7. What criteria should I consider when deciding which programs to signal?**

It is advised to use signals for residency programs where an applicant would like to train. The criteria for a preferred program will vary with the priorities and values of the applicant.

“Your preference for the program. While it can be difficult to make that distinction prior to an interview, you should signal programs where you would most like to train. The criteria for that will vary with the priorities of the applicant. In general, this program director’s advice is

to not over complicate it, try to game the system, etc. Signal the places you most want to go.” – Program Director 1

“I would definitely just recommend keeping it simple and signaling programs where you'd like to train. There's no 'gaming the system.'” – Program Director 2

“As signaling is new to programs, it is unclear how each program will adopt this element into their selection process. I would advise to be forthright and use signals to indicate your interest in programs where you wish to match, having met all the criteria you've employed to evaluate the program as a place where you wish to train.” – Program Director 3

“I wouldn't look at it in terms of criteria. Just consider programs that you would be most interested in attending. If perhaps one of those programs is out of your geographical preference, then perhaps send a signal there to indicate interest.” – Program Director 4

### **8. How do programs interpret signals in the context of the rest of my application?**

A signal will most likely serve as a small piece of the application as an indication that an applicant is truly interested in a specific residency program. The rest of the application should be strong and be able to stand alone without a signal.

“It can be helpful for a program to gauge your true interest in training with them. But it is only one part of your application. Most programs will likely have to interview many applicants who do not signal them.” -Program Director 1

“The signal will just sort of be a stamp on the application that says 'consider this one really seriously.' It can only add to the application, not detract from it. The rest of the application will still be considered in its entirety.” -Program Director 2

“Most programs have embraced holistic review processes and will assemble a committee to review all received applications thoroughly. Signals may marginally contribute to obtaining an interview invitation for a program if you've not rotated at that specific program and/or your application does not provide a clear interest in that specific program and/or geographic region.” – Program Director 3

“It is one part of the application. The applicant still has to demonstrate an interest and passion for radiation oncology and have a strong application otherwise.” – Program Director 4

### **9. How much will a signal impact an applicant's chances of interviewing/matching at a program?**

The lack of a signal will not detract from an already strong application. The use of a signal in the selection criteria for an interview/matching will likely change from program to program. It is widely accepted that for similar applications, a signal will likely help serve as a “tie-breaker” when considering who to offer interviews to. It is understood that a signal will

likely have this impact on an applicant's chances of interviewing and less of an impact/potentially no impact on a program's rank list.

"This will vary from program to program. But it will likely have a much bigger impact on selection for an interview. In general, programs should rank candidates in the order of the program's preference for that candidate. Just like an applicant sharing their preference for a program at the time of an interview, a signal will likely have less impact on rank list." – Program Director 1

"I don't think that a lack of signal will decrease the chance of being interviewed if your application already met a program's criteria; however, it'll increase chances of an interview if you wouldn't have otherwise met the criteria for a certain program based on geographic distribution, scores, etc." -Program Director 2

"It is unlikely that signaling will have a profound impact on the selection process for interviews and/or final rank-lists for matching. The greatest impact is held by affording a compelling and program-specific interest and alignment with a given training program that should come through your application and interview." – Program Director 3

"All things being equal, it certainly improves the chances of interviewing. So if I'm down to two similar applications and one has a signal and the other doesn't, I'm most likely going to invite the person who signaled for an interview. Again, I want to emphasize that signaling doesn't guarantee an interview, but it is a good tie breaker when so many applicants have similar scores, etc." Program Director 4