

MEDICAL SCHOOL VIRTUAL INTERVIEW GUIDE

THE FUTURE OF MEDICAL SCHOOL INTERVIEWS

The COVID-19 national health crisis has had an impact on many aspects of our lives. For members of the 2020-2021 medical school applicant pool, COVID-19 has meant a move to online learning, cancellation of MCAT dates, and the birth of the virtual medical school interview as medical schools pivot to safely conduct interviews. This guide will give an overview of the interviewing process, tips that will enable you to shine in the virtual environment, commonly missed opportunities and practical advice as you prepare.

THE IMPORTANCE OF MEDICAL SCHOOL INTERVIEWS

Knowing that most admissions committees use the medical school interview as the final cut, you will want to make the most of each interview opportunity! Interviews are a chance for committees to see your personality and add an element of humanity to your application.

Rather than focusing on numerical data (e.g., GPA or MCAT score) and written material, the interview puts your interpersonal skills on the table. Additionally, committees want to confirm that you are indeed the person behind the application and that you are passionate about the medical field.

- **Communication** - Medicine is both a science and a communication field, and so you must demonstrate your ability to thoughtfully and skillfully communicate. The ability to be an engaging communicator without arrogance is an important skill measured in interviews.
- **School fit** - The interview presents a valuable chance for you to determine if a school is the right fit for you. You've landed the interview proving the school is interested in you; make the most of the opportunity to both solidify their interest in you and to confirm if they are the right choice for you.
- **Strengths** - The interview phase of the application journey is an opportunity for you to put your best foot forward and showcase your proficiencies that are important for succeeding in medical school and as a physician.

THE INTERVIEW PROCESS

Most schools typically begin interviews in July/August and continue through January/February, with some schools interviewing well into the spring.

- **Application timeline**

- May: AMCAS/AACOMAS/TMDSAS applications open for completion and submission
- June: Schools ordinarily begin receiving and reviewing primary applications toward the end of June
- July: Schools begin sending, receiving, and reviewing secondary applications
- August/September: Interviewing begins
 - The AMCAS early decision deadline is August 1
- October 15: AMCAS schools may begin offering admissions for regular MD applicants.
- October - May: Medical school admissions committees meet and decide status: accept/reject/waitlist. Applicants notified.
- May 15: The AMCAS deadline for applicants with multiple acceptances to make their final decision
- August: Most medical schools begin in August

- **Interview invitation** - Each medical school has its own nuanced process for inviting applicants to interview. While some will send detailed information in an email, others refer applicants to their medical school application status website.

- **Timing** - The sooner you have your interview with a school, the sooner you'll be considered for acceptance, so schedule your interviews as early as possible.

- Some schools offer rolling admissions on a monthly basis, while other wait and batch admission offers until later in the cycle

TYPES OF MEDICAL SCHOOL INTERVIEWS

Medical schools see an applicant's interview experience as an essential element in the recruitment process; thus, schools will likely return to in-person interviewing once it is safe to do so. Until then, applicants should anticipate fully virtual or a hybrid of virtual and in-person interviews.



As much as the medical schools want to meet the applicant in-person, they want the applicant to meet the school in-person as well, so while virtual interviews complete one half of the dual purpose of the interview, the other half will be hard to replicate virtually. That said, schools could move to all virtual interviews, with a second stage interview that is in person, said Petros Minasi, Sr. Director, Pre-Health Programs, Kaplan.

- **Traditional/Long Form Interviews** - The most common medical school interview is the traditional (“long form”) interview consisting of one on one conversations with an interviewer for around 30-45 minutes. Topics typically include experiences, interests, and goals.
- **Traditional/Short Form Interviews** - The “short form” interview typically lasts 20 minutes and is more similar to an employment interview in that all interviewed applicants are asked a standard set of questions. Given the short duration of these interviews, it is important to be concise in your responses so your interviewer has time to ask you all of the questions. Traditional short form interviews are often included as a station in an MMI interview.
- **Multiple Mini Interviews (MMIs)**- The MMI is designed to assess both your thought process and your verbal and nonverbal communication skills. As you respond to a series of situations/ scenarios, you’ll have multiple opportunities to showcase your skills. Mechanics of how the MMI is conducted vary among those schools using it; while most schools conducted MMIs in-person prior to COVID-19, some schools conducted virtual MMIs, meaning the applicant entered an empty room with a camera to record their response. Out of 160+ medical schools, 46 used MMIs prior to 2020.
 - Examples of possible scenarios - approximately 10 minutes per scenario
 - Policy: Healthcare accessibility, insurance issues, etc.
 - Team play: Involving two or more students working together
 - Role play: Ethical dilemma
 - Questions: Your greatest strength and weakness
- **Hybrid Interviews** - Other schools combine traditional interviews with MMIs. Additionally, some schools have portions of their interviews in-person and other portions virtual. According to Kaplan's 2020 Medical School Admissions Officers Survey, most medical schools will conduct fully virtual interviews and reassess in early 2021.
- **AAMC Video Interview Tool for Admissions (AAMC VITA™)** - To assess applicants’ pre-professional competencies, the one-time, one-way recorded video interview tool was designed to help medical schools evaluate whether an applicant possesses the pre-professional competencies that are important for success in medical school. Participating medical schools will offer the AAMC VITA interview between August 2020 and April 2021.

- This is an online, one-way recorded interview; there is no human interviewer. The interview will include six questions presented as text prompts for one minute, then the student will have three minutes to record their response.
 - The AAMC is able to offer the AAMC VITA interview with the assistance of its delivery administrator, HireVue, using the HireVue video interviewing platform.
 - According to Kaplan's 2020 Medical School Admissions Officers Survey, less than half of medical schools are currently using VITA.
- **Other** - Though less common, there are other styles of interviews to see how candidates will react in a group session.
 - **Multiple Interviewer Session** - Two or three interviewers ask questions with one interviewee at the same time.
 - **Group Interview** - Several interviewees and interviewers at the same time to see how candidates react in a group session.

PRACTICAL INTERVIEW ADVICE AND PREPARATIONS

Congratulations - you've been invited for an interview. Consider these tips to shine even in the virtual environment!

- **Practical Advice - Do's**
 - **Look professional** - Dress for success just like you would for an in-person interview. You never know what could happen during the interview, so it's important to dress the part - and don't forget to appropriately dress your lower half just in case you need to stand up.
 - **Tell a story** - Many questions are behavioral in nature asking you to reiterate a story about a time when you had a certain type of experience. For instance, you may be asked to discuss a time when you demonstrated leadership qualities. Don't just say "I excelled as president of Model UN." Instead, tell a story: "As president of our Model UN, I called each team member individually the day before our competition to make sure they understood the day's schedule and to boost their confidence. Checking in was my way of ensuring my team's success." Interviewers want a window into your life - don't just repeat what is on your CV. Stories provide that window, while also showing the point you're trying to make - remember, show, don't tell.
 - **Make eye contact** - Look at the camera when you are talking and balance looking at the screen/camera when the interviewer is talking.

- **Pay attention to your demeanor** - While you may not be in the same physical space as your interviewer, you are nonetheless sitting across from them in a very real sense. Therefore, even during a virtual interview, you should act as though you are in an in-person interview. Be sure to sit up straight in your chair, smile, and be engaged in the conversation. Be as conversational as possible and avoid giving very short answers or being too verbose.
- **Setup front facing lighting** - Ensure there is enough light facing you so the interviewer can see your facial expressions. It is also important that the light comes from the front of you, not behind you - if there is a light or window behind you, your face will be left in the shadow.
- **Tidy up your background** - Try to eliminate possible distractions such as dogs barking, background conversations, cell phone rings, etc. Clean anything in your background and make it look as professional as possible.
 - Avoid leaving your bed visible; if unavoidable, make sure the bed is made.
 - Remove clutter. Don't have untidy shelves or windowsill with many photos, plants, books, etc.
 - Remove anything controversial (e.g., political, explicit).
 - Remove clutter from your desk/counter space, as well. Even if it's not visible, you may be tempted to shift items or shuffle through papers.
 - Conduct the interview inside - it is highly recommended to NOT be outside while participating in a virtual interview.
- **Have a strong internet connection**- Conduct an internet speed test in advance to make sure your connection is considered good - many of these are available for free online.
 - Connect your laptop/computer directly to your router via an ethernet cable if possible, as this results in the most stable connection.
 - If wifi is your only option, ask anyone sharing your account to not stream videos during your interview to protect bandwidth.
- **Take additional technical precautions**- Be prepared to focus fully on the interview and eliminate potential distractions.
 - Charge your computer and have your cord ready to plug in, just in case.
 - Check audio and use headphones to limit background noises.
 - Have a copy of your username and password easily accessible.
 - Tilt the camera to the appropriate angle - directly in front of you as possible, do not angle it looking up at you or hold a computer in your lap.
- **Ensure MMI clarity** - Make sure you are clear on MMI scenario instructions and what is expected of you. If one station does not go well, remember you will have additional opportunities to shine - reset yourself before each session.

- **VITA interview preparation** - Six questions for this style of interview will be designed to measure distinct categories. While you won't know the specifics of questions in advance, you can practice key points you want to highlight for these types of questions.
 - Your journey toward medical school
 - Social skills
 - Resilience and adaptability
 - Teamwork
 - Reliability and dependability
 - Cultural competence
 - **Prepare questions to ask**- Make sure you have some thoughtful and insightful questions prepared to ask the interviewer if given the opportunity. Use the interview as an opportunity to learn more about the program, particularly if it's an online interview (you may not get another chance to learn if this program is a good fit for you).
- **Practical Advice - Don'ts**
- **Don't have a distracting background** - Avoid conducting the interview in a location where you could get easily distracted or someone walks behind you. Do not conduct the interview in an unprofessional location such as the beach or a messy room.
 - **Eliminate background noise** - Do not have music on in the background, avoid distracting noise (e.g., washing machine), and ask roommates to be as quiet as possible during the interview.
 - **Avoid asking obvious questions** - Steer clear of questions that could be controversial (e.g., politics or religion) and/or obvious such as details that could be found on the school's website.
 - **Try to not sound arrogant** - Confidence in an interview is important; however, avoid words like "best" or "brilliant" in order to not sound too confident.

INTERVIEW PREPARATION

It is encouraged that you practice questions, think through potential responses to commonly asked questions and to know key information before the interview.

- **Helpful things to know before the interview** - This guide also contains some frequently asked interview questions, but it is helpful to know logistical details so you can prepare accordingly. Don't hesitate to ask questions if you can't find information online or in your interview packet/email.

- Will you have a live or asynchronous interview?
- How many interviews will be conducted?
- Approximately how long will the interview last?
- What type of interview will be conducted?
- What competencies or skills will be assessed during the interview?

• **Review travel and logistical details that may be impacted by COVID** - Medical school interview invitations usually begin to arrive in the late summer or early fall. The sooner you have your interview with a school, the sooner you'll be considered for acceptance, so schedule the interviews as early as possible. But be sure to look into any travel details if your interview has in-person portions.

- Financial reasons may compel you to schedule groups of interviews in particular geographical regions. Do not hesitate to request alternate dates if available; this can save you considerable time and money.
- Try to arrive the night before the in-person interview in order to familiarize yourself with the area and the school. This will also give you the opportunity to unwind and get a good night's sleep. Nothing is more underwhelming than an inattentive and dreary-eyed applicant.

• **Relax and know the school is just as interested in you as you are in them** - Lean into your confidence, remain professional yet personable.

- The school wants to see your personality but balance being conversational with remaining professional.
- Balance making your answers succinct while still showing the interviewer your train of thought.

• **Practice and review your virtual responses** - Ask a professor for a professional mock interview on a video platform so you can record this practice interview and watch it later. What did you do well? Are your tone and body language conveying your thoughts and emotions successfully? Did anything about your actions or responses surprise or distract you?

- **Make sure you're giving genuine and personal answers** - Did your recording sound scripted? Know that interviewers sometimes hear the same responses over and over - avoid sounding cliché or saying what you think they want to hear.
- **Find ways to stand out** - If you were the interviewer, what would make you remember an applicant in a positive way? Think through your uniqueness and talk about it in the interview (e.g., your unique interest in an area of medicine).
 - **Present how you are well rounded** - When applicable, weave in the conversation details on how you are well rounded, some of your accomplishments (with humility).

- **Tell a story** - As previously mentioned, it's important to practice telling details while remaining succinct. If you want to plug that you are hardworking, don't say "I'm hardworking" - that seems highly subjective. Instead, tell a specific story of a time that you had to exert effort above and beyond what was typical or expected of you. Example: "When I took my first exam in [CLASS] I failed. I knew others were struggling as well, so I started a study group with several classmates who were also hard working. We met three hours every week and six hours a week that we had an exam. I also sought the help of upperclassmen and found someone who volunteered to tutor me. By the end of the semester, I was getting all A's on my exams in that class."

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Kaplan hosted an online panel event, Med School Interviews: MMIs and Virtual Interviews that covered a variety of interview topics. Below are a few examples of commonly asked interview questions and frequently asked student questions concerning the interview process.

- **Are there topics that should not be brought up in an interview?**
 - Your ultimate goal is to show why you'd be a good addition to their medical school program. While you want to demonstrate your personal traits, avoid topics that are unnecessarily controversial. When responding, make sure you reflect on your response. Are you still portraying yourself in a positive way? Is your answer focused on medical school admissions, or are you in danger of demonstrating too much passion for another pursuit?
- **What are some examples of questions to ask the interviewer?**
 - Can you please tell me more about the culture of your program?
 - What is the average student performance from this medical school on the National Board Examinations?
 - If a student from this medical school does not pass the National Board Examinations, how does the school assist them?
 - Can you please elaborate on how this school evaluates students academically?
 - What are the types of clinical sites available or required for clerkship (e.g., ambulatory, rural settings, private hospitals, etc.)?
 - Does this medical school allow for institutional or international student rotations?
 - How are clinical evaluations performed?
 - Is there an advisor and/or a mentor system? If yes, please tell me more about the advisors (e.g., faculty members and/or other students)?

- Can you please tell me about the student population and the current state of diversity?
- Concerning a student's budget, are spouses and dependents/children covered?

• **Would you recommend doing a shadow of a student who goes to a medical school you plan to apply to?**

- Yes! Shadowing may not be possible currently due to COVID, but meeting current students by phone call or video chat is an excellent way to learn more about the culture. Many medical schools are offering video group chats with existing students to give applicants a sense of what being a medical student there is like.

• **What are the top mistakes students make during an interview?**

- Giving answers they think the interviewers want to hear and seeming generic vs. demonstrating their personality.
- Not answering the question being asked.
- Not clearly demonstrating why they will be successful in medicine or why they chose to enter this field vs. any other.
- Underestimating the difficulty of medical school - giving the impression that they don't understand the rigor.

• **How do you know if a school does traditional interviews or MMIs?**

- This information should be on the website or in your invitation email.

• **Is it okay to admit to an interviewer that you're nervous?**

- Everyone is nervous! It's fine to be nervous, but there's no specific reason to mention that fact to the interviewer - not much would be gained from admitting you're nervous unless you feel that you are experiencing a panic attack.

• **What do you do if you're asked a question that you know nothing about?**

- Don't try to be an expert in something that you're not! You could respond with confident humility, "I don't really know much about that, but I'm excited to learn more, can you tell me what is important".
- Try to spin the question in a new - but related - direction, if possible. For example, if they asked "What three policy issues in medicine today are most important for our future?" You may not have policy-related answers, but don't simply say you don't know! Pivot and say "This may not be specifically policy-related, but three of the most important healthcare issues in my opinion are..."

• **Besides looking into the school/practicing interviews, is there anything else we should do to prepare? I've heard that sometimes they ask about current events? Do we need to "study" certain things for the interviews?**

- Definitely research current trends in healthcare, including any major nationwide issues. This year, clearly you should have some thoughts on COVID and the future of healthcare as an industry and profession. Don't forget that other threats to public health still exist, as well!
- Understand what the life of a medical school student looks like. Schools want to know that you're prepared and realistic about the rigor of their programs.
- Know your application inside and out, including your essays and work/experience write-ups. What you provided in your application will likely be discussed.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Take a deep breath, and remind yourself that the school is just as interested in you as you are in them. Practice and prepare, but relax and be yourself. You've got this!

- Research public health trends and details about the school interviewing you advance.
- Record practice interviews and review to identify what you need to improve.
- Demonstrate your unique personality and interests - but in a highly professional and polished manner.
- Use the interview as an opportunity to learn more about the school and make sure they'd be a good fit for you.
- Their goal is to make sure that you are truly interested in medicine, that you've invested to learn more, and that you're realistic about the hard work and mental/emotional demands this journey will require of you. Answer interview questions with the goal of proving to your interviewers that you've thought about this profession, you know why you're choosing medicine and their school in particular, and you're mentally/emotionally ready to face the extreme challenges of med school.

For additional medical school admissions process support, visit Kaplan's Medical School Admissions Consulting page.