

## The Role of Interviews & Challenges of COVID

The personal interview is a pillar of the medical school admission and residency placement process (Puryear). Edwards et al. conceptualized the selection interview as a vehicle for information gathering, decision making, verification of application data, and recruitment (Edwards). The interview permits an assessment not only of the linguistic content of candidate responses but also an appraisal of subtle factors like facial expressions, postures, gestures, socioaffective fluidity, and qualities of voice and aural inflection—factors that come together to supplement the verbal content of the interview and create an individual's presence (Bingham). With some important qualifications, it is commonly accepted that the in-person interview enables a synthesis of information that would otherwise be difficult, if not impossible (Edwards). Yet, in the midst of a COVID-19 pandemic that is foreclosing the ability to conduct in-person interviews, it is precisely this difficulty that selection committees around the country face.

This abstract posits that, via the above mechanisms, interviews allow selection committees to stress test the *narrative integrity* of the stories candidates tell about themselves. In so doing, the interview serves as a means of evaluating how fully applicants embody their self-portraits and institutional expectations. The challenge presented by the virtual interview is a bidirectional *textural flattening* of the in-person encounter that leaves selection committees facing a dual conundrum: *How do we capture a multidimensional picture of a candidate's potential when our usual medium for narrative integrity testing is deprived of its typical robustness? Likewise, how do we paint a complete picture of our institutions to effectively recruit students?*

## Strategies

Strategies exist for fortifying the virtual interview and recapturing the lost texture of the in-person encounter as well as mitigating stereotype threat and disparities in access that may unduly impact URM students. Approaches include: adaptation of the multiple-mini interview to the virtual milieu; systematically training interviewers to elicit granular responses through structured questions; standardization of questions and post-interview assessment to ensure reliable and equitable candidate assessment; making qualitative assessments through both one-on-one virtual interactions and dynamic group-based virtual interactions (i.e. panel interviews and group waiting rooms); properly equipping candidates with guidelines and expectations to ease the friction of self-expression; strategies for enriching institutional self-presentation in virtual settings.

## Challenges Facing Programs and Candidates

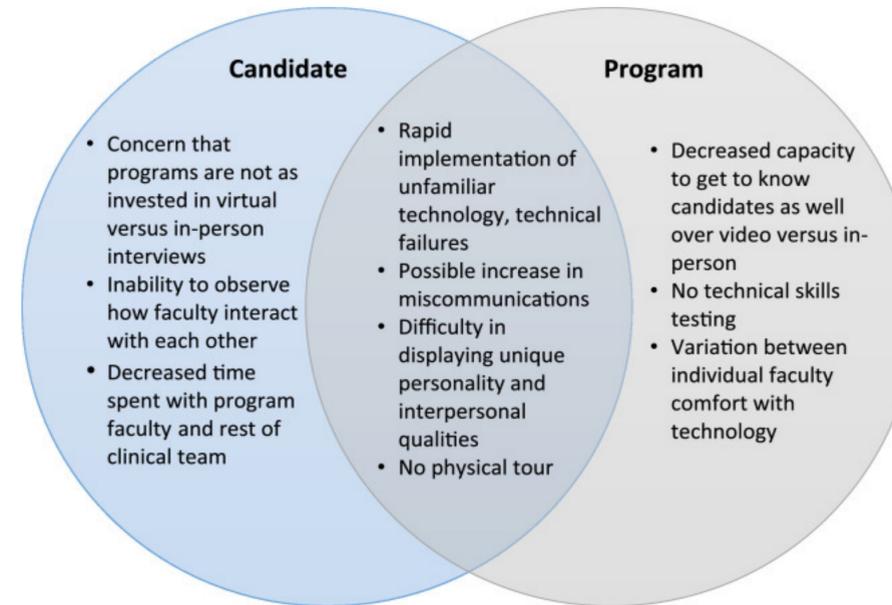


Image from: Virtual Interviews in the Era of COVID-19: A Primer for Applicants.  
Ruth Ellen Jones, MD and Kareem R. Abdelfattah, MD J Surg Educ. 2020 July-August; 77(4): 733–734.

## A Theoretical Framework: What's Missing?

Even in normal, non-virtual scenarios, language as an instrument of communication often falls short of its mark. The fissure between reality and representation becomes even more pronounced in virtual mediums.

In virtual mediums, this fissure is catalyzed by textural flattening. Textural flattening can be understood as an absence or diminishment of non-verbal contextual cues that are the hallmarks of in-person communication.

In the absence of such nonverbal cues, interviewers and interviewees are left with pixelated renditions of one another. Faces become, quite-literally, outsized and framed in one-dimensional boxes from the neck up. Because we analyze the communication data that is available to us, these unidimensional renditions become the locus of our interpretive efforts—efforts usually directed at a rich array of non-verbal cues. Unsurprisingly, due to technological issues like mismatches in video and audio speed, due to absence of common spatial context (i.e. interviews occurring without campus or medical center tours), and due to the lack of the organic physical correlates to punctuate the start and end of conversations, this interpretive effort is often thwarted by the digital constraints of the medium.

In other words, the interpretative yield only goes so far, because—to borrow a phrase from literary analysis—the primary source text lacks the usual density. What was once a layered portrait is stripped down, a sonnet becomes a sketch. At its root, then, the problem of textural flattening becomes a matter of *textual* flattening.

## Conceptual Commonalities

In light of this textual flattening, the importance of supplemental data is heightened. In situations where an individual interview itself may yield less information, narrative integrity testing benefits from cross referencing other components of the application. Namely, a standardized and rigorous scoring of the written application and letters of recommendation become even more important.

However, we should not give up hope on the virtual interview itself. The strategies above attempt to enrich the virtual encounter. The MMI, the group interview, and standardized questions may be useful opportunities for candidates to display their traits more fully. What these approaches also share in common is an introduction of a) multiple observers and opportunities for assessment b) modeling of real-time problem-solving scenarios and c) standardization of the information gathering and evaluative process to mitigate bias.

## Counterarguments & Opportunities

Notably, the above model assumes that non-verbal contextual cues that are part of an in-person interview lend reliable and meaningful ways of differentiating candidates and of testing narrative integrity. The possibility exists that such context is not reliably interpreted, but rather functions as a distraction from the substantive answers provided by interview participants. In this view, such “noise” is arguably reduced in a virtual interview, potentially leveling the playing field. This is a question that merits study, possibly in the form of an analysis comparing the makeup and performance of applicants admitted under virtual and non-virtual selection processes. Virtual interview formats may also lend themselves to innovations like post-hoc group review of a recorded interview. This may allow for testing of the interviewer's assessment and detection of implicit biases that would otherwise be missed.

## References

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