

To Early Commit or Not to Early Commit: That Is the (hard) Question!

“What do you want to do your PGY2 specialty residency in?” Seriously? I’m a fourth-year pharmacy student. How do I know what specialty I want to do a PGY2 residency in? I haven’t even started my PGY1 residency yet! Why don’t I decide what island to retire on while I’m at it?! It seems like this question gets asked earlier and earlier, and it is soon followed up with the question of *where* you will do your PGY2 training. Even though the number of available PGY2 specialty residency programs has considerably increased, there are also more prospective candidates pursuing these positions.

The first month of your PGY1 residency primarily consists of orientation-related activities and adjusting to the fact that you are a legally licensed pharmacist. By month 4, you’re only on your third clinical experience rotation, and you receive the e-mail from residency program leadership providing details on the early commitment process for PGY2. The hope is that, within just a few months, you have decided which specialty to pursue. It’s even better to actually know which specific program and institution to pursue. I’m as optimistic as the next guy, but this dream is not likely to come true for most of us. Therefore, here’s the question that haunts your sleepless nights: Should I stay at my current institution for a PGY2 residency, or should I pursue PGY2 training at another institution?

Reasonable Questions to Consider:

- Am I confident in my chosen specialty, given just a few PGY1 clinical experiences?
- Is 3 or 4 months at my current institution adequate to determine whether to stay for PGY2 training?
- Will I be competing with my coresidents for this PGY2 position?
- Do other PGY2 programs have more to offer?
- Do I really want to go through the PhORCAS application and match process AGAIN?

Most likely, your answers to these questions will be conflicting, but take a step back.

Congratulate yourself on pursuing a PGY2! This shows how dedicated you are to your professional education, training, and growth. Be thankful that you have the opportunity to early commit at your institution as well as pursue other PGY2 programs. Then, consider the following regarding committing early internally or pursuing PGY2 programs elsewhere.

Pros of Committing Early:

- **Familiarity:** You know the institution, the pharmacy department, how everything operates, etc. The removal of the orientation process can make for a smooth transition into your PGY2 and even allow for a head start on your clinical experiences or research. You can also build on the professional relationships that you have already developed.
- **Money (and stress):** The process of pursuing outside PGY2 programs is not simple. You can spend a lot of time researching PGY2 programs and a considerable amount of money on applications, interviews, and additional pharmacist licensure (if out of state). By no means is it a breeze to balance all of these big decisions in the midst of your PGY1 training.
- **Having a plan (early):** Many candidates like to have a plan and know where they will spend the next year of their life. By pursuing the early-commit process, this can be accomplished as early as October, whereas this can be delayed to March or even later if pursuing PGY2 programs externally. Also, other candidates may be interested in a PGY2 position at your current institution. This could be a tough decision if your coresident/friend wants the same position as you. It is always good to reach out early to PGY2 program directors at other institutions to make them aware that you are interested in their program. Not only does this get your foot in the door, but it also helps to identify if a position is available or if it is filled internally.

Pros of Pursuing an External PGY2 Program:

- **Fresh start:** This can be very exciting! Starting a PGY2 residency at a new institution can provide a clean slate on expectations and responsibilities. You can avoid the “continuation of PGY1” feeling and potentially avoid projects that linger from PGY1 to PGY2. You will experience multiple new preceptors and practice styles, which can allow you to further develop your own practice style.
- **Professional and personal growth:** Pursuing PGY2 training elsewhere can be an excellent opportunity to step out of your comfort zone and challenge yourself. It is a great way to adapt and experience change early in your professional career. You will build strong relationships at your PGY1 institution and take everything you learned to a new institution. You will have the opportunity to develop new professional networks, work with new coresidents, experience a new health system, explore a new city, and much more.
- **Minimal commitment (it’s only a year):** Although pursuing PGY2 training elsewhere is a big decision, it is not a permanent career move. There is a good chance you’ll end up loving your new professional home and want to stay on for a career position (if the opportunity exists)! The worst-case scenario is that you realized this wasn’t the decision for you, but it’s only a year. At least you can say you stepped out of your comfort zone and took a chance. You can always look for a position elsewhere.

I truly believe you can’t go wrong. Everyone’s situation is different. Weigh the different factors, make a decision, and pursue it wholeheartedly. In doing so, you will have a great experience no matter what you decide!

About the author: Wesley Kufel is originally from Syracuse, New York. He earned his Pharm.D. degree from University at Buffalo School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences. He completed his PGY1 pharmacy practice residency at Upstate University Hospital in Syracuse, New York, and is completing his PGY2 infectious diseases pharmacy residency at University of North Carolina Medical Center in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. He had the opportunity to early commit for a PGY2 infectious diseases residency program at his PGY1 institution, but he decided to step out of his comfort zone and pursue PGY2 programs elsewhere. He is confident that either decision would have been an exciting and worthwhile experience!