

Pathology Residency Open-House Events

A Novel Marketing Paradigm

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: Due to the continued impact of coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19), residency programs were advised to offer virtual interviews in place of traditional in-person interviews for the 2021 match recruitment season. As a result, many pathology residency programs offered preinterview virtual open-house events to meet prospective applicants before the interview season. This article aims to understand applicants' perspective on those events during the residency recruitment season of 2020 to 2021.

Methods: We performed a cross-sectional survey-based study involving 95 pathology residency applicants.

Results: Our results demonstrated that applicants generally have a positive perception of open house events; 91% found virtual open-house events beneficial, 63.2% attended open-house events for programs they were not considering applying to. Considering the high number of offered virtual open house events, 17% of applicants felt overwhelmed by attendance and 30% felt obligated to attend.

Conclusions: This brief report demonstrates the generally positive impact of these events.

Key Points

- Residency open-house events were generally well liked.
- Residency open-house events provided useful information and direction.
- Residency open houses with both faculty and trainees were most useful.

With the continued impact of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) released a recommendation in May 2020¹ encouraging medical schools and hospitals to exclusively perform virtual interviews for the residency match in place of traditional in-person interviews.² This situation has led departments to shift focus to improve their websites' content and freshen up their social media presence, particularly on Twitter. As a result, there was a notable increase in pathology departments' presence on Twitter, relevant hashtags (eg, #Path2Path, #PathMatch21), and other online activities involving and supporting medical students interested in pursuing pathology as a future career.³

There were 138 pathology residency programs listed on the Electronic Residency Application Service (ERAS) in the match season 2020 to 2021⁴; of these, at least 87 programs have Twitter accounts. Interestingly, 35% (29/87) of accounts were created between August and October of 2020 (based on a manual search done by the authors using Twitter).⁵ These accounts have been used to introduce and promote pathology residency programs to match applicants. Several creative recruitment activities were introduced, including featuring faculty and residents on Twitter pages, video tours of program facilities, prerecorded interviews with program faculty and residents, and even prerecorded songs to promote residency

programs. Additionally, pathology programs arranged and promoted preinterview events (virtual open-house events) to meet prospective pathology applicants and answer their questions using various video conferencing modalities. Multiple formats were used, including different styles of meetings (one big panel discussion vs break-out rooms with smaller groups) and involving various program members (residents only vs faculty only vs both). Almost 45 (33% of the total programs listed on ERAS) have arranged preinterview virtual open-house events, with nearly 80 events organized between August and October of 2020 and some programs setting multiple events on different dates.

Material and Methods

This article aims to understand the impact of preinterview interaction (virtual open-house events) on applicants during the residency recruitment season of 2020 to 2021. To achieve that, we performed a cross-sectional survey-based study involving pathology residency applicants. The electronic survey was created using Google Forms and distributed using social media outlets (WhatsApp and Twitter pathology interest groups) and emails.

The survey included 3 main sections: demographics, the level of training, and the training background. Each section had various questions, including multiple-choice questions, open-ended questions, and Likert scale questions¹⁻⁵ to evaluate different aspects of virtual open-house events. [Supplemental Table 1](#) includes all the survey questions and their choices (all supplemental materials can be found at *American Journal of Clinical Pathology* online). The survey was distributed starting in the middle of October through the middle of November 2020. All responses were anonymous and participation was completely voluntary.

Results

A total of 95 pathology residency applicants filled the survey. This represents around 10% of the current applicants.⁶ Participants were from different medical backgrounds, including allopathic MDs (24%), osteopathic DOs (10%), and international medical graduates (IMGs; 65%). The distribution of participants was similar to ERAS reported data, which showed that out of 1,250 total applicants, 72% are IMGs, 22% are allopathic MDs, and 6% osteopathic DOs. Almost (80%) of survey participants knew about preinterview

virtual events (open houses) through Twitter, with a few others who knew about the events through program websites, email, or word of mouth. Moreover, the majority of the participating applicants attended more than 5 events, with 44 (46.3%) who attended 5 to 10 open houses and 35 (36.8%) who attended more than 10 open houses **Table 1**. Additionally, most participants (85%) preferred virtual open houses that included both faculty and residents rather than any group alone or just an updated residency program website.

Results show that the majority of the participants had a favorable impression regarding open-house events. For instance, when asked to assess how beneficial virtual open houses were by a Likert scale (5 = very beneficial), the mean Likert score was 4.67 (range, 3-5). Discussing the residency program curriculum (schedule) and the educational opportunities were the 2 most beneficial areas selected by participants. Additionally, the results showed that most participants believed that the virtual open houses were able to provide information on the program's collegiality.

Interestingly, 60 participants (63.2%) attended virtual open houses for programs they were not considering applying for, out of which 57 participants (95%) were influenced to consider applying to those programs. On the other hand, around 60% of the participants decided not to apply to certain programs after the virtual open house. For most applicants (91.4%), open houses facilitated communication with programs after the events through different channels (eg, Twitter, email, etc.).

Table 1
Survey Participant Characteristics

Characteristic	Participants, No. (%) (n = 95)
Educational background	
Osteopathic student (DO)	9 (9.5)
Allopathic student (MD)	21 (22)
US IMG	21 (22)
Non-US IMG	35 (37)
MD/PhD	9 (9.5)
Current residence	
Inside the United States	82 (86)
Outside the United States	13 (24)
Finding out about open houses	
Twitter	74 (79)
Other social media	8 (8)
Word of mouth/email	8 (8)
Program website	5 (5)
Number of open houses attended	
None	1 (1)
<5	15 (16)
5-10	44 (46)
>10	35 (37)

DO, Doctor of Osteopathy; IMG, international medical graduate.

Considering the high number of offered virtual open-house events (around 85), we asked participants if they felt overwhelmed or obligated to attend those events; results showed a mean Likert score of 2.67 and 2.23 for feeling obligated and overwhelmed, respectively. These results demonstrate that virtual open houses might have been associated with some applicants' negative feelings, as around 30% of applicants felt obligated or very obligated, and 17% felt overwhelmed or very overwhelmed.

Finally, most applicants (87.1%) think that virtual open-house events helped prepare them for the actual interviews in different aspects, such as presenting themselves, asking pertinent questions, and figuring out the technical aspects of virtual interviews. Many participants expressed their opinion in open-ended answers, and their responses are summarized in [Supplemental Table 2](#). **Table 2** discusses the main results and potential conclusions.

Discussion

Overall, the results of this research showed that the pathology residency program open-house events seemed to have a predominantly positive response by those who attended. The results demonstrated that the open-house events were able to help the applicants explore the different programs and prepare applicants for the virtual interview match season. The results of this study are encouraging for programs to continue these recruitment activities. However, few considerations suggested by the results proposed spacing out open-house events by possibly starting early in the match

season to prevent overlapping and avoid overwhelming applicants with many events in a short period of time.

A small sample size limits results of this analysis; however, the distribution of applicant type mirrors the overall applicant pool. This limited response might be due (in part) that the survey was distributed on the same venues used to promote open houses (ie, social media and email), introducing a selection bias. COVID-19 has changed the paradigm in many aspects of medical education, including trainee recruitment. With the uncertainty of how long the COVID-19 pandemic impact will last, further studies are needed to investigate and improve the current practices and their educational value for potential trainees.

Virtual open houses show promise as a unique way of interacting with residency programs and might be useful for programs even after the pandemic is over. It is unclear whether the next match season will follow a similar pattern to the current season; nevertheless, the impact will likely last due to the logistical and financial benefits that the virtual interviews offer for programs and applicants. Future studies will have to address these questions, particularly after the results of the current virtual season. Studies with larger sample size and a diverse respondents background with a similar distribution to the actual match applicants are needed to identify the existing gaps to fill in for the upcoming match seasons. Institutions such as the AAMC and the National Resident Matching Program, among others, should invest in their access to data to help the medical education community better assess the impact of the pandemic on the residency recruitment process.

Table 2
Main Results and Conclusions of the Virtual Open-House Events Survey

Main Results	Possible Conclusions and Recommendations
85% preferred virtual open-house events with both faculty and residents' participation.	It is beneficial to include both faculty and resident sessions in future open-house events.
91% found virtual house events to be beneficial or very beneficial (mean Likert score of 4.67)	Virtual houses should be implemented in programs as a modality to introduce applicants to residency programs.
90% of participants considered applying to programs they were not considering after attending their open-house events.	Open houses serve as a possible way for applicants to evaluate programs. Programs are recommended to share their educational potentials during open-house events.
63% of the participants communicated with programs after open-house events.	Programs are advised to share with applicants their requirements and eligibility criteria.
30% of applicants felt obligated to attend open-house events, and 17% felt overwhelmed.	Open houses facilitate communication and participants have used a variety of ways to reach out to programs. Programs are recommended to share with applicants their preferred methods of communication.
	Virtual open houses can stress applicants and overwhelm them. Programs are recommended to distribute open houses over a more extended period of time; additionally, programs should try to offer more than one open house to allow applicants to attend based on their convenience.

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