



in collaboration with



Frequently Asked Questions:

Navigating the 2021 Internal Medicine Match During the Time of COVID-19 Webinar

August 12, 2020

Part 1: COVID-19's Impact on Applicants' Ability to Choose Residency Program

1. [Because away rotations are being discouraged, what other ways can students learn more about individual residency programs and whether to apply?](#)
 - Most programs will be making concerted efforts at reaching out to applicants to compensate for the loss of ability of students to learn about them in the traditional way
 - Most programs have websites that contain key information.
 - Many programs also have a social media presence (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram) that can provide information about programs.
 - These information channels reflect what is important and valued by residency programs and should be helpful in learning about different programs.
 - Your medical school may be able to provide a list of graduates and where they matched for residency, along with contact information to ask them about their experiences (see number 4 below).
2. [Given the changes in this year's residency application process, what advice do you have for students when deciding the number and types of programs to which they should apply?](#)
 - The general advice is that the overall number and types of programs that you apply to should remain the same as it would have been without the pandemic.
 - A guiding principle has always been, and continues to be, that you should apply only to programs where you believe you will be able to learn medicine in an atmosphere that best fits your personal learning style and meets your wants, needs, and preferences in advancing your professional career, and that you would actually consider attending if you match there.
 - Although some specialties (such as pediatrics) have issued specific numerical recommendations for this, the optimal number of applications and where they should be made should be based on your individual circumstances, and the actual number may vary based on multiple different personal factors.

- The best people to advise you are the people at your school who know you the best, including your academic record, individual talents and interests, and a sense of the types of programs where you would be likely to thrive.
- It is helpful to look at historical controls in your own medical school - where do students like you get interviews and end up matching? Your advisors generally know this information and can provide useful advice for your own decision making.
- Ultimately, you should apply to the programs you sincerely are interested in, would consider attending should you match there, and avoid submitting an excessively large number of applications beyond those you truly wish to consider out of concern that you might not be successful in the match.
- In terms of the effects of the pandemic, this cycle's application timeline will be compressed with the release of the Medical Student Performance Evaluation (MSPE) being about 3 weeks later than normal. This means that programs will have less time to review applications. An excessive number of applications would translate into less time for review of each individual application; this should be a consideration in the number of applications you are planning to submit.

3. All residency interviews will be conducted virtually during this recruitment cycle. How many virtual interviews do you recommend students should do and how should students decide which interviews to do?

- Just as the number of applications in this cycle should be determined by your personal circumstances, although virtual interviews may be more convenient and less costly this year than in-person interviews, you should still be deliberate and judicious in selecting the programs where you choose to interview.
- Because residency programs have limited resources, particularly during the pandemic, most programs will not likely be increasing the number of interview slots this cycle.
- Interviewing at an excessive number of programs, particularly those in which you may have less interest, has the potential to exclude others (including you) from obtaining interviews at other programs in which you may be truly interested without actually increasing the likelihood of matching at a specific program.
- Your advisors can be invaluable in helping you develop a reasonable (and survivable) interview schedule.

4. Since all interviews will be virtual this cycle and applicants will not be able to actually visit a program and institution, will there be other ways to meet current residents and/or other candidates in their potential class in order to assess residency program fit and culture?

- It is important for you to figure out what is most important to you about a residency program (beyond actual medical training) and what "culture fit" looks like to you – where you feel you could thrive and contribute as a resident.
- A tried-and-true method apart from the pandemic is to go to your own medical school and ask for a list of classes ahead of you to look at who matched in internal medicine and where. They can usually provide contact list that you can use to reach out to some of those people to ask them how they like the program you are interested in possibly pursuing. Talk to as many people as possible who have knowledge and experience of a program (i.e. don't rely on only one or two).

- Finding out this information can occur in several ways:
 - Many programs have websites and some produce videos about their program.
 - However, it is important to remember that some programs, particularly smaller ones, do not have the resources to do this, and this should be kept in mind when looking at different residencies.
 - Social media postings may be very helpful:
 - What are they showing you? With current residents are postings mostly social or just in-hospital? Are they straight learning or other non-training activities? Do they celebrate residents and their accomplishments? Are they silly or serious and professional? Are they smiling? Are they posed? Is diversity represented? These may reflect the underlying culture, values, and focus of different programs.
 - Some programs may offer virtual chat rooms, virtual conferences, and virtual get-togethers or other non-in-person social activities as part of the interview process. This is a good chance to get to know the residents in the program, assess your fit with them and the program, and ask questions (which, as with any residency application, you should be prepared to ask, particularly those that are important for your own decision making).
 - Also, compare what you learn from one program with another, which may help to contrast characteristics between programs.

Part 2: COVID-19's Impact on Residency Programs' Ability to Evaluate Applicants

1. How will the disruptions to the usual application cycle due to the pandemic (such as interruptions in the USMLE and the inability of students to complete clerkships and sub/acting internships) affect what materials need to be submitted, and are there additional materials that should be included this year?
 - It is important to know that residency programs, residency program directors, and resident selection committees fully understand this disruption and are doing what is possible to account for these unanticipated changes, with the goal of being fair and equitable to all applicants.
 - The Alliance for Academic Internal Medicine (AAIM) which includes both clerkship and residency program leaders in internal medicine, published recommendations for the 2021 application cycle in the American Journal of Medicine in July, 2020 [Chretien KC, Raj JM, Abraham RA, et al. AAIM Recommendations for the 2020-2021 Internal Medicine Residency Application Cycle in Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic [published online ahead of print, 2020 Jul 10. Am J Med. 2020;S0002-9343(20)30535-0. doi:10.1016/j.amjmed.2020.06.002 (Link: <https://www.amjmed.com/action/showPdf?pii=S0002-9343%2820%2930535-0>)]. Its major recommendations include:
 - Waive any requirement for Step 2 CK to be completed by the time of initial application review.
 - Waive completely any requirement for Step 2 CS.
 - Waive any requirement for an acting/subinternship by the time of initial application review.

- Use of a standardized Department of Medicine Summary Letter of Evaluation form for programs to use (contained in the recommendations).
 - Includes a section noting COVID-related changes in their school.
- Letters of recommendation guidelines:
 - For categorical resident applicants:
 - 1 clinical letter from an internal medicine faculty member.
 - 1 departmental letter of recommendation.
 - Additional letter optional (i.e. research or other interest area).
 - For preliminary medicine applicants:
 - 1 clinical letter from an internal medicine faculty member.
 - 1 clinical letter of any specialty faculty.
 - Departmental letter of recommendation waived.
- It is suggested that you should inform the faculty with whom you work that you want a letter or recommendation early since you may be with them for a shorter amount of time given alterations in exposure given the pandemic.
- No additional application materials should be submitted (and programs should certainly not be charging for something such as this).

2. How will pandemic-related changes to the process change the way a student's application will be evaluated?

- Even before the pandemic, there was always an effort to conduct a holistic review of applications for residency. With variability in students' curriculum and inability to complete standardized tests this year, programs will be more flexible in their review and criteria for interviews.
- There will be increased focus on departmental, the MSPE, and letters of recommendation.
- Personal statements will be particularly important as they tell programs something about you that makes you stand apart from other applicants. For example, what are the characteristics you value in your teachers and mentors that make them good internists and role models, and how do you want to manifest them yourself personally and professionally? And what do you believe that you could contribute to a program and that might make you more attractive to them? It is important to do your homework and understand and be able to articulate why their program is of sincere interest to you, both in your personal statement and interview.

3. How do residency programs foresee virtual interviews as differing from in-person interviews, and what advice do you have for students in conducting virtual interviews?

- Similarly to any interview, be yourself; bring your whole self to that interview – don't present yourself as different than who you are. This helps them understand your fit with the program as well as helping you understand who they are.
- Specific recommendations include:
 - Dress for the job you want; be professional (i.e. a suit).
 - Check your technology; know what your camera shows and what doesn't, and optimize both your video and audio presentation.
 - Practice before your interviews to make sure you come across well – i.e. talk too fast, pause too frequently, etc.

- Take a moment before the start of an interview to check things such as your hair, dress, and hygiene.
- During the interview, make eye contact with the camera and not the face of the person.
- Make sure to avoid distracting habits during the interview, such as touching your face or hair.
- Smile – don't look terrified; be confident.
- Keep your phone on silent and away from view; don't look at it!
- Feel free to take a moment to think about a question if you need to; take a sip of water to buy time if needed; take a breath.
- The interview is a way to get to know a program and its people, and you to learn about and meet them. So enjoy the experience and have fun!
- Consider obtaining feedback from your mentors and advisors about your virtual interviewing style as many are willing to do practice ("mock") interviews with you. You may also want to do practice interviews with your student colleagues and friends to help you refine your interviewing skills in preparation for your residency interviews.

Part 3: Additional Questions

1. [Because of the changes in this year's residency application process, how can the inclusion of applicants from underrepresented and underserved backgrounds be optimized during virtual recruitment and interviews?](#)
 - This change in this year's application cycle should have no impact on this. Everyone has unique attributes – we want to know what makes you unique; let us know all about those unique experiences (particularly through your personal statement and in your interviews). This is your time to shine – don't be humble! Talk about what's important to you and be proud!
2. [The pandemic has potentially altered some residency program structures and the resident experience. How can applicants stay up to date on these changes in different programs throughout the application cycle?](#)
 - This will likely be a very fluid thing, affecting different programs in different ways, and many may not be made public given the rapidity of change given the different phases of the pandemic.
 - It is best to reach out to programs/program directors/chief residents to ask about those aspects they believe are most likely to change and the impact on training they might have.
 - Following residents on social media may also give some insight into changes at a particular program.
 - It is important to remember that the pandemic will not last forever, and that any of the structural and functional changes associated with it will not likely last for the duration of your residency.
3. [The Association of American Medical Colleges \(AAMC\) and the National Resident Matching Program \(NRMP\) recommendations on contacting students have been fairly strict in previous](#)

years, which made sense given most students were able to engage with programs for 4-8 hours on interview day. Now that this is no longer possible, have there been any thoughts about changing the recommendations about post-interview contact?

- This is not known at present. However, it is likely that there will not be significant changes since these policies and rules are in place mostly to protect students and avoid unrealistic expectations by them and by programs.
- However, even under these guidelines, students should feel empowered to reach out to programs and program directors after an interview to seek additional information that might help you decide on your fit with that residency.

Part 4: Live Audience Questions

Many questions were received about issues associated with applications by international medical graduates seeking to train in the US. A separate webinar to address these questions by this group of students is currently being planned, and will not be addressed here.

1. Given the delays in the opening of ERAS and distribution of Medical Student Performance Evaluations, will the Interview window be shifted later this year?
 - Because of these changes, it is likely that interviews will be shifted somewhat later, probably from early November, 2020 through January, 2021.
2. Will it be possible for some program to offer in-person interviews to geographically-local individuals?
 - It is recommended that all interviews be held virtually, and that for fairness, programs are discouraged from considering doing so.
3. Will the virtual interviews be held in context of interview day “experience” with other activities, or be held as “isolated” interviews?
 - The answer to this is not yet known as programs are still working on how virtual interviews will occur. Different programs may handle this in different ways.
4. Is it OK to use a virtual background during interviews?
 - Yes, as long as it isn’t inappropriate or distracting.