

Virtual Interviews in Plastic Surgery

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INTRODUCTION

Residency interviews in integrated plastic surgery during the 2020–21 application cycle were conducted virtually. Virtual interviews are not an entirely new entity; they have been reported in the literature, albeit sparsely. Our group sought to characterize the entire process of virtual interviews in plastic surgery from optimizing how applicants can best showcase themselves to what both the applicants and program directors experienced during this new process.

OPTIMIZATION AND PREPARATION

Before the commencement, we wrote how applicants can optimize virtual interviews through three domains: environment and background, audio/visual, and interview etiquette.¹ Largely, virtual interviews should be approached in a manner similar to that of in-person interviews. Applicants should arrive early, remain engaged, make good eye contact, and most importantly, eliminate potential distractions.

THE APPLICANT PERSPECTIVE

Following rank list submission, applicants were surveyed to help better characterize the virtual interview process.² The majority of respondents were satisfied with virtual interviews, though if given the choice, more than 70% would have preferred in-person interviews. Additionally, 60% reported that they were able to attend more interviews than if they were in person, which highlights a potential advantage. Finally, nearly 90% reported spending less than \$500 on interview-related costs, which is significantly less than what we previously reported of an average of over \$6,500.³

THE PROGRAM DIRECTOR PERSPECTIVE

To further understand the process, program directors were also surveyed.⁴ Thirty-seven percent of programs increased the number of interview slots during the virtual

interview season. Most notably, 67.8% of respondents reported being satisfied (15.3% extremely satisfied, 52.5% somewhat satisfied) with the virtual interview process. However, 76.3% preferred in-person interviews, which coincides with the 70% of applicants who would have preferred in-person interviews.

INTERVIEW INVITATION DISTRIBUTION

This shift to virtual interviews came with many potential benefits, including decreased cost and increased flexibility without the need for travel. However, these advantages allowed the highest tier of applicants to attend nearly as many interviews as they were offered, commonly referred to as “interview hoarding.” This potentially eliminates “the trickle,” in which lower tiers of applicants are offered interviews that the higher tiers decline.⁵ Three program directors suggested a “cap” on the number of interviews one can attend, and 68% of applicants responded “yes,” when asked if there should be a limit. However, no integrated program had an unfilled position in the 2021 match, questioning the need for a cap. This concept should be explored further to better understand its potential benefits in relation to interview hoarding and equitable interview distribution.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The future of virtual residency interviews is unknown. A hybrid virtual and in-person interview system is an option, though it should be organized carefully. Individual programs should balance the pros and cons of each modality with their ability to recruit the best residents for their programs while remaining considerate of each applicant’s time and expenses. Long-term data regarding the satisfaction of both programs and residents with respect to their rank lists following the virtual application cycle is paramount, as this information will help guide the future of the residency interview and match process.

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