

Perspectives of Virtual Residency Interviews in Plastic Surgery: Results following 1 Year of Training

Benjamin A. Sarac, MD; Jeffrey E. Janis, MD

Beginning with the 2020–2021 integrated plastic surgery residency application cycle, interviews have taken place in a virtual format as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many have studied the perspectives of applicants and program directors (PDs) following this change in format, including our group which has notably reported this at various timepoints throughout the process.^{1–5} However, the literature currently lacks data reporting on outcomes following the Match, once a resident has spent time training within their respective program. As such, we sought to study applicants' and PDs' satisfaction with virtual interviews after experiencing one another through 1 year of training.

Surveys were distributed to integrated plastic surgery PDs and residents from the 2019–2020 and 2020–2021 application cycles. Each survey was timed to send to participants following 1 year of training within the program, with the exception of the initial PD survey that was included within a separate survey study,³ to help prevent survey fatigue. Timeline of survey distribution is shown in Figure 1. Participants were asked how well they were able to get to know their respective program/resident and how happy they were with where they ranked their respective program/resident, following either in-person or virtual interviews. Data were collected on a Likert scale (1–5) and analyzed via independent samples *t* test. Analysis was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics for Macintosh (IBM Corp. version 27.0, Armonk, N.Y.), and a *P* value less than 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

Response rates were greater than 25% for each survey (PD in-person 69/82, 72%; PD virtual 44/82, 54%; applicant in-person 55/167, 33%; applicant virtual 40/156, 26%). Applicants interviewing in-person reported that they were better able to get to know their programs compared to those who completed virtual interviews (4.2 ± 0.8 , 2.8 ± 1.1 ; $P < 0.001$). However, there was no statistically

significant difference between groups in respect to their satisfaction with where they ranked their respective programs (4.6 ± 0.8 , 4.3 ± 1.1 ; $P = 0.070$), as shown in Table 1. Data from the PD surveys were similar in that they also reported a better ability to get to know applicants during in-person interviews (4.1 ± 0.9 , 3.5 ± 1.3 ; $P = 0.004$). They differed from residents, however, in that PDs were more satisfied with where they ranked their applicants during in-person interviews compared to virtual (4.6 ± 0.6 , 4.3 ± 1.2 ; $P = 0.028$), as shown in Table 2.

Virtual residency interviews in plastic surgery have been a topic of debate since their inception in the 2020–2021 application cycle. The results of this study are the first to assess long-term (1 year) outcomes following virtual interviews. Prior to the present study, our previous data showed that the majority of PDs preferred in-person interviews; however, despite this preference, 68% were satisfied with the process.³ Of note, the results of that study were immediately following the inaugural virtual interview season. The data in the present study show that PDs were more satisfied with where they ranked applicants after interviewing in-person once given the opportunity to get to know them after a year of training within the program. Similar results are seen among applicants/residents, in which our previous data showed that 65% were satisfied with virtual interviews, though 73% would prefer in-person interviews.⁴

Although the data suggest that residents and PDs may be less satisfied with where they rank programs and applicants, respectively, there are positive aspects of virtual interviews. Specifically, the cost of virtual interviews is far less when compared with in-person interviews, which has been shown to be a significant stressor for applicants, and can be upward of \$5000 in a single year.^{4,6,7} Virtual interviews may help ensure increasing equity of ability to attend interviews among individuals from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. And while geographic bias has been discussed, this has recently been studied among those applying to surgical specialties, and there was a decrease in geographic connection with respect to the applicant's matching program compared with previous years.⁸

Whether virtual interviews are a suitable replacement for in-person interviews for integrated plastic surgery residency will likely never be a universally accepted

From the Department of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio.

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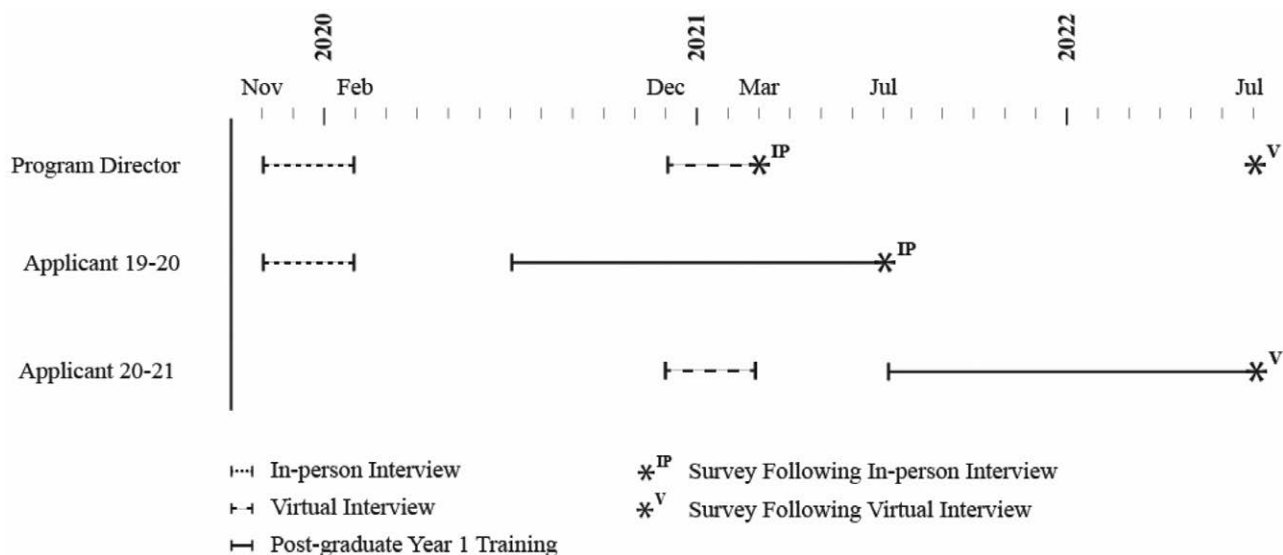


Fig. 1. Timing of survey distribution.

Table 1. Applicant Responses to Survey

Survey Question	In-person	Virtual	P
How well were you able to get to know your current program on interview day?	4.2±0.8	2.8±1.1	*<0.001
How satisfied are you with where you ranked your current program?	4.6±0.8	4.3±1.1	0.070

*Statistical significance.

Table 2. PD Responses to Survey

Survey Question	In-person	Virtual	P
How well were you able to get to know your current resident(s) on interview day?	4.1±0.9	3.5±1.3	*0.004
How satisfied are you with where you ranked your current resident(s)?	4.6±0.6	4.3±1.2	*0.028

*Statistical significance.

answer. If given the opportunity to conduct interviews in-person, virtual, or a hybrid of the two, programs should carefully weigh the pros and cons to ensure an equitable and thoughtful process for both themselves and applicants.

Jeffrey E. Janis, MD, FACS
 Department of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery
 The Ohio State University
 915 Olentangy River Road, Suite 2100
 Columbus, OH 43212
 E-mail: jeffrey.janis@osumc.edu

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