Q & A: Mastering the Virtual Interview

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Interviews can be stressful and anxiety-provoking. Over 150 attendees from 8 countries participated in our "Mastering the Virtual Interview" webinar with Dr. Cherilyn Cecchini. AMWA members have exclusive access to a recording of this session (login required). Over 40 questions were asked, here are some highlights from our Moderators Dr. Brette Harding and Dr. Tara Shrout:

What would you suggest to make me stand out as a good candidate other than extracurricular activities?
Many ways! How can you contribute uniquely to this program where you are interviewing? Write down all the things you are proud of that you have done during medical school. Find some ways to highlight those.

How to convey to the program that they are your top choice?
If the program truly is your top choice, tell them during the interview. You can say something such as, "Thank you for your time, I really enjoyed getting to know your institution. I want to let you know that this is my top choice for residency". Let them know but be sure before you say it because it is important to be honest.

How do you answer a question that might stump you or you did not expect?
Many people who are asking these types of questions realize that they require thoughtful answers and may actually expect you to take some time to pause and think before answering. You can acknowledge that it is a great/interesting/thoughtful question and request to have a little bit of time to think about the answer. Most of the time, it feels very awkward to the interviewee answering the question, but the interviewer asking doesn't feel as awkward. So it might be a matter of perception. Just be sure to take your time and come up with the best answer for the question. That will be the most important thing!

Will interviewers understand that students weren't able to do (home/away) rotations in specific specialties due to the COVID-19 pandemic?
Yes - we are all going through this, and anticipate that programs understand the change in circumstances. Do your best to highlight what else you did during those times and what experiences you have that demonstrate interest in the field.

How long should my answer be if my interviewer asks "why are you choosing this specialty"?
As long as it needs to be! There is no set time limit. Your answer should show that you put some thought into it -- such as discussing your process of arriving at your decision to choose this specialty or demonstrating why you are committed to the specialty. You do not need to drag it out and add unimportant sentences just for time though.

Should we approach our interview differently according to who we are speaking to (student, program director, Dean)?
Yes - hopefully you will have the names of your interviewers. Look them up in advance (titles, positions, interests, research, etc.)

What tips do you have for participating in the multiple mini interviews format?
Treat every interview like it is the most important interview! Start fresh with each. Gather what you can uniquely from each discussion. Consider trying to provide your interviewers with different information about you and why you are a great applicant with each interviewer.

How can I find out whether a program prioritizes gender equity?
You can ask the residents and gauge a program's priorities by reviewing the program's public information (including institutional website pages, media articles, and social media content).

What if you lose power and get disconnected during the interview?
Good question and you are already planning ahead. Have a back-up plan (such as calling the phone number of the interview organizer) and let you programs/interviewers know in advance if you might lose power (e.g., bad weather forecast, if you are in an area with unstable internet services, etc). People understand.

How might one inquire about ACGME accreditation status, for example, on probation or warning?
If a program is on probation, this is supposed to be posted online. If this is the case or if it is unclear, it is important to ask. The program may be able to give you a great explanation and how they are approaching it.

If an interviewer asks me about research and I lack scientific publications, how should I navigate this?
Instead of a publication, describe a project (or other areas such as community service) that you significantly contributed to and saw all the way through. If you have poster/oral/teaching presentations, you can talk about these too!

Think whether you want to be involved in research/publications in residency, and if so, how you might what to do that. Being thoughtful and applicable matters. Publications are often a nice 'plus', but absolutely not necessary for residency applications.

How do you handle actually pausing to think about the question without it feeling awkward?

Pauses can be confident building! It is appropriate to pause for a moment when needed. Have some go-to 'stories' or examples of things you are involved with that can apply to many question, have a page in front of you with written down options in case needed (this is one advantage of having virtual verses in-person interviews).

What do you recommend us to talk about when I mention about a club that I joined?

Mention what you gained from that experience. What skills or lesson did you learn? How can you apply these to the opportunities during residency and your future career?

If I am a "traditional" student, should I talk about meaningful undergraduate experiences?
Certainly! Anything that you feel is important, or helped you to become the person you are (or describes you or your interests) is always a great thing to talk about. Showing your passion for things is most important!

Should I send thank-you notes?

This is dependent on the program. There are some programs that clearly say that they do not accept post-interview communication. Look out for this and I would follow what the program recommends, even though you might want to send thank you emails.