

Virtual Interview Process in the Setting of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: To examine the experiences and attitudes of pediatric dentistry residency program directors and first year residents regarding the virtual interview process during the 2020/2021 application cycle.

Methods: One survey was sent to 101 pediatric dentistry residency program directors a second survey was sent to 889 post-doc members of AAPD with data only collected from those who interviewed during the 2020/2021 cycle.

Results: Response rates were 27% (N=22/82) for program directors and 17% (N = 72/416) for residents. Program directors felt that virtual interviews could not substitute in-person interviews and that virtual interviews made it difficult to represent clinic facilities, observe interactions between current residents and applicants, and assess certain personality characteristics. While 40.0% of directors said they would be willing to utilize virtual interviews in the future 60% of directors were not interested in future utilization. Residents felt they were unable to observe interactions between faculty and current residents, unable to assess the surrounding area or clinical facilities, and unable to understand the culture of the program. While residents reported that virtual interviews were more accommodating to their schedule and 87% spent less than \$250.00 on virtual interviews 61% would still prefer to interview in person for any future interviews.

Conclusion: Program directors felt virtual interviews could not substitute in-person interviews and 60% of directors would not be interested in any future virtual interviews. Residents reported they were unable to evaluate the clinical facilities or the surrounding area and would prefer to interview in person for any future interviews.

INTRODUCTION

During the 2020/2021 application cycle, Covid-19 travel restrictions and safety precautions necessitated the switch from traditional in-person interviews to virtual interviews (VIs) across medicine and dental residency programs. Programs faced the challenges of assessing candidates through a virtual medium as well as exhibiting what their programs had to offer including facilities, program culture, while encountering inherent technical glitches.¹

The interview process consistently ranks as a high priority according to program directors when ranking applicants as it gives valuable information that is not attainable on a written application.² Across dental specialties program directors look to assess applicant’s honesty, responsibility, professionalism, interpersonal skills, enthusiasm, listening skills, verbal skills, confidence, and maturity.³⁻⁸

Applicants also highly value the in-person interview when it comes to ranking programs. Based on previous research in the area applicants wish to assess clinical facilities, surrounding area, observe interactions between residents and faculty, observe interactions between current residents, current resident satisfaction and perceived happiness.^{9,10,11}

Traditional in-person interviews are an expensive cost to both programs and applicants. Many applicants have to pay for travel, accommodations, and food in addition to the time commitment that takes away from valuable clinical experience during their final year of dental school. A 2018 study found that medical students applying for residencies spent anywhere from \$250-\$499 on a single interview and 71% of respondents borrowed money to fund interview costs, while 41% declined interviews for financial reasons.¹²

In-person interviews also come with significant cost to the programs themselves. Most programs host a social event either before or after the formal interview and meals throughout the day of the interview. A 2019 study found family medicine programs spent on average \$213 per applicant.¹³

Studies in the medical field comparing in-person interviews to virtual interviews found both groups felt they were able to accurately represent themselves but differed when asked if the interview experience helped them decide if the program was the right fit and if they were able to understand the culture of the program and make an informed ranking decision. Major drawbacks to the virtual process compared to in-person experiences were the inability to gain detailed knowledge of surrounding city, program facilities, and inability to effectively interact with current residents and faculty. Overall, both applicants and faculty reported that videoconferencing interviewing could not substitute for an onsite interview.^{15,16,17}

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A survey was sent via Survey Monkey to 101 pediatric dentistry residency program directors. Data was collected only from respondents who were active program directors during the 2020/2021 application cycle. A second survey was sent to 889 listed post-doc members of AAPD with data only collected from current first year residents. Data was collected over a 7-week period. The list of both sets of emails were obtained from the AAPD. A cover letter was sent via email along with the survey stating the purpose of the survey and that the completion of the survey was voluntary with minimal risk for the participants. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained from Albert Einstein College of Medicine prior to distribution of the survey. The surveys collected demographics, experiences and attitudes of virtual interviews, as well as general trends in the application cycle.

RESULTS

Response rates for program directors were 26.8% (N = 22/82) and 17.3% (N = 72/416) for residents. The total number of program directors was adjusted due to the AAPD supplying an excess of email addresses to prevent sharing of e-mail lists. According to the Commission on Dental Accreditation there are currently 82 accredited pediatric dentistry programs in the United States. Out of the 889 listed-post doc residents supplied by the AAPD, 416 applicants matched according to the 2020/2021 National Matching Services Inc.

Program Directors: Of the 22 program directors that responded, 10 were hospital based, 10 were hospital and university based and 2 were university based. The average years of experience as director was 9.8, ranging from 1 year to 41 years and 54% . Eighty-six percent of programs only offered virtual interviews while 4.6% of programs offered in-person interviews only. Eighty-one percent had no previous experience with virtual interviews and 90.9% spent less money than previous years of in-person interviews. Sixty-eight percent of programs interviewed the same number of applicants compared to previous years while 27.3% of programs were able to interview more candidates. Seventy-two percent of programs offered applicants virtual or pre-recorded tours of surrounding area and 86.4% offered virtual or pre-recorded tours of the facilities. Sixty-eight point two percent of program directors offered a virtual pre/post interview social event. Program director and resident attitudes can be found in Figures 1 and 2. Sixty percent of directors reported if travel and health restrictions are lifted they would not utilize virtual interviews in the future while 40.0% said they would be willing to utilize virtual interviews in some capacity.

Residents: Resident respondents originated from 29 different states with an average age of 30.3 (N=72) with 68.0% identifying as female. Seventy-two point two percent reported having travel restrictions in place during the interview cycle affecting their ability to go on in-person interviews. Sixty-eight point one percent responded that in-person interviews were not offered by any of the programs they were invited to interview with. Respondents reported participating in 1 to 16 virtual interviews during the 2020/2021 cycle with an average of 5.5 virtual interviews per applicant. Compared to the total interviews, 94.2% were virtual interviews (N = 390/414). 20.1% of residents reported spending \$0.00 on virtual interviews, 66.7% reported spending less than \$250.00, while 12.5% reported spending more than \$500.00. Ninety-five point six percent of residents did not face any financial burdens caused by the virtual interview process. Eighty-three point three percent of residents interviewed virtually at their current residency. For any future interviews 61.1% preferred to interview in person, 15.3% would prefer virtual only interview, and 23.6% would prefer a combination of virtual and in-person interview. In all, 90.3% of residents report either being satisfied or very satisfied with their current residency and 77.25% of program directors are either satisfied or very satisfied with their 1st year residents who interviewed virtually.

All result must be interpreted with caution given the low response rates from directors and residents.

CONCLUSIONS

The virtual interview process during the 2020/2021 application cycle had its share of conveniences and shortcomings.

Program directors felt:

- Virtual interviews cannot substitute in-person interviews
- Programs spent less money during virtual interviews
- Virtual interviews made it difficult to represent facilities, assess applicant personality, and observe interactions between applicants and residents
- Majority of program directors are not interested in utilizing virtual interviews in the future

Residents felt:

- Unable to observe faculty and current resident interactions
- Unable to assess current resident satisfaction
- Unable to understand the culture of the program
- Unable to observe clinical facilities and the surrounding area
- Resident were able to attend more virtual interviews and spent less money
- Majority of residents prefer to interview in-person for any future interviews

Program Director Attitudes

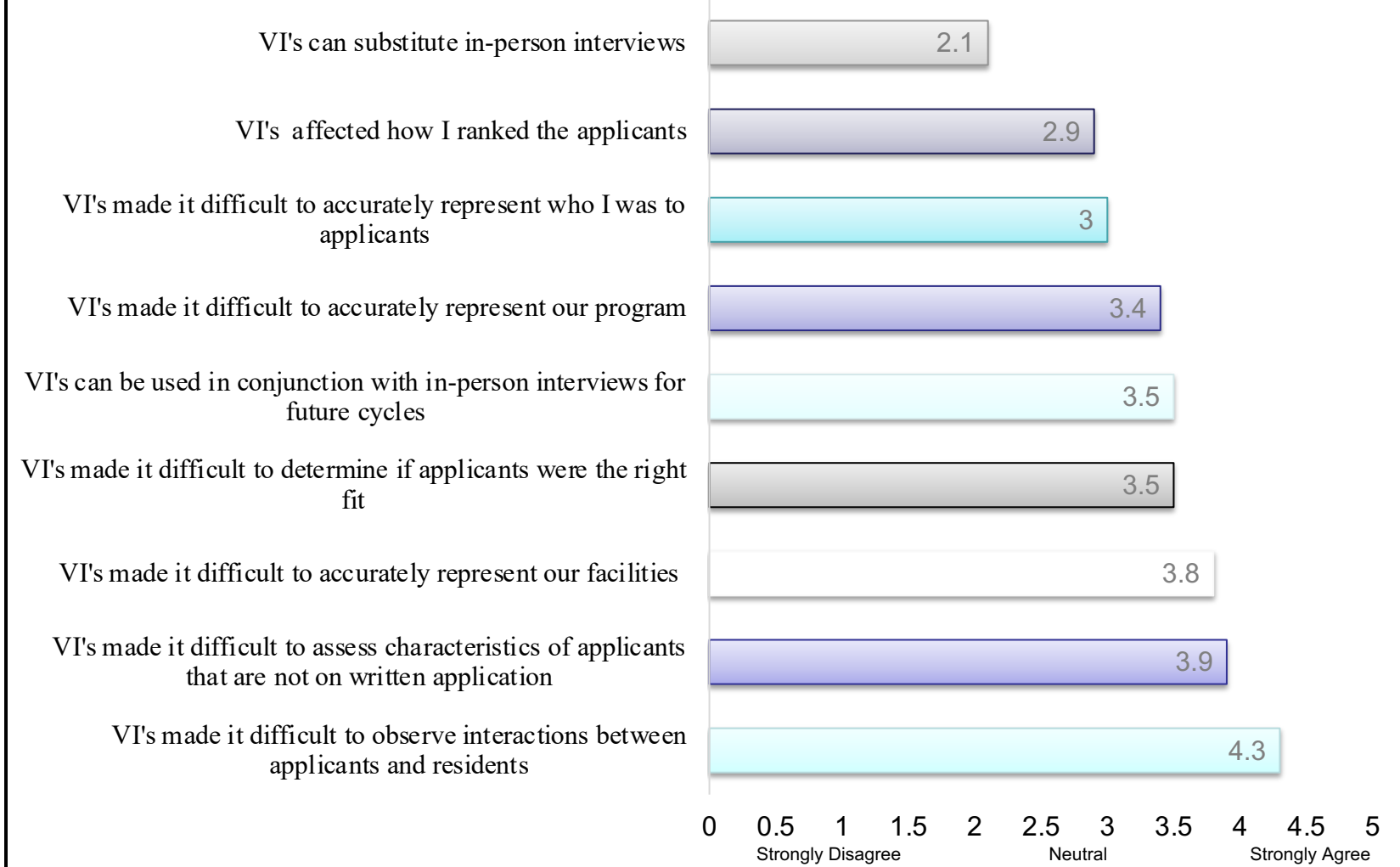


Figure 1. Program Directors Attitudes Towards Virtual Interviews

Resident Attitudes

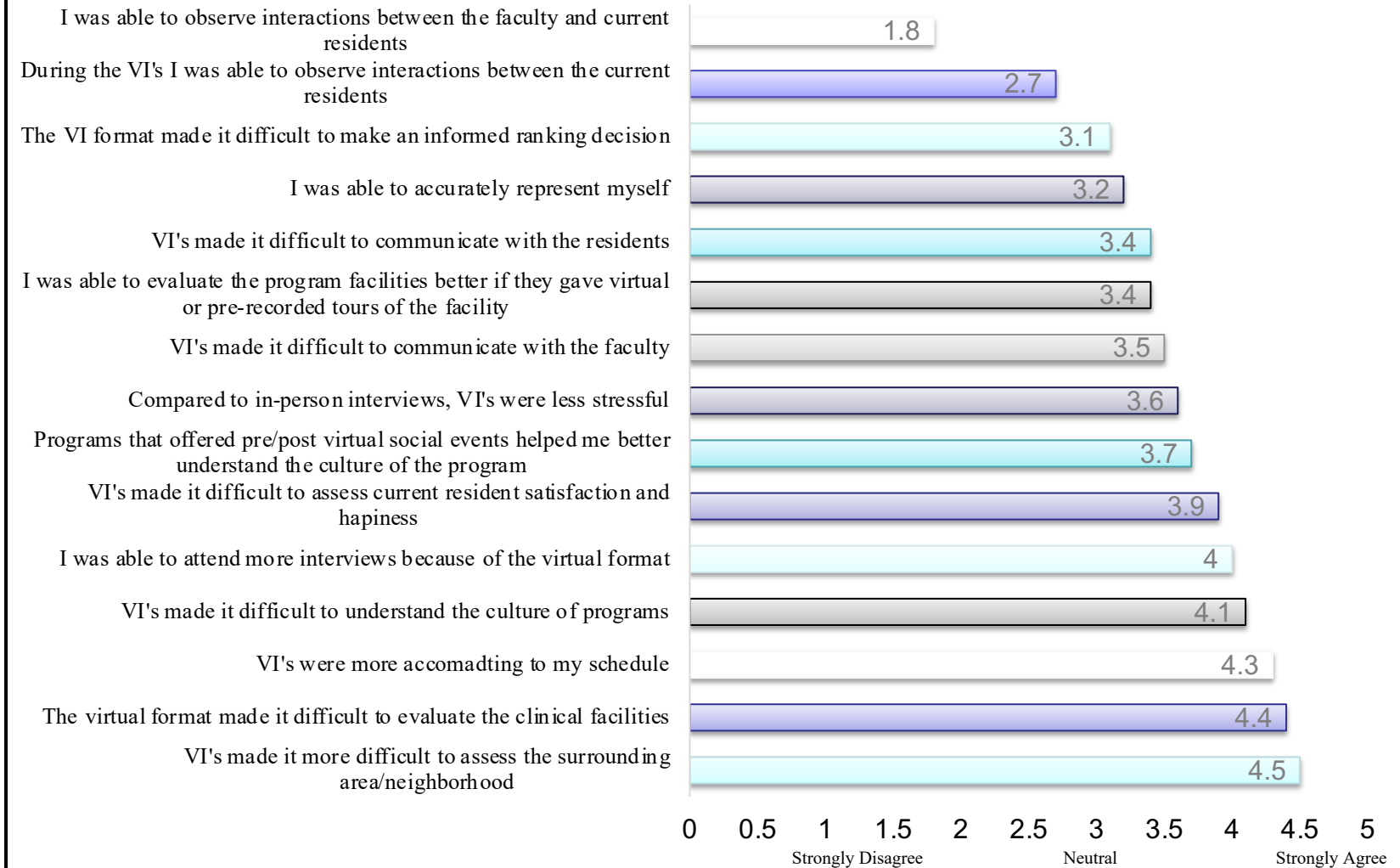


Figure 2. First Year Resident Attitudes

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Available upon request