

dear residents

Fellowship Interviews and Post-Interview Communication

September 22, 2024

Dear Residents,

The most stressful time in residency is not the start of residency or a tough critical care rotation – it is the **fellowship interview season**. And it gets particularly stressful if you are competing for the **Big Four** – Cardiology, Gastroenterology, Hematology/Oncology, and Pulmonary and Critical Care Medicine. The interview itself is anxiety provoking and making decisions on what to say or not say after the interview is confusing. **In an ideal world**, fellowship interview season would unfold this way:

1. A **uniform interview-offer release date** that all programs (at least in any one specialty) adhere to – this would help prevent the “it seems interviews have gone out from such-and-such program but I haven’t heard yet” and the problem with accepting an interview at one place and then being offered an interview from a program that’s higher on your list on that same day.
2. The addition of a finite number of **preference signals** for fellowship applications to help manage application inflation.
3. An agreement on whether **post-interview communication** is encouraged or discouraged.

The interview itself is a high-stakes event. From the program director perspective, we know quite a bit about your accomplishments and your clinical readiness but are trying to form an impression of who you are and the genuineness of your interest in the program. We don’t expect perfection, but just want to get to know you. Program directors must guard against their **initial impressions** – this often leads to an early assessment of likeability followed by using the rest of the interview to justify the initial impression. Luckily, most program directors have undergone cognitive bias training and are cognizant of this trap.

From your perspective, do your best to answer questions and behave in a way that reflects who you are – because that’s what is being assessed. Imagine that someone inquires how you handled a conflict. If you are a naturally extroverted person, you might explain how you openly confronted the issue in a group setting and used the power of your outgoing nature to smooth things over. If you are an introvert, you might have handled the situation differently by assessing each person’s perspective privately, then spending some time analyzing the situation followed by a subsequent debriefing. Both are effective answers, but each represents your own personal style. Being true to your personal style will convey that **authenticity** the interviewer is attempting to gauge. **Body language** should also reflect your personality. If you are someone who gestures a lot while speaking, then do so. Be relaxed, be confident, lean forward if you need to. You can look away if you need to pause, think, or reflect – that’s fine too. If you are a softspoken person who is poised, makes good eye contact, looks straight ahead, and doesn’t move much, that is who you are and there should be no reason to adopt a “preferred body language” that does not come naturally to you. It’s important to **listen well** and, when speaking, be concise, avoid tangents and unusually detailed explanations. For a question you don’t fully understand the intent of, it’s permissible to ask for clarification. “I think you would like an example regarding a time I felt particularly challenged, correct?”

Your interviews have gone well. What's next. **Should you send a thank you note? Or a "love letter?"** Should you focus on why you are perfect for them or why they are perfect for you, or both? Perhaps a reasonable way to send a message of interest without sounding overeager might be: "I really enjoyed our conversation and learning more about the program and your work. The University of Perfect is clearly a place that resonates with my career goals, and I would be delighted to have the opportunity to contribute to your mission."

When it's time to rank programs, the [NRMP](#) code of conduct states that **both applicants and programs may express their interest in each other; however, they shall not solicit verbal or written statements implying a commitment.** The NRMP Match algorithm works best when everyone does what is best for them without the pressure to disclose their preferences. You should submit a ranked list of your true preferences for programs and keep this information confidential. Similarly, programs should submit a ranked list of their true preferences for applicants. Strategically, there is no incentive to do anything else. There is no need for applicants to guess what the programs think of them. There is no need for programs to figure out how highly applicants rank them. Total honesty becomes the best strategy for everyone involved. This is example of a non-enforceable [Nash equilibrium](#). If everyone plays by the rules, then everyone has an equal chance at the best outcome.

SEP 25

12:00 PM ET

Ranking Opens

NOV 06

11:59 PM ET

Quota Change Deadline

NOV 20

09:00 PM ET

Rank Order List Certification Deadline

DEC 04

12:00 PM ET

Match Day

I look forward to Fellowship Match Day. In the meantime, if you have questions, concerns or need general advice, please reach out to me.

Dino Kazi