

The Virtual Residency Interview Season: Are You Ready? Here We Go Again!

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THE 2020–21 RESIDENCY APPLICATION and interview season began in unprecedented times. With the COVID-19 pandemic in full swing, and in the midst of a crucial movement to address systemic racism plaguing our country, applicants and programs were compelled to set aside the abundant stress and trauma of the times and embrace the changed landscape of the application and interview process. The reality of virtual interviewing was upon us.

In the 2020–21 season, 2030 applicants applied for 1460 available positions for residency in Obstetrics & Gynecology (Ob/Gyn).¹ At our Ob/Gyn residency here at Brown, we received 866 applications for our 8 available PGY1 positions, a 12% increase from the preceding year. Of those applicants, we interviewed a total of 100 candidates, and were thrilled with a successful match in March of this year. On April 24th, our national organization, the Council on Resident Education in Obstetrics and Gynecology (CREOG), released recommended standards for the 2021–22 match season, including virtual interviews for all applicants. Here we go again!

Time to reflect; Lessons learned

Our education leadership team has spent a great deal of time reflecting on the past season – what worked and what we could improve upon. The COVID-19 pandemic brought a silver lining of a now-household name: Zoom. With the hallmark of the Zoom platform, we were able to expand access for applicants to learn about our program through live events over several months, opportunities that were once primarily limited to a single interview day and dinner. Our program participated in Zoom virtual residency fairs

through the Alpert Medical School (AMS), and through the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG). Members of our department started a virtual Diversity Visiting Scholars elective held exclusively over Zoom. Six talented fourth-year students participated in this two-week course with involvement in a wide range of educational conferences, simulated patient encounters, and social events with faculty, fellows, and residents. In addition, we were able to invite prospective applicants to participate in happy hour events sponsored by the Brown Minority House Staff Association (BMHA) throughout the season, and our second look event through the BMHA for applicants Underrepresented in Medicine (URM) was a success through the virtual platform. Additionally, with time for travel removed from the equation, applicants could accept more interviews across the country, and expand their options for the match. In addition to increased access, applicants in the virtual season benefited from significant cost savings due to lack of travel costs.

Along with these benefits of the virtual interview season came some downsides. The elimination of travel time preferentially benefited top applicants. In an in-person interview year, these applicants would need to choose between programs offering interviews on back-to-back days as time for travel would pose a barrier to participating in both. This phenomenon potentially decreased interview opportunities for middle- and lower-tier applicants. But perhaps the biggest downside of the virtual interview season was a challenge in helping applicants see themselves living in our diverse, thriving city. In our post-match survey this year, the

number one reason applicants cited for not ranking our program more highly was location. Certainly, amid the uncertain times that the pandemic posed, it is understandable that applicants may feel more secure at a residency program closer to home. However, when informally surveying current residents in our program, they relay time and time again that the ability to visit Providence and the hospital on interview day and during the BMHA second look is what drew them here. They recount feeling the warmth of our culture and acknowledge first-hand the vibrant and diverse communities that Providence offers. The questions become: how can we better relay these sentiments in the virtual setting, and is the virtual interview season here to stay?

Looking ahead

As we embark upon a second virtual interview season, we have solid groundwork and systems in place. We are scheduled to participate in local and regional virtual residency fairs through AMS and ACOG. We are thrilled that visiting students will have the opportunity to take part in in-person Sub-Internships, and excited to welcome back our Diversity in Medicine Visiting Student Scholars. We are lucky to have phenomenal residents, fellows, and faculty who have contributed abundant video content for applicants to get a feel of who we are, and the extraordinary residency experience we offer. Our interview dates have been selected, and virtual happy hour events will again be scheduled. We are ready! But how can we show potential applicants how amazing it is to live and work in the beautiful Ocean State?

I believe the answer is twofold – there are opportunities to improve our



Residents at Women & Infants Hospital. [COURTESY OF DAYNA BURRELL]

virtual outreach, and the potential to entertain a hybrid virtual/in-person interview season. In terms of the virtual platform, we plan to use our social media platforms to share personal stories of residents, fellows, and faculty – to relay what brought them to our program and department, and what they love about their environments inside and outside of work. We also plan to incorporate video interviews of graduated residents to share their views and experiences after completing our four-year program. The question then becomes if a hybrid interview season offering some in-person component will become a possibility. This topic was widely debated at our national CREOG retreat in July, with the majority of stakeholders promoting continuation of a completely virtual process, citing bias that the hybrid process may impose. The virtual interview season did provide greater equity in access for applicants to programs across the country, regardless of financial means, and this crucial point will need to be at the forefront of our plans moving forward.

For this year, we plan to stay with the virtual interview season and continue to re-evaluate alongside our colleagues nationally in the years to come.

Is the virtual residency interview season here to stay? It may be. The benefit of cost savings is irrefutable. Additionally, the results from the 2020–21 Match suggest that programs across the country performed similarly to prior years despite the change from in-person to virtual platforms.¹ As program leaders, I believe that we should embrace the virtual interview process moving forward, but creatively consider how we can introduce greater exposure to our programs without overburdening applicants with related time commitments and expense or create inequalities of access to programs. We have adapted significantly over the past year and a half, and I am excited to consider the innovative possibilities moving forward. Whether virtual or in-person, we are dedicated to recruiting a diverse group of residents passionate to care for our incredible community, and further our field as

educators, researchers, advocates and leaders. Our program, hospital and city provide a unique and unparalleled training experience for our future providers in Ob/Gyn, and I look forward to sharing all we have to offer with applicants in the coming interview season. ❖

Reference

1. National Resident Matching Program, Results and Data: 2021 Main Residency Match. National Resident Matching Program, Washington, DC. 2021.

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