Rapid Transition to a Virtual Multiple Mini-Interview Admissions Process: A New Medical School’s Experience During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

**Problem**
The University of Houston College of Medicine (UH COM) began its first admissions cycle after receiving preliminary accreditation in February 2020. With the advent of remote learning in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the school moved its admissions process, including multiple mini-interview (MMI), from an in-person to online format in mid-March 2020.

**Approach**
The UH COM selected Zoom as the video conferencing platform for its virtual admissions process, including MMI. On each interview day (3–4 hours), 14–16 applicants joined administrators, faculty, and staff in a virtual meeting room. Applicants were divided into 2 groups:

- One group participated in 7 MMI interviews (one-on-one interactions with interviewers) via virtual breakout rooms; the groups then switched. The MMI stations were the same as those used in-person in early March. Applicants were able to ask questions at multiple points during the day. Technical support was provided for participants with connectivity issues or unfamiliar with Zoom.

**Outcomes**
Of the 180 applicants interviewed in March–April 2020, 134 (74%) participated in the virtual process and 46 (26%) in the on-site process. Twenty-five (83%) of the 30 members of the inaugural class of 2024 interviewed virtually. Advantages of the virtual format included ease of access for faculty and more flexibility and less expense for applicants. Challenges included the need for applicants to decide whether to accept an offer of admission from a new school without visiting and missed opportunities for faculty to have relatively unstructured interactions with applicants.

**Next Steps**
This virtual admissions process was a feasible alternative for the inaugural class but is not sustainable. UH COM plans to leverage lessons learned to refine the virtual format for use in future admissions cycles, even when in-person interviews are possible.

**Problem**
The evolving COVID-19 pandemic has affected many medical school operations, including admissions and the selection of medical students. Whereas nearly 75% of business executives were already using real-time video conferencing to interview applicants in early 2020,1 medical school admissions committees were conducting traditional in-person interviews. In March 2020, as we prepared to shift to a virtual admissions process at the University of Houston (UH) College of Medicine, we searched for published examples of online medical school interview processes to help guide the development of our strategy. This search yielded several reports on the process and benefits of virtual interviews of candidates for residency programs2–4 but no articles describing a virtual interview process for medical school applicants in the United States.

Because the UH College of Medicine was awarded preliminary accreditation by the Liaison Committee on Medical Education (LCME) in February 2020, our admissions process was off-cycle for entry year 2020 compared with other medical schools. To fill the 30 seats of the inaugural class of 2024, application review began at the end of February and on-site interviews using the multiple mini-interview (MMI) format were scheduled for March and April.

On March 11, 2020, in response to the COVID-19 outbreak, a declaration of local disaster for public health emergency was announced for Harris County, Texas,4 where our school is located. As a result, the university suspended in-person gatherings for 1 week; this was followed the subsequent week by the initiation of remote/online learning for all programs. At the UH College of Medicine, 3 rounds of admissions interviews were conducted on-site during the first 2 weeks of March before in-person interviews were suspended. Admissions leaders chose to pivot quickly to a virtual process out of necessity, citing 2013 evidence from an Australian medical school,5 which reported that there was no significant difference between MMI data collected remotely or in-person and both applicants and interviewers deemed the remote MMI process acceptable. Thus, the Office of Admissions swiftly developed an online interview process that would closely mimic the original in-person activities. After a week of preparations, all remaining admissions activities were conducted virtually, from mid-March through April.

**Approach**

**Virtual interview platform**
The video conferencing program Zoom (Zoom Video Communications, San Jose, California) was chosen as the online platform.
platform to conduct virtual admissions interviews because it allows for both large group and one-on-one interactions, and our institution had already started using it as a method of engagement with faculty and staff working from home. Before the virtual admissions process was launched, interviewers were trained in the use of Zoom and provided opportunities to practice features such as screen sharing and using breakout rooms.

**Virtual interview process**

The format of the 3–4-hour virtual interview day (Figure 1) remained similar to the on-site experience, including the MMI with 7 stations for 14–16 applicants. The process was coordinated and directed by the director of admissions (C.B.D.), who was supported by 1 staff person, and it required 7 interviewers (all members of the Admissions Committee, including M.A.C.T., K.S., O.M.-V., K.R., and K.V.H.). The chair (K.S.) and/or vice chair (M.A.C.T.) of the Admissions Committee provided additional support during the interview day when necessary.

The day before their scheduled interviews, applicants received an invitation via email with a link to attend the Zoom interview meeting. At the scheduled time, applicants joined the administrators, faculty, and staff involved in the interview process in a virtual conference room, where they were greeted by the director of admissions and the associate dean for student affairs, admissions, and outreach (K.V.H.). Like the on-site process, the virtual session started with the dean of the UH College of Medicine formally welcoming the applicants. Then a recorded presentation describing the curriculum was played, which was followed by a brief question-and-answer period. Next, the day’s interview process was explained and the applicants were divided into 2 groups (7–8 applicants per group) to complete different activities (approximately 1 hour each).

Group 1 was directed to remain in the original Zoom meeting (Room 1) to complete the MMI stations. Group 2 was directed to sign out of this meeting and into another meeting (Room 2) to view a brief video tour of the school and prerecorded presentations from the financial aid office and from departmental and institutional leadership, as well as to interact with faculty and student affairs staff. Once Group 1 completed all MMI stations, it was directed to sign out of Room 1 and into Room 2. Group 2 was directed to sign back into Room 1. At this point, interviewers and applicants were given a 10-minute break. Then, Group 2 cycled through the MMI stations and Group 1 participated in the tour and related activities.

**The virtual MMI process**

At the beginning of each group’s MMI session, the director of admissions provided instructions to the applicants on the MMI process. The 7 MMI stations were the same as those used for the on-site interviews in early March. For each rotation, the director assigned an interviewer and an applicant to a Zoom breakout room. Once all interviewers and applicants were in their breakout rooms, the director acted as timekeeper. At the director’s signal, each interviewer shared their screen with the applicant, which allowed the applicant to see the MMI prompt. The applicant had 1 minute to read the prompt; all breakout rooms were informed simultaneously (via a Zoom message) when the minute had expired. At that time, the interviewer stopped sharing their screen and the applicant had 6 minutes to answer the prompt. A countdown clock appeared in the breakout room for the final 30 seconds. At the 6-minute mark, all applicants and interviewers were automatically returned to the main meeting room (Room 1). Once a rotation was complete, the director assigned applicants to new interviewers, and the process repeated until all applicants had completed all MMI stations. On days when there were 8 applicants per group, a “rest station” was scheduled as the eighth station.

During the brief transitions between MMI stations (while the director was arranging the next round of interviewer–applicant pairings), interviewers took turns introducing themselves to the applicants and sharing a few words about their role in the medical school. These interludes were moderated by the chair and/or vice chair of the Admissions Committee.

Upon completion of all interviews, all applicants, interviewers, faculty, and staff returned to Room 1 for a final question-and-answer session. This time was also used for applicants to redo any MMI stations, if needed, due to connectivity issues.

**Technical support**

Throughout the process, the director of admissions and the supporting staff member were available virtually to provide technical support to applicants and interviewers. Almost all applicants were already acquainted with the Zoom platform—likely a result of the nationwide move to virtual work and learning platforms in response to stay-at-home/shelter-in-place orders. Thus, applicants required little training to prepare for the virtual interview experience.

The most common technical problems were connectivity issues due to unstable internet connections or unfamiliarity with the Zoom platform (mainly on the medical school side). Interviewers, despite receiving training beforehand, occasionally required assistance in using Zoom features, such as screen sharing. In these cases, the director of admissions or the supporting staff member was able to assist directly by entering the MMI breakout room with the interviewer and applicant to share the MMI prompt. Typically, problems were resolved quickly and did not result in significant disruptions.

Participants who had connectivity issues were advised to sign out and back into the meeting or to call into the Zoom meeting via telephone. Applicants who were disrupted and/or unable to finish answering an MMI prompt due to connectivity issues were allowed to continue with the interview process. They revisited the missed or disrupted MMI station while the other participants were in the final question-and-answer session. No disruption was so severe that an applicant was unable to complete their interview day.

**Outcomes**

**Applicants: Interviews and admissions offers**

The UH College of Medicine’s virtual admissions process did not appear to be a deterrent to applicants. Most virtual interview invitations were accepted, and the majority of admissions offers made to virtual interviewees were accepted. Of the 180 applicants interviewed in March–April
In 2020, 134 (74%) participated in the virtual process and 46 (26%) in the on-site process. Thirty-two (24%) of the virtual interview participants were extended offers to join the inaugural class of 2024 and 7 (22%) declined, whereas 4 (44%) of the 9 offers made to on-site interview participants were declined. Although 25 (83%) of the 30 members of the class of 2024 interviewed virtually, it appears that the remote and in-person processes were similarly selective. Ultimately, 11% of in-person interviewees matriculated compared with 19% of virtual interviewees.

**Impact on the admissions process**

While we recognize that conducting interviews virtually is not the same as doing so in-person, we and the members of the Admissions Committee believe that the change to a virtual format did not hinder the committee’s ability to select qualified applicants. The committee supported the transition to a virtual format as a necessary and practical way to complete the admissions process. The virtual format also offered some practical advantages. Interviewers were able to engage in the process more easily; they could log into the Zoom interview sessions from anywhere and, in some

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**Figure 1** The workflow for the University of Houston College of Medicine’s virtual admissions process, including the 7-station MMI, used mid-March–April 2020 to interview applicants for the class of 2024. Abbreviation: MMI, multiple mini-interview.
cases, avoid the inconvenience of travel and/or disrupted clinic schedules. In addition, the ease of accessibility allowed for the engagement of additional faculty who were not directly involved in the interview process to meet and greet potential students, thus emphasizing the UH College of Medicine’s collective excitement and anticipation of welcoming our inaugural medical school class.

Virtual process aside, because our first class consists of 30 students selected from a pool of more than 1,700 applicants, the Admissions Committee did not lack highly qualified individuals to invite for interviews. While many of the applicants who participated in the virtual interviews had initially been scheduled for in-person interviews, others were invited to interview after the shift to our virtual format because of the ongoing nature of our admissions process. It is important that some applicants who accepted the offer of a virtual interview would not have been able to attend an in-person interview. Given that the medical school interview process can be expensive and time consuming, a virtual method may make interviewing more accessible for applicants without adequate financial resources to pay for travel or with relatively inflexible commitments at work or school.

The primary challenge of our virtual experience was that the UH College of Medicine is a new school. Most applicants had to decide whether to accept an offer of admission without the opportunity to visit, tour, and interact with faculty and staff within the medical school’s instructional spaces. Therefore, our virtual tour, which showcased the educational spaces designed for the medical students, was important to inspire confidence in the applicants who decided to be part of our first cohort of students.

Another challenge of our virtual interview experience was the missed opportunity for relatively unstructured interactions with applicants. It was easy to disseminate information in the virtual space, but it was not possible to engage in individual conversations with applicants, except when answering their questions. As a result, if an applicant did not ask a question, there was no opportunity to interact less formally with that individual. This made developing connections between faculty, staff, and applicants more difficult.

Next Steps
Work, educational, and recreational activities have been significantly altered for many people during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is impossible to predict which changes will become permanent transformations. The UH College of Medicine’s virtual admissions process was a feasible alternative to in-person interviews for our inaugural class. However, we do not consider the model described here to be sustainable as our class size grows due to the time and effort demanded of the director of admissions and interviewers. We are leveraging lessons learned from our spring 2020 process—a pool of more than 1,700 applicants, thus emphasizing the UH College of Medicine’s collective excitement and anticipation of welcoming our inaugural medical school class.

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References