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## Dermatology Online Journal

### Title

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### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0qg7d56b>

### Journal

Dermatology Online Journal, 28(3)

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### Publication Date

2022

### DOI

10.5070/D328357798

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Peer reviewed

# Utility of an anonymous online interactive forum for dermatology residency program directors and applicants

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Keywords: application, COVID-19, interest group, webinar

To the Editor:

Inadequate transparency in the dermatology residency application process is a concern for applicants and program directors [1]. Online webinars have been used to address this problem [2]. In July 2020, the National Dermatology Interest Group Association (DIGA) co-hosted a national dermatology webinar with the Association of Professors of Dermatology (APD). Almost 1000 (996) prospective applicants attended [3].

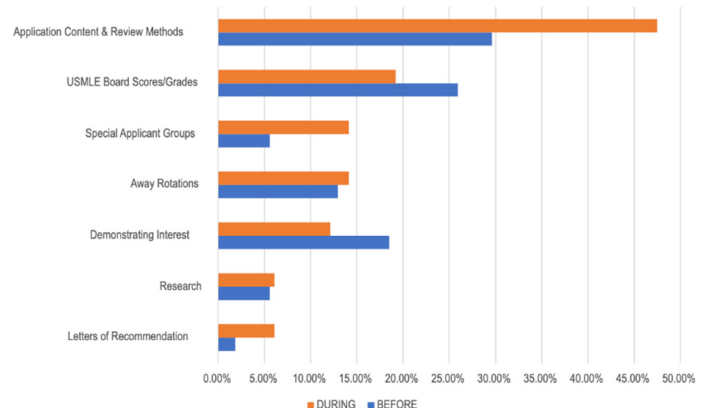
Prior to the webinar, students were asked to submit questions anonymously through a Google survey. The 54 questions submitted were addressed by APD panelists during the live webinar. An additional 99 questions were posed to panelists via the "chat" function during the live webinar.

The University of Pennsylvania's Institutional Review Board approved this study. Three reviewers (SV, JS, KL) performed an independent qualitative analysis of all medical student questions grouping them into seven thematic categories. The categorized questions were discussed to consensus with a percent overall agreement of 84.07% (Cohen Kappa=0.81, 95% confidence interval 0.76-0.87).

The topics of the anonymous questions submitted included application content and review methods (41.12%, 63/153), United States Medical Licensing

Examination (USMLE) board scores/grades (21.57%, 33/153), interest demonstration (14.38%, 22/153), away rotation at site (12.42%, 19/153), special applicant group (11.11%, 17/153), research interest (5.88%, 9/153), and letters of recommendation (4.58%, 7/153), (**Figure 1, Table 1**).

The large number of medical student attendees at this webinar may be a reflection of the isolation and apprehension created by the COVID-19 pandemic [4]. They were interested in understanding the most effective method to highlight their special characteristics (holistic factors) when completing applications. This is not surprising since successfully matched dermatology applicants have very high grades and the highest board scores of any specialty



**Figure 1.** Graphical representation of questions asked during the dermatology residency webinar.

**Table 1.** Example questions posed by medical students in seven thematic categories.

Theme	Example question
Application content & review methods	What specifically does holistic review mean?
USMLE board scores/grades	Are test scores weighted differently in the evaluation of an application this year, and if so, how? (e.g., Letters of Rec, Personal statement, Clerkship grades)
Special applicant groups <sup>1</sup>	Is it harder to match after someone has not matched dermatology? Are programs more hesitant to take someone who has not matched?
Away rotations	What would you recommend/what is more beneficial for my learning: taking an extra dermatology elective at my home institution or completing a virtual externship?
Demonstrating interest	Should a mentor be identified to advocate for me or make calls to a program I'm interested in?
Research	Are papers that are submitted but not yet accepted looked at inferiorly?
Letters of recommendation	Is a clinical letter of recommendation valued more than one from a research mentor?

<sup>1</sup>The code "specific applicant groups" included questions pertaining to International Medical School Graduates (IMGs), Osteopathic Medical School Applicants (DOs), re-applicants to dermatology residency, and those applying without home dermatology programs.

[5]. There was also significant interest in procedural information about the timing of coordinated interview release dates, length and subject material of personal statements, the availability of application evaluation rubrics, and methods of contacting current dermatology residents to learn about their programs without being intrusive.

Limitations of this study include lack of formal feedback as a post-webinar survey was administered to attendees; only a small portion (less than 30%) were completed. Hopefully in the future, surveys on webinars can render higher response rate by including incentives such as gift-cards for those completing the survey. Additionally, question quantity and topic significance may not be correlated, as in some instances applicants may share questions of minimal importance. Regardless, multiple students individually thanked DIGA for hosting this helpful webinar during uncertain times. This unsolicited positive feedback further highlights this webinar's impact.

Although access to away-rotations this upcoming cycle is limited, this study confirms the value of a national, anonymous webinar as evidenced by the large attendance and volume of questions. This past cycle, the APD responded by widely disseminating information through residency programs and DIGA members. As the application landscape changes (e.g., the USMLE Step one transition to pass/fail), applicant questions will certainly evolve and a repeat webinar can further guide APD goals and educational activities. Individual residency programs should also engage in interactive online information sharing with their applicants to transparently address applicants' thirst for information about special characteristics of individual departments [1]. Equipping the entire applicant pool with a shared knowledge base can improve the residency application experience.

## Potential conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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