

Getting the most from residency interviews

For Pharm.D. students who have submitted residency applications and are busy trying to balance rotation responsibilities with scheduling interviews, booking flights and hotels, and frantically searching for professional references in order to gain an edge and impress the targeted programs, it can be easy to lose sight of the purpose of the interview. The interview is but one part of the applicant profile, but it can make or break a program's perception of the applicant—and vice versa. By knowing what programs are attempting to gain from the interview, candidates can put themselves in the best position to make a great impression and match up with a top program.

The interview's purpose. Over the past 20 years, the number of pharmacy residency applicants has grown exponentially.¹⁻³ This growth has surpassed the expansion of pharmacy residency programs, leading to an ever-increasing number of unmatched candidates²; further, the growth of well-established programs takes time, and the gap between the number of candidates and the number of available positions is likely even wider in these top-tier programs. With these systemic stresses, the onsite interview is more important than ever before.

The residency interview serves four main purposes.⁴ First, it is a way to gather information that is not obtainable outside of the interview, such as teamwork ability, personality, and other nonacademic qualities; for this purpose, most programs will have at least one onsite interview.



Second, the interview serves to help the selection committee make decisions. While this seems intuitive, the importance of interactions during the interview cannot be overstated. Information from both the interview and application will be used to make a final decision. Many programs traditionally used the interview to rule out applicants who would not be a good fit; as candidates now are increasingly coached for interviews,^{5,6} the value of the interview as a “weed-out” tool has decreased, but this aspect

of the interview remains important. The onsite interview is also important for the candidate's decision-making. Candidates should observe interactions between residents and preceptors, assess how well the program is incorporated into the health care system, and try to envision their involvement in the program.

Third, the interview serves as a means to verify information on the curriculum vitae, and many interviewers will have a copy in the interview room for reference.

Finally, the onsite interview is a valuable recruitment tool. Most onsite interviews last a full workday and may include events before or after the interview itself, such as a meal with current residents and faculty. To gather as much information as possible about the program, the candidate needs to come prepared.

Means of preparation. There are a number of currently available resources^{7,8} to help applicants make the best first impression in a residency interview. Many colleges of pharmacy are beginning to incorporate into their curriculum courses and seminars that teach students how to interview.^{5,6} These are often part of a “preresidency pathway” or “residency gateway” program,⁹ which requires involvement and commitment very early in pharmacy school. As part of such a gateway program at the University of Kentucky, the college of pharmacy offers mock pharmacy residency interviews for second-year students conducted by current residents and residency faculty.

For students who make the decision to pursue residency training later in their Pharm.D. training, the American Society of Health-System Pharmacists (ASHP) has recently published *Get the Residency: ASHP's Guide to Residency Interviews and Preparation*, which includes tips on how to “ace the interview process.”¹⁰ The book

The New Practitioners Forum column features articles that address the special professional needs of pharmacists early in their careers as they transition from students to practitioners. Authors include new practitioners or others with expertise in a topic of interest to new practitioners. AJHP readers are invited to submit topics or articles for this column to the New Practitioners Forum, c/o Jill Haug, 7272 Wisconsin Avenue, Bethesda, MD 20814 (301-664-8821 or newpractitioners@ashp.org).

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Roadmap to Postgraduate Training in Pharmacy, published in 2013, may serve as another valuable resource; it highlights interview strategies and other aspects of the residency recruitment process such as forming a rank list and preparing for annual meetings, as well as tips on succeeding in a residency program.¹¹ A number of articles—including one published in this journal⁸—provide a good overview of the content of postgraduate year 1 (PGY1) residency interviews; this information can help candidates anticipate and formulate answers to the most common questions (e.g., Why do you want to complete a residency?).

Perhaps the most helpful research before any residency interview is inwardly directed. Self-reflection to identify career goals and begin to form a personal practice philosophy will prove invaluable on interview day. Remember, programs are looking not only for candidates with a great grade point average—they also seek mature, goal-oriented coworkers.

Structure of the interview day. Prior to an onsite interview, most programs will send the applicant an electronic copy of the itinerary that provides an outline of the interview day. In general, most interviews will be like a full eight-hour workday, during which time the candidate will hear about the rotation year, various postgraduate year 2 programs (if applicable), and the structure of the pharmacy department. The applicant should strive to allocate time to meet with current residents at some point during the interview process in order to gain firsthand insights into the program.

At most programs, the actual interview lasts only one or two hours, and the candidate is typically given the opportunity to meet with multiple practitioners in various stages of training for individual interviews. The applicant might be asked to give a presentation, conduct a journal club, or present a patient case; saving work from fourth-year rotations can help the candidate avoid having to build a presentation from scratch during interview season.

With increasing numbers of applicants, some residency programs are

moving toward telephone interviews or conducting interviews at ASHP's Mid-year Clinical Meeting as an initial screening method. Telephone interviews may involve one-on-one conversations or a conference call with multiple practitioners at the institution. Current residents will typically not be involved in these telephone interviews, which generally range from less than 30 minutes to one hour in length and provide basic information about the program followed by a series of questions. It is important to keep in mind that telephone and other offsite interviews have a different purpose than onsite interviews. They are generally used only as a screening tool; as such, they will not provide the depth or breadth of insight provided by a traditional interview.

Tips for interview success. When considering how to optimize an onsite interview, it is imperative to remember the four main purposes discussed earlier: information gathering, decision-making, verification, and recruitment. With these purposes in mind, the following tips may be helpful to the residency applicant:

1. *Be honest.* It goes without saying that a candidate should never lie in an interview, but it is also important for the candidate to put forth his or her true self. Chances are that the applicant was invited for an interview because of an exceptional application, which is a wonderful measure of "hard" skills (i.e., the ability to do a job). However the interview itself assesses "soft" skills such as attitude, teamwork, and ethics. For that reason, the candidate should avoid a "right answer" mentality and focus on portraying himself or herself as a coworker. The same attributes that landed the interview might not land the residency position.
2. *Be engaged.* Recruitment is a time-consuming process for all parties involved. Residency programs and program directors take the process very seriously and expect the same of candidates. Applicants should take notes throughout the interview to help in processing copious amounts of information. They will likely have multiple chances throughout the day to ask questions—and should take full advantage of those

opportunities. Candidates should be inquisitive about the institution and avoid blending in. It can be helpful to pose the same subjective question to multiple individuals to gather differing perspectives and validate information.

3. *Don't stand out in the wrong way.* It is important for the applicant to remember that even though only a portion of the day is devoted to a structured interview, he or she will be observed throughout the whole day. Interactions with interview-day coordinators, residents, and other candidates are just as important as the performance in structured interviews. Candidates should avoid appearing overexcited or too relaxed.
4. *Be prepared.* Applicants should have already gathered basic information about the institution and the program before the site visit. They should know what excites them about the program and what reservations they have about completing a residency there. Instead of basic, obvious questions (e.g., Do you require a project?), it is better to be more specific (e.g., What types of projects do PGY1 residents typically complete? How are projects chosen?). Candidates should focus on questions that show they have given the program serious consideration and thought.

The value of networking. The phrase dates back nearly 100 years: "It's not about what you know; it's who you know."¹² Networking can be a valuable aspect of both residency and practice interviews and may very well have helped the applicant gain a coveted interview spot at a top program. However, too much name-dropping can be harmful. Programs are interested in the candidate's personal qualities and why he or she might be a good fit. Spending too much time discussing former professors and preceptors instead of personal qualifications will often leave programs unimpressed.

Conversely, networking with other applicants can be a great aspect of pharmacy residency interviews for two reasons. First, it facilitates the development of professional contacts that will likely pay off later on. Second, peer networking makes the applicant appear more personable in the eyes of those involved in the interview process. Remember: Programs

are looking for coworkers; the more likable the candidate, the better.

Finally, make sure you review your itinerary and know with whom you are scheduled to meet. Identifying connections between the preceptors and residents you will meet throughout the day and having an understanding of their practice and background may prove to be very helpful.

After the interview. The residency applicant should follow up with residency program directors and other interview participants shortly after the interview day. Personalized handwritten letters or phone calls to program directors and coordinators are appreciated and encouraged; for others, an e-mail may suffice, but sending “shotgun” e-mails is likely to be counterproductive. If questions arise after the interview day, it is certainly appropriate for an applicant to contact the program director or another individual at the institution. If such postinterview contacts are necessary, the applicant should avoid excessive praise, gratitude, and communication with the program and be genuine in conveying interest without going “over the top.”

As soon as possible after the interview, candidates should take simple notes regarding what they liked and disliked about the program. A spreadsheet summary of the top qualities of each program may be beneficial for comparing multiple institutions and identifying the one that best fits the candidate’s needs.

Future directions in residency interviews. As residency programs continue to attempt to distinguish among the extensive pool of applicants, some are starting to adopt new strategies to assess soft skills and noncognitive at-

tributes. Pharmacy schools have started using methods such as a “multiple mini-interview” (MMI) process. Essentially, the MMI method involves placing candidates in various situations designed to test a specific attribute such as communication, integrity, and motivation.¹³⁻¹⁵ The importance of soft skills was discussed at the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy 2013 Interim Meeting,¹⁶ and it is likely that measures of noncognitive skills will continue to expand in the pharmacy and residency interview setting.

Closing notes. Knowing what residency programs are expecting to gain from interviews as well as what you are expecting to gain from an interview will help you stand out as a candidate on interview day and get the most from your experience.

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