General Surgery Applicant Perspectives: A two-year cohort of virtual interview experiences and supplemental application impressions

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BACKGROUND

- Residency interview days typically include a pre-interview social event, interviews with faculty, and lunch or tour with current residents- activities that contribute to assessing program "fit"

- The COVID-19 pandemic launched the shift to an entirely virtual interview platform

- This study focused on applicant behaviors and values assessed through a post-interview survey

METHODS

- An anonymous, investigator-generated online survey was distributed to categorical general surgery residency interviewees at our institution for the Match 2021 and 2022 cycles

- Surveys consisted of a combination of yes/no, 5-point Likert scale style, ranking values, and free response to capture the applicants' experience and perspective

- Data were analyzed using chi-square and paired t-tests

RESULTS

- 135 applicants (56.5%) completed the survey, 50.3% Male

- Median number of interviews was 17 in Match 2021 and 15 in Match 2022 cohort (IQR 13-20)

- 54.8% (n=74) applied to more programs and 53.3% (n=72) accepted more interviews because they were virtual

- 27.4% (n=37) applied to different geographic regions because virtual platform

- 90.0% (n=54) of 2022 applicants plan on visiting programs in person after interview

- 20% of applicants who 'signaled' programs did not receive an interview offer from any of the programs they signaled

- 57% (n=77) reported virtual interviews presented an increased opportunity for bias. **Table 1** qualitative responses

- 52% of Match 2021 applicants felt comfortable ranking programs based on their interview day. 58% Match 2022.

- Top benefits and top limitations are reported in **Table 2**

Virtual Interview Benefits	2021 Cohort	2022 Cohort	Mean
Saves Money	96%	96.7%	96.3%
Saves Time	45.3%	55%	49.6%
No transportation, weather, or travel issues	41.3%	46.7%	43.7%

Virtual Interview Limitations	2021 Cohort	2022 Cohort	Mean
Inability to observe faculty, residents, and staff interactions	61.3%	51.7%	57%
Exposure to current residents and faculty	57.3%	66.7%	61.5%
Difficulty comparing programs	57.3%	58.3%	57.8%
Exposure to city / general location of program	53.3%	65%	58.5%

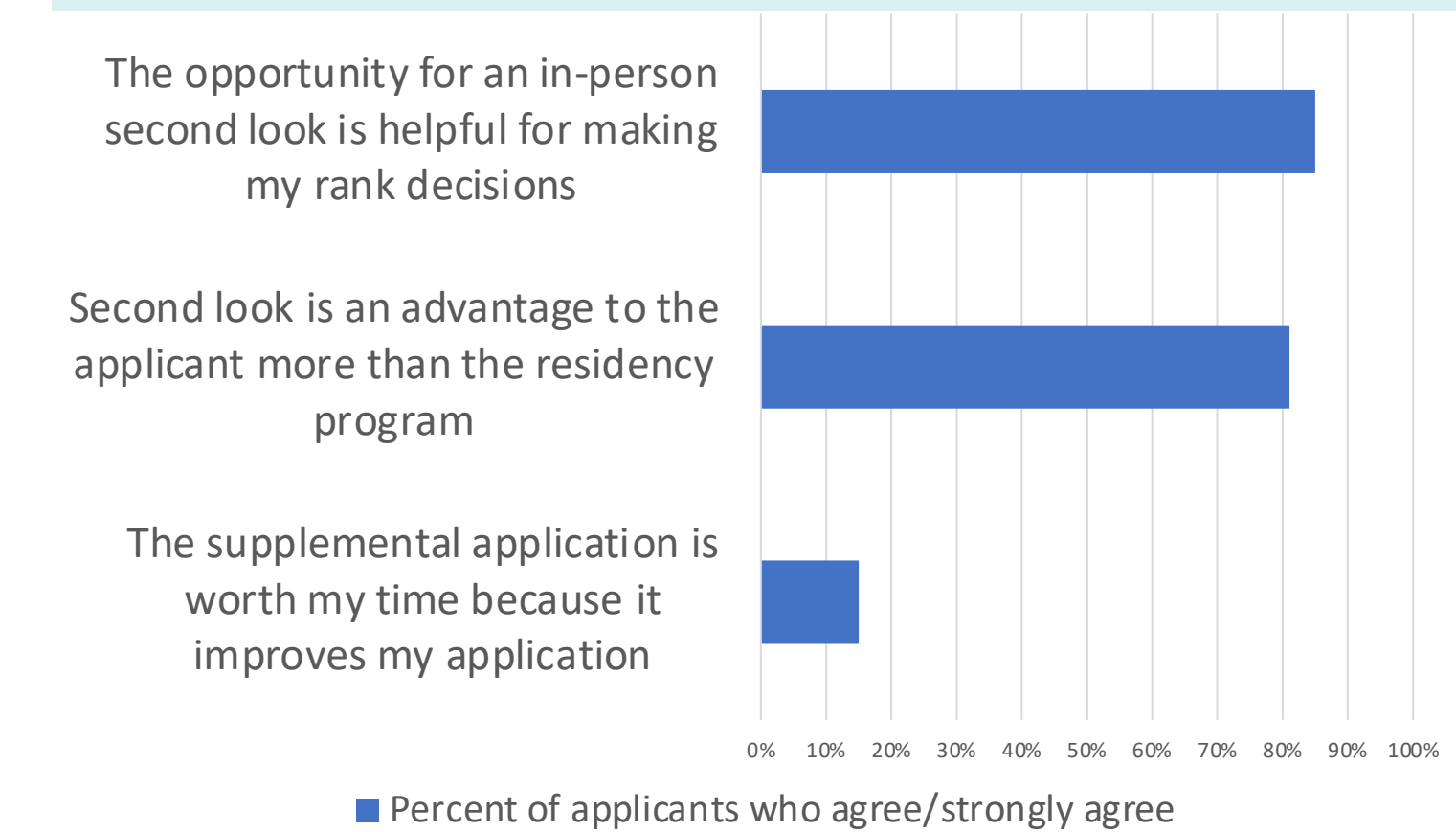| Less bias	More bias
"Virtual interview allows similar structure for all candidates."	"I think it is very difficult to impress someone over a virtual interview, but it is easy to make a bad impression."
"I think that physical appearance plays less of a role in the virtual setting and that interviews may be more accessible to candidate."	"Candidates have different socioeconomic backgrounds. Some can afford high tech webcams and backdrops, even microphones."
"Does not discriminate based on applicants' ability to afford travel to/from interview locations."	"No opportunity for non-verbal cues." "Unable to read body language."

RESULTS continued

Figure 1. Applicants share common views on recent changes to the Match process

CONCLUSIONS

- Time and money saved were clear benefits, while inability to observe interactions and lack of exposure were significant dissatisfiers

- In-person second looks are highly valued by the applicant, while the supplemental application's debut was of unconvincing utility

- Efforts to reduce cost and increase accessibility will need to be balanced against the value of human interaction and observing a program's culture