

EDUCATION HIGHLIGHT

VIRTUAL RESIDENCY RECRUITMENT: IS IT TEMPORARY OR THE NEW NORM?

As with all things associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, residency recruitment this year has been turned on its head. The act of finding highly skilled and talented future physicians to be trained in our various surgical disciplines is perhaps one of the most important duties that our programs carry out each year. The changes in all aspects of our lives in the last year have brought new challenges, but also new opportunities as we do this important work.

We became aware of significant changes early in Spring 2020 and at times we were apprehensive to check our email for fear of another new and momentous alteration in our way of life. Quite early in the pandemic the University of Washington instituted a travel ban and a prohibition on all visiting medical student rotations. For our four residency programs (General Surgery, Vascular Surgery, Cardiothoracic Surgery and Plastic Surgery), the visiting student system provides an excellent opportunity to get to know top-flight candidates and essentially conduct a month-long interview with them. It also enables those same people to get to know us and the city as they think about future training locations. Not long after this, we received word that all interviews would be virtual during this application cycle. Like many aspects of the practice of surgery, our in-person interview routines have been the norm for decades. We did have some experience in one-off

virtual interviews on FaceTime, typically when a scheduled applicant had a canceled flight due to weather. What we did not have experience with was coordination of dozens of people on a Zoom call.

Despite all the turmoil that accompanied the pandemic, we also saw hope and innovation. Throughout the summer our programs, and specifically our tech-savvy residents, very quickly shifted to virtual recruitment efforts. Programs held a variety of open house Zoom events, each with a different emphasis such as life in Seattle, research activity in the department, getting to know faculty, and recruitment of applicants from underrepresented populations. Despite not being able to rotate and work day-to-day with these excellent applicants, we did find that it was possible to develop relationships in the virtual environment.

As we have all seen, most logistical efforts have been delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the realm of residency recruitment and application, everything was pushed back a month. The Dean's letters came out later, invitations for interviews went out later, and the interviews themselves were delayed from our normal patterns. In a "normal" year, these delays would be disastrous. However, because it was mandated nationwide that all interviews occur virtually, much of the logistical burden for applicants was removed. Therefore, it was possible to invite applicants to interview and then conduct the interview a mere week later. Multiple rounds of residency

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Q & A with our residency programs

How were the 2021 application and interview numbers impacted by virtual interviewing?

"Both the amount of applications and interview slots offered were increased from previous years. The increase wasn't exponential though. With each successive year we receive more applications and offer more interview spots."

(Plastic Surgery-Integrated)

"They stayed fairly level, which I think was a bit of a surprise. We had been prepared for a big influx of applications." **(General Surgery-Categorical / Preliminary Surgery Program)**

"Our numbers were higher than the year before. From 2020-2021 we had close to a 14% increase in applications. Both years recruiting for two R2s. From 2019-2020 – we had an almost 25% increase – but we went from recruiting one R1 to two R1s."

(Vascular Surgery-Integrated)

What are some positives and negatives of the virtual interviews?

"Our preliminary interviews are always virtual, so no big changes!" **(Preliminary Surgery Program)**

"Financial benefits for applicants. We really missed meeting everyone in person! We also know that being able to experience Seattle first-hand is a big draw for candidates (especially East Coasters!) and that is something they weren't able to do this year. We're unsure if this will impact decisions."

(General Surgery-Categorical)

"It presented some new challenges and took some effort to get faculty buy-in, but the overall process went smoothly. Doing the interviews also saved our program a lot of costs."

(Plastic Surgery-Integrated)

interviews were conducted via Zoom, which took a tremendous amount of coordination on the part of our excellent program administrators, and for the most part they went off without major problems.

The virtual format did have some advantages. It obviously represented a tremendous cost savings to applicants, all of whom are paying for their education and typically do not have regular income. Additionally, the moving of applicants from room to room could be done while sitting at a computer. Finally, it was endearing to see the care and thought that was put into the generation of each applicants' background for their zoom interviews. The arrangement of plants, art and innovative lighting was a window into the applicants' creativity and was just fun to see. The drawbacks to virtual interviews are obvious, the primary one being the development of those critical person-to-person connections and relationships that can be sustaining over the span of a 5 to 6 year residency program.

While we have weathered these challenges, and in some cases even thrived, we can only speculate about the outcome at this point. Seeing the increased number of applicants and the broadening diversity of the applicant pool as a whole, we wonder if the virtual format has in some ways lowered the literal and figurative costs of entry into our highly competitive specialties. Certainly, the decreased monetary expenditures (which are typically quite formidable) for residency interviews can only be regarded as a benefit, however, is the risk associated with the loss of human contact as well as the potential for matching in a city and institution that one has never

set foot in before worth that benefit? At this point it remains to be seen. Some of us have postulated that more applicants will opt to stay at the institutions at which they attended medical school because those places are known commodities and students did not have the benefit of visiting rotations. This is a reasonable conclusion, and whether that phenomenon actually happens is not yet known.

As everyone is aware, the most highly anticipated objective outcome of any application and interview season is the Match which happens every year in March. As we write this, Match week is right around the corner. When we open up that email to find out who will be coming to train at the University of Washington, some of our questions and uncertainties will be answered. However, given the myriad factors that go into any match with a training program, some mysteries may remain.

What is not in question is the solid foundation for training that all residency programs in the Department of Surgery possess. Regardless of the names and stories on those Match lists, all of those recently graduated physicians will be embraced with open arms by our programs in this Department. They will be welcomed into a close-knit family that will have their educational and well-being interests at heart, and they will participate in a surgical education that is among the best in the country.

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Q & A with our residency programs

"Many faculty felt the interviews were more efficient, and several candidates commented on how organized and efficient the interviews were as well; we were also able to hold a unique virtual reception the night before interviews in which we had breakout rooms per site, and one breakout room with all our trainees. Drs. Singh, Starnes and Quiroga gave short presentations. Then candidates were split up into 5 groups and had 10 minutes in each of the breakout rooms to ask questions in a smaller group setting; and financially they were much easier on candidates. The in-person experience is unique and can't be replaced by a zoom meeting; the candidates weren't able to visit Seattle and see what it is like; we weren't able to hold our reception at the Edgewater, which is a lovely event space with beautiful views. It's also a more casual way to meet the faculty and trainees the night before interviews; and we weren't able to share breakfast or lunch with the candidates, which is a good time for comfortable conversation and community. **(Vascular Surgery-Integrated)**

What was candidate feedback regarding the virtual interviewing?

"Candidates enjoyed the guides and details we provided as well as how the day was formatted and flowed!"
(General Surgery-Categorical)

"Candidates felt they missed out on the experience of going to Seattle and getting to know the program and faculty better. However, the amount of money and time they saved was a huge benefit to them." **(Plastic Surgery-Integrated)**

"Several candidates commented on how much they enjoyed the day, interviewing with all faculty efficiently, and being able to go to the resident breakout room in between interviews and talk to our residents throughout the day. They had breaks and said it went very well." **(Vascular Surgery-Integrated)**