

A Virtual Journey to the Match

Full interview responses from the spring 2021 edition of *The Ohio Family Physician*

A long anticipated and cornerstone moment in a young physician's medical career is the Main Resident Match (Match). Years of preparation lead a medical student to this pivotal point when the next phase of their medical training will begin. For months leading to the official Match Day, medical students navigate a variety of steps including interviews, site visits, networking events, and more. Each of these steps become critically important to the decision of ranking residency program choices and ultimately setting the path for the next stage of their career.

While these factors all remain the same, this year's interview season was anything but typical. The COVID-19 pandemic impacted many layers of healthcare, including residency interviews and the Match. For the first time ever, the 2020-21 application cycle turned virtual.

The OAFP Foundation (Foundation) asked residency program directors, residents, and fourth-year medical students for their insights on the unprecedented, all-virtual Match process dictated by the pandemic. From the nitty gritty lessons learned, challenges overcome, and changes made that will stick around, here is what they shared.

Responses from The Ohio State University Family Medicine Residency, Columbus, OH

Program Director: Fred Miser, MD

Resident representatives: Daniel Krajcik, DO, MBA, PGY3; and Shreya Reddy, MD, PGY3

What have been lessons learned on the transition to virtual interviews?

Dr. Reddy: Flexibility is key. Technological issues will occur and allowing time and grace for troubleshooting is so important.

Dr. Krajcik: Still be professional. Have a professional background and attire. Although it is hard to focus on zoom for a long time, stay engaged as much as possible - it is easy to tell when applicants are doing something else on their computer at the same time!

Dr. Miser: We were pleasantly surprised at how smooth our interview season transpired. We obviously altered our approach, but I believe I was still able to get a good sense of each. It did take some work at the beginning prior to interviews to make sure we were an expert with Zoom and its capabilities.

What were some challenges?

Dr. Miser: Our residents don't have as good of a sense of the applicants as what they did when they came here in person. We missed out on our usual night before dinner, morning of breakfast, and interactions with the candidates with Grand Rounds, etc. So even though our faculty got a good sense of whom they were, some of this was lacking with the residents. We did offer several "special" nights, party nights, etc., which were well attended, but toward the end I think everyone gets Zoom fatigue.

Do you have any shareable tips or tricks for going through the process?

Dr. Reddy: Tip for programs: Because this may be the only opportunity applicants have for a comprehensive overview of the program, it's important to rally a diverse group of faculty and residents to participate in the events so applicants get a good idea of the culture of, and opportunities within, the program. Zoom fatigue is a very real thing so planning for participation well in advance can help mitigate that.

Tip for applicants: choose a well-lit and quiet space for your virtual interviews. Don't be afraid to add in some non-distracting pictures, plants, etc., to showcase your personality.

Dr. Krajcik: Use breakout rooms as much as possible. Getting to know each other in a group format virtually is hard, but having small group or one-on-one experiences helps tremendously.

What do you plan to keep in place after the pandemic?

Dr. Reddy: The transition to virtual interviews highlights the ability and need to increase efficiency during the entire interview process. During my own interview cycle a few years ago, the hospital tours were part of the schedule that applicants were least excited about. It adds time to the day that could be spent interacting with more residents, fellows, faculty members, and staff. Minimizing interview day fatigue with virtual facility tours is going to be a huge asset going forward. You can highlight so much of a medical center without having to worry about organizing car pools, parking, walking, etc. And, if applicants are still interested in viewing the campus in person, you can definitely arrange a time to do that.

Our virtual Spotlight Nights were a great addition to our recruitment season as they allowed for dedicated time to discuss specific areas of focus and opportunities within our program. We hosted seven different events which each consisted of a 30-minute presentation from faculty members and residents followed by a Q&A session; a Prezi about Columbus as well as virtual hospital and clinic tours; and general program highlights. I imagine that we will continue with these as they dedicate time to one topic and allow for discussions directly with faculty and residents that are most involved in those areas. It's an efficient and accessible way for applicants to learn about the opportunities they are most curious about.

Dr. Krajcik: It might be good to keep sporadic virtual nights to engage with applicants more throughout the interview season. It was very helpful to meet applicants more than once, and virtual interactions might help with that.

What opportunities have been brought to light?

Dr. Reddy: An important asset for applicants, I imagine, is removing the barrier of travel, scheduling changes, and time off requests. Travel and accommodation to interviews can be extremely expensive so it will be prudent to allow a space for virtual interviews and social interactions in the future. Some applicants may be able to show up in person and some may opt to schedule a virtual interview, but having both options available can increase applicant pools and accessibility for them.

Dr. Miser: Our reach went outside of the Midwest. We actually interviewed two students who were abroad, one in the United Kingdom and one in Ireland. I'm not sure we would have done that if they had to pay for their travel. We will consider a hybrid next year because a lot of the process did go smoothly.

Mount Carmel Family Medicine Residency, Columbus, OH

Resident Representative: Teena Dcruz, MD

Do you have any shareable tips or tricks for going through the process?

I suggest that applicants interested in a particular program definitely attend the virtual social hour/dinner hosted by the residents. If you don't plan to attend the dinner, then that is a good sign that you aren't interested in the program. And, if you aren't interested in a program, definitely don't rank it. Give 100% during every interview. Your enthusiasm and energy make a big impact. You don't want to look tired, sleepy, or bored.

What resources would have been helpful before heading into the process?

Utilize the resources around you. Ask residents, faculty, or others you know in medicine about the interview process, good questions to ask, etc. It's good to get perspective from multiple people.

What do you plan to keep in place after the pandemic?

Naturally, students have saved a lot of money due to the shift to virtual interviews. It's quite possible that in the future students will be given the option of choosing between virtual and live interviews.

Grant Family Medicine Residency, Columbus, OH

Associate Program Director: Scott Rogers, MD

What have been lessons learned on the transition to virtual interviews?

Despite the significant "loss" we felt going virtual, the reality is, applicants didn't know any other way to interview for residency. This was their first and only go-around! So, while we continued to mourn this sense of what we were missing out on, I think the applicants were holding up just fine. Embrace the technology, but do practice. We found that dividing the interview day into more asynchronous activities (interview day, separate resident meet-up/hang-out, additional topic or interest-based Q&As, etc.) allowed for more applicant engagement and flexibility.

Do you have any shareable tips or tricks (for the program and/or the students) for going through the process?

Deliberately schedule opportunities for "screen time" with residents and faculty. Often, during typical interview seasons, we would learn of interests/backgrounds and quickly engage residents/faculty to sit with an applicant at lunch or be sure to connect during the day. All that flies out of the window in virtual interviews, so we had to be more mindful about connecting outside of the interview day (following appropriate National Resident Matching Program rules) via additional virtual settings. Those connections are still really meaningful and important!

What do you plan to keep in place after pandemic times?

As much as we thought that the loss of physical connection would be devastating, when you really strip it down, you can take away the in-person handshakes, tours, and lunches, but what really matters is the human connection. We were blown away by the vulnerability that our faculty, residents, and applicants displayed in putting themselves out there over a screen and bringing authenticity to the virtual interview. And maybe, deep down, that's what we're really selling. So whether we bring people back in person or keep doing some element of virtual interviewing, what won't change is searching for real connection, humanism, and the traits that we are dedicated to cultivating in our residency program.

Responses from Doctors Hospital Family Medicine Residency, Grove City, OH

Program Director: Andrew Eilerman, DO, FACOFP

Associate Program Director: Tejal Patel, DO

What have been lessons learned on the transition to virtual interviews?

Dr. Eilerman: When using outside scheduling platforms, be sure that the local firewall does not prevent its features to fully function. We found that using these platforms to share links to our local virtual platform for interview connectivity worked better. Also, confirm there is enough time between interviews to work through snafus in connectivity and ensure your program coordinator is available for contact with applicants real-time if there are connectivity issues.

Do you have any shareable tips or tricks (for the program and/or the students) for going through the process?

Dr. Eilerman: Prepare for the interview ahead of time by testing out your connectivity and audio and video set ups; ensure that the volume is audible during a "test" run; use appropriate equipment to optimize communication (head phones, microphones etc.); and set up in an area that does not have a distracting background.

What do you plan to keep in place after pandemic times?

Dr. Eilerman: Because virtual interviews have been convenient and less costly for applicants, I don't see them going away. It makes sense to lessen the burden and cost of the application process for students as much as possible. I imagine that there may be a hybrid approach to interviews - where some applicants set up a tour to visit with the program and see it first hand while still doing a virtual interview.

What opportunities have been brought to light?

Dr. Eilerman: There is certainly more opportunity for applicants to explore a variety of programs that they would not have been exposed to in the past due to the need to travel. Also, the virtual interview season has highlighted the need to have a social media presence and a robust website for applicants to review.

Dr. Patel: Virtual presence is key. We put a lot of people-power and time behind updating profiles with state and national organizations. We created a social media handle @dhfamilymedicine and created a more learner-oriented website to help students not only find us but get to know us before making the decision to apply. We've also been using our social media account to highlight ways that we have adapted our usual didactic learning sessions, such as our procedure lab.

Reflections from fourth-year medical students

Melanie Biegler, M4, A.T. Still University School of Osteopathic Medicine

Shaina Rood, OMS IV, Ohio University Heritage College of Osteopathic Medicine- Cleveland Campus

Maya Prabhu, M4, Wright State University Boonshoft School of Medicine

What tips or tricks would you share with fellow medical students?

Melanie: Because everything is virtual, you can have your notes right in front of you! I even had a sticky note with some questions right at eye level on the side of my screen just in case I got flustered during the interview. Interviews can be stressful, so another trick I implemented was to light a candle to maintain a calming atmosphere.

Shaina: I did a mock interview during the summer before interview season with a mentor which helped me not only prepare for the types of questions I might be asked, but we also talked through my virtual interview set-up. He read my personal statement and I gave him my CV so he could ask questions that were personal to me. I think that experience gave me confidence for starting the process. Since I did the mock interview so early, it gave me time to think through more specific examples to possible questions and get helpful interview accessories, such as headphones with a microphone, proper lighting, designing my Zoom space, etc.

Maya: First, take advantage of all of the opportunities programs provide you and continually communicate with programs. One of my biggest fears during this virtual process was that I wouldn't get enough of a "true sense" of a program because I couldn't experience it in person. It was so interesting and reassuring to hear that those sentiments were often reciprocated on the program side as well. There are so many ways to interact with programs between interview day and match day, and each of those opportunities really helped with feeling out which program is the best fit for you. Second, practice your virtual interviews beforehand. You may find some habits or mannerisms that can be distracting via video. Also, a low-stakes practice session can help get you pumped up for the big day. Third, stay organized and always have a plan. Technology fails, unfortunately. Make sure to have a back-up phone/tablet/computer nearby in case your interview platform isn't working. Also, make sure to have a backup set of headphones in case yours aren't working or are not fully charged. Finally, HAVE FUN! This process is what we have waited and worked years for!

What was the hardest adjustment to the process?

Melanie: Definitely not being able to see everything and meet everyone in person. Therefore, it was somewhat challenging to understand what the culture is like at the program and what the feel of the location is. However, most programs did a really good job of having virtual meet and greets the night before with the residents as well as video tours of the facilities to help overcome this.

Shaina: One adjustment was dealing with technology glitches, which can sometimes be awkward. I made sure to write down the phone number of the program coordinator or contact so that I could have that information handy if I had a technology issue during the interview.

Maya: Honestly, it was really challenging to get used to staring at the Zoom camera versus people's faces! Beyond that, being on video calls for interview dinners/get to know the resident socials, interviews, and second look virtual visits was tiring. It was exciting and such a privilege to interview for the next step in my training, but I had no idea how exhausting the entire process would be.

What was a positive from the changes?

Melanie: The biggest positive was savings on cost and time! I was able to complete the interview from the comfort of my own home and still be able to make it to clinic or the hospital in the afternoon for some of them.

Shaina: One positive aspect of virtual interviews was having the opportunity to meet with programs I may not have been able to given timing and cost. It also allowed me to see how programs were quickly able to adapt to change. Many programs used videos, Instagram, their program website, and information sessions to help us learn more about their program. I really appreciated having this additional information beyond what I received during interview day to go back to as I think about my future residency choice.

Maya: The money I had saved up for interviews is now going to help with the transition into residency. The cost savings aspect of this virtual interview season has been amazing. It was also inspiring to meet people from around the country who are excited and passionate about family medicine!

What resources would have been helpful before heading into the process?

Melanie: One resource my school provided was "Big Interview." It allowed me to practice interview questions on video and receive feedback from my school faculty. Whatever particular resource you use, it is definitely helpful to not only practice answering the questions but to practice on video. This also allows you to re-watch your answers and see how you can improve.

Shaina: The "Strolling through the Match" resource on the AAFP website gave me a sense of how the process works. I regularly used a program's Instagram page to get additional details about information sessions or a feel for the program. I also reached out to mentors and other students who had been through this process to get their advice along the way.

What do you wish you would have known before you began?

Melanie: That it was going to be ok. I was really nervous about interviews in the first place, and being the first class to switch to a virtual season, I was worried about how it would play out. It ended up going much smoother than I anticipated, and I still feel like I got a good sense of the programs and their people even without being there physically.

Shaina: I wish I would have had better training for how to use Thalamus, which is a platform used for scheduling and conducting interviews. It is not the most intuitive site and several programs I applied to used it. I got the hang of it, but having more information about how to use it in advance—perhaps even before interview invites are sent out, would have made the process go smoother.

Maya: I think the whole interview experience (both in person and virtual) is a powerful journey. Over the months of interviewing, we find out what kind of physician we want to become and which program could best help us on that path. It's stressful because "you don't want to make the wrong decision," but it's also incredibly exciting. Before starting this interview season, I wish I had talked to more previous M4s about the reflection component of interview season. It's crucial to keep in touch with yourself throughout the process and make sure you are staying true to what you want and your values!

How do you think the changes will impact future interview seasons?

Melanie: With all the time and cost savings, I could foresee the virtual platform being used again in the future. Not only will this allow us greater clinical time in our fourth year, but it may help create a more equitable interview season for applicants.

Shaina: Overall, I thought the virtual interview season was a positive one for me. I think offering virtual interviews helps increase access to students by lowering the cost of applying to residency. While I do think that it is nice to interview in-person to get a feel for the program environment, it may be nice to keep the option for virtual interviewing in the future.

Maya: I feel more programs will incorporate some form of technology into the interview experience. In many ways, this virtual season made the normally very expensive interview season more accessible and cost-effective.