

RESEARCH LETTER

Interviewing Dermatology Applicants in a Virtual Setting: A Perspective after 2020-2021 Match

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The COVID-19 pandemic greatly affected the 2020-2021 residency application cycle. In the spring of 2020, the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) and dermatology residency program directors released statements discouraging visiting medical student sub-internships and in-person interviews.^{1,2} The AAMC has since recommended the resumption of sub-internships in August 2021. However, all specialties conducted interviews virtually in 2021.³ In 2020, residency programs across the country, including dermatology, created social media accounts, and implemented virtual open houses.⁴ It is unclear whether these methods effectively evaluated and recruited applicants. We aimed to assess the impact of visiting rotations, pre-interview events, and virtual interviews through the lens of dermatology program directors and medical students who matched into dermatology in 2021.

An online survey was distributed to all 138 dermatology residency program directors in the United States from May 4, 2021, to June 10, 2021, by email. The survey was intended for program directors, faculty, and medical

students. Questions for program directors and medical students aimed to capture views on visiting rotations, virtual interviews, and the effectiveness of virtual pre-interview events. We had a response rate of approximately 13% (N=18). In addition to dermatology program director responses, we received a 2% response rate from medical students who successfully matched into dermatology during the 2020-2021 application cycle (N=11). Medical student responses were omitted from the final analysis as they were not likely reflective of the medical student population.

With regards to away rotations, most PD respondents (72%) believed applicants missed out on fully experiencing their programs by forgoing in-person away rotations and interviews. Additionally, most PD respondent (68%) believed the absence of a student's away rotation would limit their ability to gauge an applicant. As shown in Figure 1, Q&A sessions with residents and virtual open houses were the most frequently offered pre-interview events (21% and 19%, respectively). PD respondents rated virtual open houses as the most virtual pre-interview event (average rating of 6.8

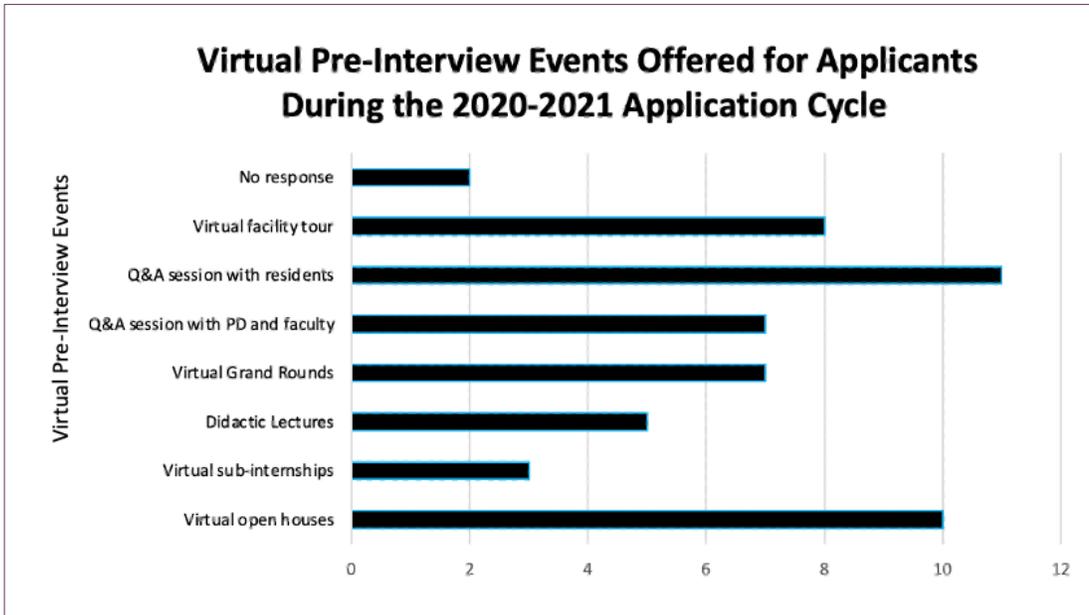


Figure 1. This figure shows which virtual pre-interview events were offered during the 2020-2021 application cycle as reported by Program Directors. Q&A sessions with residents were the most offered event by program directors followed closely by virtual open houses.

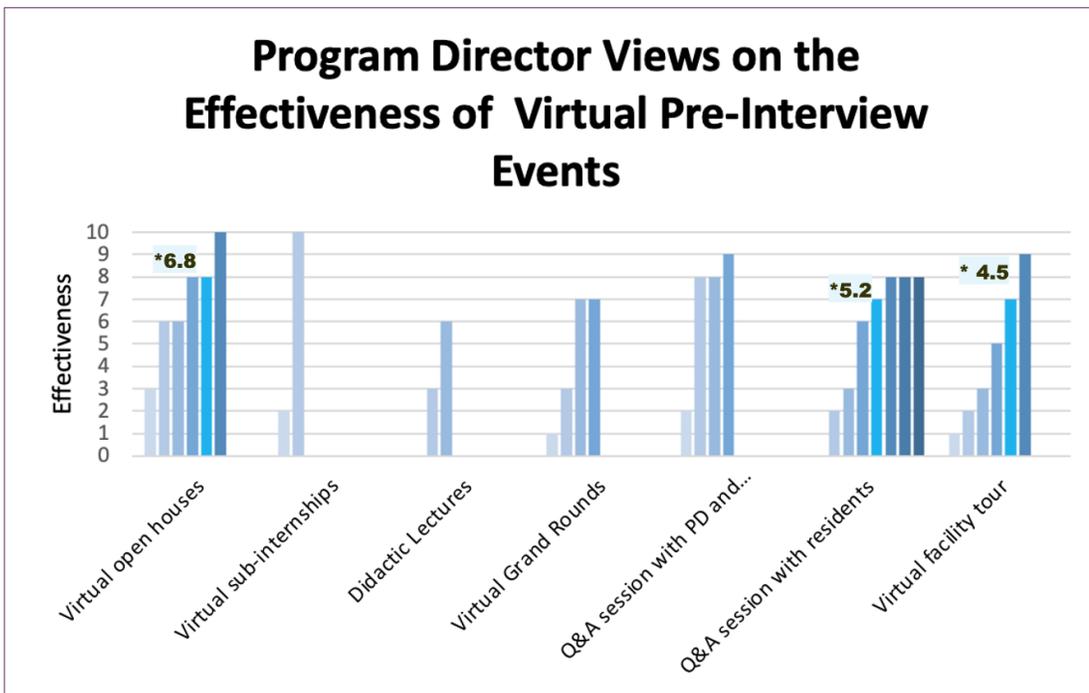


Figure 2. The survey asked program directors to rank the effectiveness of all virtual pre-interview events they offered from 1-10, 10 being the most effective. Columns reflect individual respondents' answers. Each event received highly variable effectiveness scores. "Virtual open houses", "Q&A session with residents", and "Virtual facility tour" had the most responses. Of those three, virtual open houses had the highest average score.*Average effectiveness scores for the virtual events with the most responses.

out of 10, shown in Figure 2). Further, 44% of program directors reported developing accounts on social media platforms after March 1, 2020, mainly “to promote our residency program or department/division.”

Our study suggested that the lack of away rotations had a large impact on a dermatology residency program’s ability to evaluate applicants. Our results further illustrate that virtual Q&A sessions with residents and virtual open houses were the most popular and effective opportunities for residency programs to offer students. Dermatology residency training programs may use this information to decide which virtual pre-interview events to offer in subsequent virtual application cycles. Furthermore, with the possibility of a return to an in-person interview season in the future, there may be a role for a hybrid application process.⁵ As costs of applying to competitive specialties, such as dermatology, continue to increase, the decreased cost burden associated with virtual platforms may prove beneficial.⁶ This study has limitations, including its retrospective nature and small sample size. Further, unverified and incomplete responses limited the generalizability of our results, as there were incomplete data for some questions.

Residency programs and applicants adapted to the virtual application cycle through enhanced virtual interaction, and these opportunities appeared to impact the application cycle in nuanced ways. A significant downside to this virtual transition is decreased interpersonal interactions between parties. It is unclear what future application cycles hold, however, our study’s findings may provide a framework for the continued use of virtual opportunities in the wake of a global pandemic.

Conflict of Interest Disclosures: None

Funding: None

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