

Residency Program Interviewee Opinion Survey: The Value of a Weekend Versus Weekday Interview with Respect to Typical Workday Exposure, Focus on the Applicant, Scheduling, Finances, and Tourism. Does it affect scheduling and attending an interview or ranking a program?

Jeffrey Berger, MD, MBA¹
Negin Daneshpayeh, BS²
Nichelle Cook, MD³
Adam Sachs, PhD⁴

Original Article

¹ Assistant Professor of Anesthesiology in the Department of Anesthesiology and Critical Care Medicine, The George Washington University, Washington, DC

² Medical Student, The George Washington University, Washington, DC

³ Pain Medicine Fellow at Stanford University Medical Center, Department of Anesthesiology, Palo Alto, CA

⁴ Anesthesiology Resident, The New York University Langone Medical Center, Department of Anesthesiology, New York, NY

Abstract

Background Our research team investigated the value of a weekend interview for residency applicants. The importance of this offering to medical student interviewees has yet to be investigated and the implications are great, particularly with respect to applicant scheduling, costs, staffing, and potentially even program selection from the applicant's perspective. We aimed to determine if a weekend interview compared favorably to a typical weekday interview for residency applicants to our program.

Methods Following exemption from The George Washington University (GW) Institutional Review Board, an 18 question web-based survey was sent to 123 residency applicants who interviewed for GW's anesthesiology program. The results were collected anonymously, and data was analyzed using Pearson chi squared tests.

Results Of 123 surveys, 67 were completed for a response rate of 54%. The weekend interview was a "positive" offering with respect to focus on the applicant (71.6%, CI 60.1 - 82.4) and scheduling (83.8%, CI 75.1 - 92.6). Other considerations such as: decision to apply, rank, family time, costs, tourism, and exposure to routine work day were not significant factors in applicant decision-making.

Conclusions Overall, the day of interview did not affect applicants' decisions to apply, interview, or rank the program. A weekend interview offering allowed for greater program focus on the applicant and easier scheduling of the interview from the medical student applicants' perspective.

Correspondence to:

Jeffrey Berger, MD,
MBA, The George
Washington University
School of Medicine,
Department of
Anesthesiology and
Critical Care Medicine,
900 23rd St NW, Suite G-
2092 Washington, DC
20037, Telephone: (202)
715-5296, Fax: (202)
715-4759
Email:
jberger@mfa.gwu.edu

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Background

The residency interview has been identified as one of the most important factors residents consider when choosing a program¹. The interview season begins when the Electronic Residency Application Service distributes medical student applications to programs on September 1st of each year. The interview process concludes when programs and applicants submit rank order lists at the end of February. Typically applicant interviews consist of a one-day informational meeting and personal interview. Programs may offer additional opportunities for applicants to learn about the program in the form of social activities or meals with current residents, special handouts or videos to promote the program, and personalized correspondence. Regardless, the interview day is a focal point for medical student comparisons between programs.

Many prior studies regarding the interview process have served to guide program directors in selecting residents^{2,3}, but few have focused on the medical student applicant perspective and preferences with respect to the interview process itself. In an electronic survey conducted by Rogers et al, academic qualifications of successful plastic surgery residency applicants were collected along with preferences regarding the interview process. The plastic surgery resident applicants favored interviews that occurred on weekdays⁴.

The George Washington (GW) University School of Medicine’s Department of Anesthesiology and Critical Care Medicine has offered interviews on Wednesdays and Saturdays for applicants to the Anesthesiology Residency Program for more than five years. Faculty leadership has long suspected that a weekend interview offering may be of benefit to applicants for a variety of reasons including: focus on the applicant, scheduling convenience, family time, costs, tourism, and exposure to routine work day. However, a literature search (conducted on PubMed, using the Medical Subject Headings (MeSH) term “Interviews as topics” and “residency applicants”) did not reveal any publications reporting the benefit of weekend interviews to residency applicants.

In this study, the authors sought to test our hypothesis that weekend interviews are more desirable for applicants than weekday interviews. We anticipate that our results will help residency programs considering interviewing on the weekend to better appreciate the value that medical student applicants place on a weekend interview.

Table A Residency Applicant Post-Match Questionnaire	
1. What day did you interview for a spot in the George Washington University Anesthesia Residency?	
2. Do you think offering a Saturday Interview is worthwhile/beneficial?	
3. If you did not interview on Saturday, “What was your main reason for not doing so?”	
4. If you interviewed on Saturday, “What was your main reason for doing so?”	
Please answer the following 3 questions only if you were a Saturday interviewee	
(1 = Very negative, 2= Negative 3=Neutral 4= Positive 5= Very Positive)	
5. Did the fact that GW offered a Saturday interview play a role in your decision to apply for an Anesthesia residency at GW?	
6. Did the fact that GW offered a Saturday interview play a role in your decision to follow through with scheduling and attending your interview at GW?	
7. Did you foresee that GW’s offering of a Saturday interview affected your ranking of them in the match?	
8. What was your perception of the option for a Saturday interview in regards to:	
A.	Travel options/ Financial issues
B.	The focus on applicant
C.	Exposure to faculty
D.	Exposure to typical day
E.	Timing
F.	Scheduling
G.	Weekend time/ Family Issues
H.	Vacation/Learn about the city
I.	Overall interview experience
J.	Other: (please list)
9. Rank order the 3 most important factors (from above list) in your decision to interview or not interview on Saturday	

Methods

For the 2009 residency recruitment season, medical student applicants to our institution were offered four Saturday interview dates and five Wednesday interview dates between November and January. On any given weekend interview, applicant capacity was roughly twice that of the weekday in our interview scheduling model.

GW's Institutional Review Board exemption, a web-based survey (Survey Monkey, Portland, OR) was sent to all 123 fourth year medical students who interviewed for an anesthesiology residency position at GW in 2009. The initial survey participation request was delivered following the National Resident Matching Program match decisions (March 19, 2009) via e-mail on April 13, 2009. A reminder e-mail was sent on April 27, 2009 to those applicants who had yet to complete the survey.

No incentives were given to encourage applicants to participate in the survey. Respondents were not allowed to complete more than one survey based on pre-set Survey Monkey parameters. Further, Survey Monkey tallied responses anonymously.

Each medical student interviewee was requested to complete an 18-question survey (Box). The survey was developed and refined over several years based on applicant feedback and responses to annual post-match surveys. Survey questions contained a total of 27 items for respondents to answer. Eight questions representing eight items sought information regarding GW's own offering of a Saturday interview versus a Wednesday interview. Ten questions with 19 items sought generalized information regarding interviewing on a weekend versus a weekday at any residency training program.

Two questions were binary, 'yes' or 'no' responses to determine day of the week the applicant interviewed and impression of the offering. Two questions allowed free text for interviewees to type the primary reason for deciding to interview on a weekday versus a weekend. Thirteen questions were five-point, Likert Scale questions ranging from 'very negative,' to 'very positive.' Three of the 13 questions sought to understand the degree of impact that interviewing on a weekend day had on applying, interviewing and ultimately ranking of the program. Eight of the 13 questions aimed at understanding the factors that play into an applicant's decision to interview on a particular day. The final five-point Likert Scale queried applicants regarding overall impression of the program. Last, respondents were requested to rank the "three most important factors" in decision-making solicited from earlier questions.

Saturday interviewees were compared to weekday candidates for overall satisfaction, reasons for selecting a particular interview day, and impressions of various aspects of a weekend interview. Statistical Analysis was conducted with WinPepi (Jerusalem, Israel), version 11.15. Fisher's exact test, with overall continuity corrected values to account for sample size, was used for analysis. P-values less than or equal to 0.05 were considered significant. SAS (Cary, NC), version 9.1.3 was used to calculate confidence intervals to 95%, and standard errors were calculated for Likert Scale score groupings, positive or negative.

Results

Of the 123 subjects, 54% were female and 46% were male (Table 1). The majority (98%) attended a US public or private medical school. The majority (82%) attended medical school in the Northeast and Southeast.

Of 123 surveys, 67 were returned complete for a response rate of 54%, 26 Wednesday interviewees and 41 Saturday interviewees. Our results show 95% of interviewees had a “positive” or “very positive” experience regardless of day of interview. There is no significant difference in the proportion of interviewees who felt “positive” or “very positive” about their interview experience when comparing a weekend to weekday interview.

When considering various aspects of the interview day, Table 2 shows that at least half of the interviewees perceived the option of a Saturday interview as “positive” or “very positive” in regards to the focus on the applicant (71.6%, CI 60.1 – 82.4) and scheduling (83.8%, CI 75.1 – 92.6). Few interviewees marked “positive” or “very positive” (19.7%, CI 10.5 – 29.0) when asked how they perceived the option of a Saturday interview in regards to gaining exposure to a typical workday at the hospital. Table 3 demonstrates that the Wednesday interviewees were more positive when considering “exposure to a typical workday” when compared to the Saturday interviewees ($p = 0.025$); whereas the Saturday interviewees were more positive than Wednesday interviewees when rating the ($p = 0.001$).

Table 4 notes that of those interviewees who interviewed on a Saturday, fewer (4.4%, CI 0 – 10.5, $p = 0.026$) felt “positive” or “very positive” (compared to “negative” or “very negative”) that the offering of a Saturday interview played a role in their decision to apply to a residency position at GW, or played a role in their ranking of GW in the match (4.4%, CI 0 – 10.2, $p = 0.013$). However, 55.6% (CI 41.0 – 70.1, $p = 0.001$) of the interviewees perceived the option of a weekend interview as “positive” or “very positive” in terms of their decision to schedule their interview at GW.

For those who interviewed on a weekend, the primary reason for choosing a weekend interview day was scheduling (Figure 1, 51.2%) followed by not having to miss clinical duties at their home institution (34.2%). For those who did not interview on a weekend, scheduling was again cited as the primary reason for not doing so (Figure 2, 56%). Family visitation for those with local roots nearby our institution (Table 2, 43.3%, CI 31.4 – 55.2), and tourism in Washington D.C. (47.8%, CI 35.8 – 59.7) were neither “positive” nor “negative” for medical student interviewees.

Discussion

Our survey of medical students offered unique insights into the potential benefit of Saturday interviews. Offering a Saturday interview option was valued positively by our medical student applicants for its greater focus on the applicant and ease of scheduling.

We discovered that at least half of the interviewees perceived the option of a Saturday interview as “positive” or “very positive” in regards to the focus on the applicant (71.6% CI 60.1 – 82.4). We speculate that applicants are often frustrated by the distractions and interruptions of clinician obligations on a weekday interview; weekend interviews permit the program director and faculty participating in the interview process to focus more time and energy on getting to know the

applicants. The option of a weekend interview was also seen as “positive” or “very positive” for at least half of the interviewees when considering scheduling (83.8%, CI 75.1 – 92.6). The availability of a weekend interview likely aided those applicants who were scheduling multiple interviews, mainly at programs that only offered weekday interviews. This is seen from the fact that Saturday interviewees then perceived the Saturday interview option even more positively than did weekday applicants. Additionally, weekend interviews often meant fewer days missed during fourth year medical school rotations. 34% of applicants who interviewed on a Saturday reported not wanting to miss clinical days as their reason for doing so (Figure 1). Based on these findings, the authors conclude that weekend interview offering is perceived by applicants as more focused on the applicant and more convenient for scheduling.

Not all findings concerning weekend interviews were positive. Only 20% of interviewees marked “positive” or “very positive” when asked how they perceived the option of a Saturday interview in regards to gaining exposure to a typical workday at the hospital (19.7%, CI 10.5 – 29.0). However, 33% were neutral on the issue of typical workday exposure. In addition, those who interviewed on a Wednesday were more likely to report a “positive” or “very positive” perception regarding exposure to a typical workday than those who interviewed on a weekend. This suggests that the difference in activity in a hospital on a weekday versus a weekend is not truly appreciated by students until they actually experience a weekend interview. In an anonymous, web-based survey DeIorio et al surveyed applicants to emergency medicine programs who reported the overall “feel” or “personality” of a program to be one of the most important aspects of the interview day⁵. The lack of exposure to a typical day may keep applicants from grasping the true personality of a program, especially when taking into account the fewer numbers of faculty and residents available to interact with applicants during the weekend interview day. Therefore, it may be important to organize additional attending physician participation and resident involvement on the weekend interview day to represent the “personality” of a program.

Compensation for faculty and residents coming in on the weekend may pose a barrier to implementation of a weekend interview experience. Not only is additional “work” time requested of interviewers and tour guides, but weekend time away from family, who are also free of work and scholastic obligations, may be particularly onerous. Thus, properly incentivizing faculty and resident participation may be difficult. At GW, the costs associated with offering a weekend interview day are equivalent to weekday interviewing. Both interview offerings require administrative costs, room reservation, and food costs. We offer a vacation day to faculty and a non-clinical day to residents who participate in a weekend interview session; hence, both weekend and weekday interviews require the exact same number of days off from clinical responsibilities.

Overall, 95% of our interviewees had a “positive” or “very positive” interview experience regardless of whether they interviewed on a weekday or weekend. When examining the ultimate goals of the application cycle – application submission, interviewing and ranking - the day of interview does not seem to play a major role for applicants. However, it should not be discounted that 55.6% (CI 40 – 70%) of interviewees reported that the offer of a weekend interview positively influenced their decision to schedule their interview.

Figure 1 If you interviewed on a Saturday (n = 41), what was your reason for doing so?

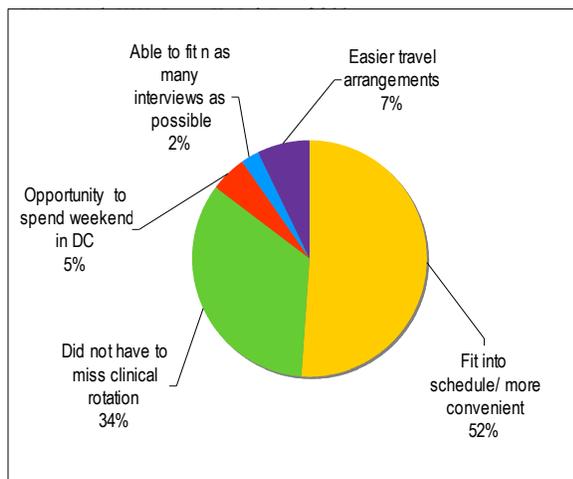
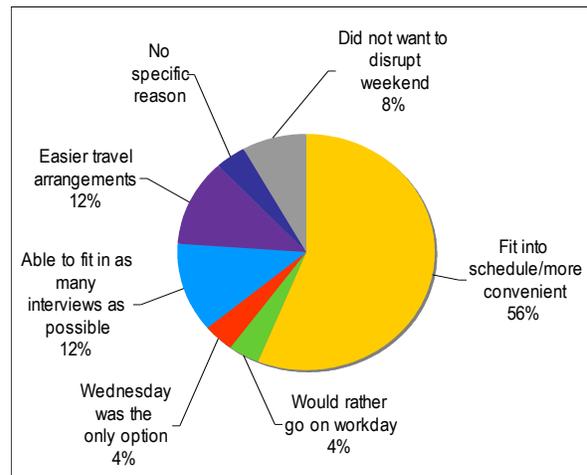


Figure 2 If you did not interview on a Saturday (n = 26), what was your reason for not doing so?



There were several limitations to our study. First, our population was a convenience sample, or a group that only represented medical student interviewees at one institution. Next, the results are subject to non-response bias and selection bias. The risk of non-response bias is deemed low since we had a relatively high response rate of 54%. Further, our survey was restricted to GW anesthesiology interviewees and the results may not be generalizable to other programs. Additionally, interviewees who matched at GW’s program or wanted to match at GW’s program but did not may be biased to report either falsely positive or negative interview experiences. The fact that 95% were satisfied suggests that falsely negative interview experience reporting was not a factor. Another possible limitation is that our demographics suggested a preponderance of northeast and southeast US allopathic students. An osteopathic student, international student or one from a different region may not have the same perspectives and opinions as those in our study. Finally, we only offered weekday interviews on Wednesdays and weekend interviews on Saturdays; perhaps some other day combination would have yielded different results.

Conclusion

If our results are generalizable over a wider geographic area, offering a Saturday interview day appears to be perceived positively by interviewees with regard to scheduling and focus on the applicant. The day of the interview did not affect applicants’ decisions to apply to the program, schedule an interview or rank the program. However, the decision to attend their interview was likely positively affected by weekend availability. Anesthesiology departments wishing to further entice applicants to interview at their institution may wish to consider offering a weekend interview schedule.

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