



# Learning Community Initiatives to Engage Medical Students During COVID-19: A Series of Virtual Conversations

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## INTRODUCTION

Challenges to medical education have been pervasive during the COVID-19 pandemic, and medical students in particular have faced numerous obstacles as a result. One of the greatest losses for medical students was the inability to gather with their peers and a lost sense of community. The Learning Community (LC) program at Wayne State University School of Medicine (WSU SoM) expanded our offerings through the use of the Zoom platform to increase a sense of connectedness among medical students. The first initiative of its kind, the Virtual Conversation series enabled students to share their pandemic challenges while also connecting with physicians on the COVID-19 frontlines.

Students were offered online sessions with physicians and residents who were able to share insight regarding:

- 1) how to succeed as a medical student on rotation during COVID-19,
- 2) potential implications of the pandemic on residency applications,
- 3) the utility of telemedicine,
- 4) tips for patient encounters, and
- 5) realities of serving as a physician during a global health crisis.

The effort to reinforce student engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic allowed the learning communities to bring forth the opportunity to maintain interactions amongst peers. Time was spent with residents and physicians who shared via the Zoom, information that increased knowledge around newly established best practices. Each of the conversations wrapped up with an open question and answer forum giving medical students the space to discuss preparation, clerkship expectations, and outlooks on future medical careers.

## OBJECTIVES

COVID-19 influenced the Virtual Conversation series to bring awareness of the realities of the pandemic to WSU SoM LC medical students. The objective was to provide peer connectedness while educating students on medical concerns surrounding the pandemic by using residents and physicians to engage with directly. The aim was also to give insight to the medical students who are anticipating their new roles serving on the frontlines.

## METHOD

The Virtual Conversation series initiative involved LC Coordinators (LCCs) individually reaching out to an array of residents and clinical physicians selected from the network of Office of Student Affairs Director of Mentoring and Student Engagement. Essential frontline physicians were handpicked based on specialty and range of experience. LCCs contacted each physician by email, with an invitation to co-host a Virtual Conversation alongside a second or third-year medical student LCC Facilitator.

The physicians immediately began accepting the invitations by scheduling the Virtual Conversations over the first three-weeks of April 2020. Conversation topics included (1) utilizing telemedicine, (2) serving on the frontlines from a resident's perspective, (3) physician experience managing a pandemic versus natural disasters, (4) being an intern in the MICU, (5) leading community resources, (6) leading and rounding, (7) an epidemiologist's perspective, and (8) unique barriers faced by homeless and LGBTQ+ adolescents during the pandemic.

A Likert scale, open text, and ranking questions were used to collect response. Without utilizing identifying information, evidence was gathered using the Qualtrics Survey tool to evaluate each of the presentations. WSU SoM used the survey responses to identify, measure, and appropriately address shortcomings, introduce specific COVID-19 pandemic-related curriculum, and prepare students, faculty, and staff accordingly.

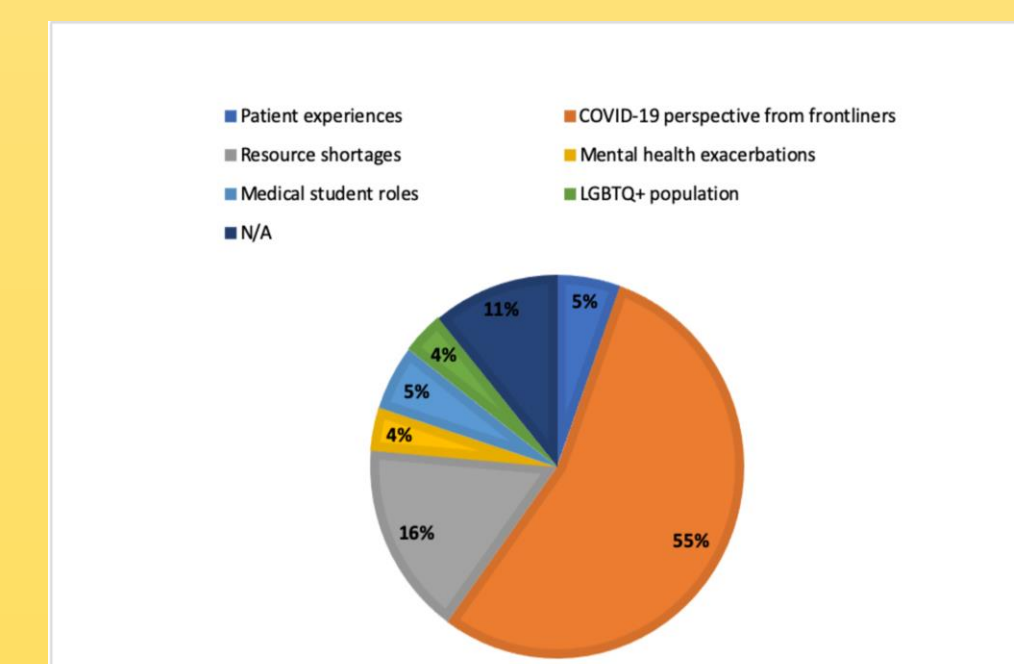
## RESULTS

The eight WSU SoM LCs hosted a unique student experience through the Virtual Conversation series. One hundred percent of the respondents (n=55) from each conversation of the series reported that the presentations were useful, with open text responses demonstrating 5% of students felt the topics directly covered student experiences in clinical rotations during a global health crisis, as well as student futures as physicians in the COVID-19 landscape. Students interacted with and questioned the panelists about health systems' preparedness and vigorously changing safety protocols, the roles of medical students during the global health crisis, and more.

When asked to rate the usefulness of the Virtual Conversation series, 62% of medical students selected 'extremely useful' and 33% selected 'very useful'. 0% of medical students selected 'not at all useful'.

Qualitative text analysis was performed by two individual researchers, and any relevant discrepancies were discussed and resolved. Results of the analysis identified new information medical students learned through the Virtual Conversation series categorized according to the following: (1) reflections on patient experiences, (2) resource shortages, (3) medical student roles during the COVID-19 pandemic, (4) COVID-19 perspectives from frontliners, (5) mental health exacerbations of clinical providers during the pandemic, and (6) the impact of COVID-19 on LGBTQ+ populations. 55% of medical students reported they learned something new about the COVID-19 pandemic from the perspective of frontliners (Figure 1).

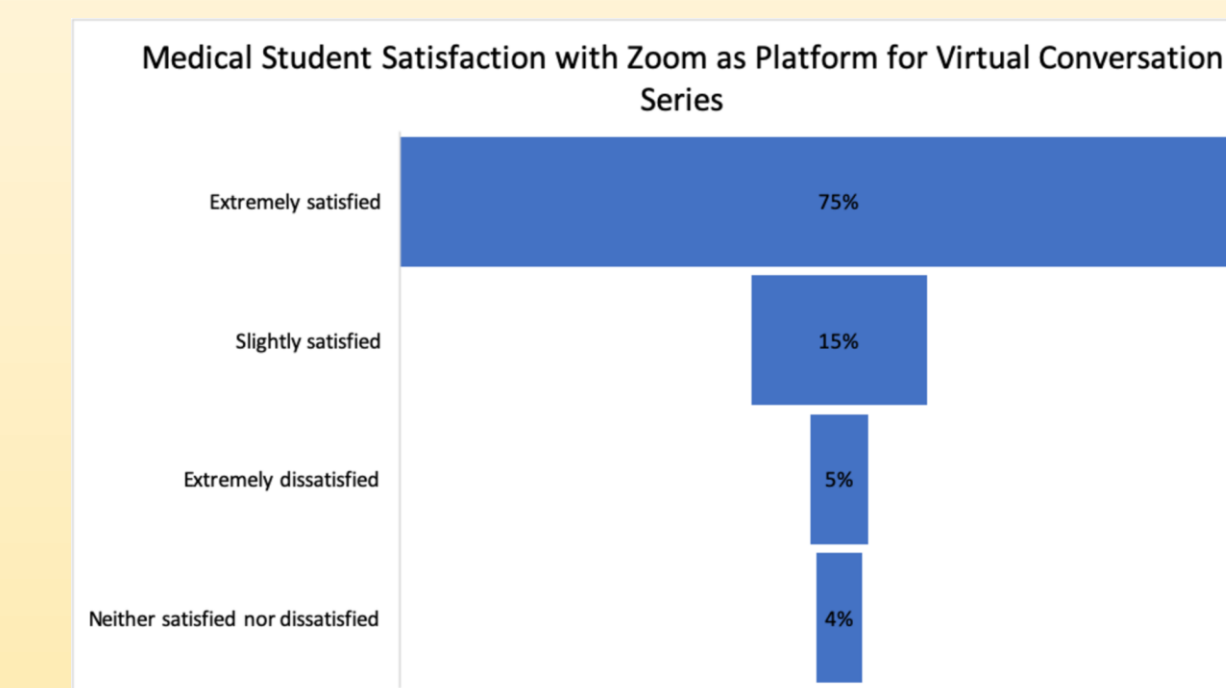
Figure 1



## RESULTS

When asked, "How satisfied are you with Zoom for this type of online session?" responses indicated the use of Zoom as a platform for the series was highly received by a wide margin. Six percent of the attendees were extremely dissatisfied with the platform but did not state why. Four percent of students were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. Contrarily, 90% of the responses ranged from slightly satisfied to extremely satisfied (Figure 2).

Figure 2



Students were also asked for suggestions of future topics in the interest of another installment of the Virtual Conversation series. Twenty-one students responded with suggestions among which 29% reported wanting to hear more about physicians' perspectives from the front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic, 33% were interested in hearing more about managing COVID-19 patients, and 19% hoped to learn more about the roles of medical students and residents during this time. The remaining 19% were interested in various topics such as managing mental health as a patient care provider, the health system's preparedness for the pandemic, and financial management as a physician.

## Conclusion

The Virtual Conversation series provided a unique benefit to medical students' exposure of the realities of COVID-19, the current landscape of healthcare, anticipation of their future roles as physicians, connectedness with their community, and opportunity to practice flexibility as they begin to apply online learning to real-world situations in the health system. Medical students who are training to serve in their roles as frontliners have been provided with an opportunity to connect with their peers already on the frontlines, which has bolstered their preparation. With a desire for expansion of the topics presented in this Virtual Conversation series, as well as other topics that pertain to medical students' professional development, it is recommended this initiative be incorporated into a more longitudinal component of the medical school curriculum to increase student connectedness with their peers through LCs and physician colleagues.

## References

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