Being a Leader in Your Program's CaRMS Process: The PARO Guide to Resident Selection

Introduction

As a resident, you have unique insight into the CaRMS interview process. Because of your experience as a candidate in the match, you know just how crucial this time is for candidates, and how stressful the experience can be. As a resident, you also understand that every program is slightly different, and how important it is for your program to attract the people who will be able to thrive and make a positive contribution to your program. There are many ways residents can participate in the candidate selection process, including acting as a file reviewer, interviewer, or advocate for the program through casual interactions with candidates during tours and socials. Having an understanding of not only the CaRMS candidate experience, but also the CaRMS interview experience and process of candidate selection, will allow you to play a unique role in advocating for optimization of your program's candidate selection process.

This best practice guide has been developed based on input from other residents who have already been a part of their program's selection process. Our goal is to provide guidance to residents participating in the CaRMS process to ensure they are prepared for their role as a selection committee member, file reviewer, or interviewer. We want you to feel confident and prepared taking on this role, and capable of supporting your program to put its' best foot forward with your future colleagues.

Preparing for your role

1. Preparation is key! Be proactive in seeking out opportunities to meet with the rest of the selection committee in advance of the file review and interview processes. Enquire if there are training or information sessions offered to faculty members, request that you be allowed to participate.

2. Make sure you clearly understand what your program identifies as an "ideal candidate". Your program will likely have an idea of who their optimal candidate is – if you're not clear about what qualifications, attributes, and skills make up an ideal candidate, ask! Similarly, if you're not sure what elements of an application or interview should be considered a "red flag", get some clarity from your program in advance.

3. Before you interact with any candidates or their applications, get clear guidance from your Program Director about how they want you to handle bias (and perceived bias). It's very possible you'll come across a candidate you'll have interacted with at some point, and that's not a bad thing, or a problem. Sometimes, having worked with a candidate in the past lets you know that they'd be a fantastic (or less than fantastic) fit for your program. However, depending on the nature of your interaction with the candidate and your program's practice

when it comes to handling information from external sources, you may need to approach those candidates in a different way. Make sure you have a clear understanding of what the expectations are before you begin your role, and seek clarification as needed.

4. If you have an opportunity to provide input into what criteria your program uses, speak up! As a trainee in the program you have unique insight into the kind of information that would be useful to have about candidates in making a decision. If you have a unique perspective on some area of training or candidate experience (such as being an IMG trainee), don't hesitate to share your feedback.

5. Fair, objective, and consistent criteria is important when assessing a candidate's application. However, criteria that puts a disproportionate amount of weight on a particular area will result in a candidate pool that lacks diversity. Encourage your program to incorporate criteria that assesses a range of CanMEDS competencies, educational and clinical experiences, and professional interests.

6. The University of Toronto's Best Practices in Admission and Selection (a guide for programs that has been adopted by the AFMC) emphasizes the importance of increasing physician diversity to better reflect the population we serve. You might wish to encourage a discussion of how your program intends to tackle this challenge with others participating in the selection process – you might need a specific strategy to ensure you're considering candidates with a variety of backgrounds, experiences, and skills. You should specifically consider whether your University or Program has a specific mandate to meet, or whether it serves a community with specific needs, and modify your process accordingly.

Interview Day

1. Conducting interviews remotely is a challenge, both for candidates and for those doing the interviewing. The biggest way you can personally improve the experience for candidates is to be an active listener. Minimize distractions around you so you can fully engage with the speaker. Maintain eye contact and use active body language like nodding to encourage the speaker. Keep in mind that you may need to make gestures and facial expressions larger or more animated in order to show up on camera.

   While this level of focus and engagement will require some effort, it will make a big difference to nervous candidates. An engaged audience will help candidates to perform better, which ultimately gives you and your team more information about what they're really like.

2. We all know that technology can sometimes fail us at crucial moments – so make sure your team has a backup plan in case something goes wrong. Have the candidates' phone numbers and email addresses on hand in case you need to contact them at the last minute. Discuss in advance what you'll do if a candidate has internet problems that prevent them from completing the interview. If you plan to show video or use more complicated features, consider having a tech run through with your team to avoid wasting valuable time troubleshooting during interviews.

3. Consider working with other residents in your program to develop a FAQ sheet about the key information candidates want to know. As residents, you and your colleagues are the best sources of information about things such as: what a typical night on call looks like; where in the city most residents live; where you can find a gym close to the hospital; and what a typical day in the life looks like for your program. These details can be enormously helpful to candidates – and by preparing in advance, it means you only need to answer the question once.

4. If you're using Zoom, make sure your video displays your full name, rather than a nickname. You and your fellow interviewers might consider adding your roles in the program to your name (for example, Dr. Julie Smith, Program Director) to help candidates identify you more easily.

5. Do what you can to set candidates at ease. The process is stressful, so some anxiety is natural, but you'll get a better sense of candidates if they're more comfortable. Think about offering a few introductory statements about yourself, the other interviewers, and the program in order to give candidates a moment to gather themselves and relax. Use a calm and friendly tone of voice, and be aware of your body language. Even if a candidate doesn't seem nervous, actively working to put them at ease can give you a more accurate sense of what they're really like to work with.

6. When it's time to rank, it's important that candidates are ranked based on the assessments of those involved in the selection process, and not based on who you think might also rank the program highly. There's no way to game the system, but lots of myths still circulate about how to get the candidates you want – be fair and objective in offering your views on ranking, and encourage others on the selection team to do the same. Remember, candidate ranking decisions are private, it is inappropriate to offer to tell them how your program intends to rank them. Even more importantly, it is a violation of CaRMS policy for a program to ask a candidate how they intend to rank, and candidates have the right to refuse to answer such questions.

Ask the Best Questions

1. If you have a chance to choose some of the questions being asked, think about what questions will give you the most insight into a candidate. Try to keep the questions on topic – while not every question needs to be about medicine, questions like "what are your views on NAFTA?" will not really give you information about a candidate that will allow you to make a more informed decision.

2. In general, questions should be mostly standardized between candidates so that you can compare responses. However, you can still tailor some questions to a candidate's particular interests and experiences. If a candidate's response to a specific question leaves you confused or feeling like you need more information, it's ok to seek clarity and detail from them, even if you don't with every single candidate.

3. Keep context in mind. While you might ask someone you're just getting to know about their spouse or children in a social setting, these questions will come off differently in an interview. Be cautious about asking candidates questions that might require them to disclose a lot of detail about their personal life, religious practices, or political views. Similarly, make sure you understand what questions you are legally unable to ask – if you're not sure, your program director or PGME office can help you. If you notice others on your panel asking these kinds of questions, it's important to let them know it's not appropriate – and in fact, could be considered discrimination. Saying something like, "I don't know if you realize, but asking female candidates about whether or not they plan to have children could get us in trouble – if it seemed like that was a factor in how highly we ranked candidates, we'd likely be seen to be discriminating based on gender" is a polite way to alert your colleagues that they've asked an inappropriate question.

4. There are several methods to assess candidate attributes and capabilities – skill-testing activities, traditional panel interviews, situational behavioural questions, and more. Encourage

your program to carefully consider how to implement a mix of question types that will help you as an interviewer get the best insight into the candidate.

5. The best kinds of questions are those that get candidates to demonstrate their skills in a particular area, or that allow you to understand and assess their past behaviour in a specific scenario. Both are the most accurate predictors of future behaviour.

Optimizing your program's CaRMS social

1. During this time of social distancing, it may not be possible to hold a social gathering for candidates. However, we know that candidates value these less formal interactions with current residents, and appreciate having an opportunity to talk to you about your experiences in the program and city in a more casual environment. Consider what creative ways you might be able to use to provide candidates and the members of your program with an opportunity to get to know each other.

2. Make an effort to talk to all the candidates, not just those you know already. You and the other residents in your program might want to strategize in advance of the event to ensure that all candidates are greeted by a current member of the program, residents are able to mix and mingle with as many different candidates as possible, and candidates are able to socialize with each other. If you're hosting an online zoom event, consider rotating participants through randomized breakout rooms.

3. Put your best foot forward. You are a reflection of your program at this event, and candidates will be looking to you to get an honest sense of the strengths and challenges in your program. Be open, honest, and friendly about the questions you receive. Don't hesitate to be proud of the strengths of your program, and be honest about where the challenges lie too.

4. Remember, candidates will look to you to know how to view the program. Statements like "we only want the best of the best" are needlessly intimidating (no program wants only mediocre candidates) and does not give candidates concrete information they can use to make decisions. Statements like "the people who excel here are those with great interpersonal skills, a strong research background, and an interest in maternal health. We need to collaborate with allied health a lot, so those who prefer to work more independently might not enjoy the environment as much" gives candidates information that allows them to assess what it takes to be successful, and whether the program is a good fit for them.

5. Ask candidates questions, and give them space to talk. This is an opportunity for you to get to know some of your future colleagues. Medicine is a small world so whether they end up training with you in your program, or working with you in the future, you're likely to interact with them again. Learn about their interests – medical and non-medical – and foster a comfortable environment for them to speak about themselves. Keep in mind that introverts and extroverts like to be engaged in different ways (extroverts need to talk to think, while introverts need to think to talk), so consider ways to make both groups comfortable.

6. Information overload is real. Often, residents want to be helpful to candidates by offering advice and guidance. While this can be incredibly valued by candidates, advice that is too detailed and specific can be overwhelming. Similarly, advice that is not strictly fact-based or is highly subjective can be confusing for candidates, who are likely hearing different messages from different people.

7. Professionalism is crucial. Chances are, if there's a candidate you think would be a great fit for your program, there are other programs who think so too! Behaviours like gossiping

about other candidates, residents, or faculty, overemphasizing the importance of fitting in, or inappropriately propositioning candidates are not in line with the professional image you, or your program, want to put forward. If you notice colleagues making inappropriate comments, show leadership in being the person to pull them aside and politely but firmly let them know they've been unprofessional. Often, having someone else notice and call out the behaviour will be enough for them to realize they've crossed a line.

8. Remember, even if a social is a more relaxed environment, you are still participating in a formal selection process. Asking candidates questions about things like religion, politics, ethnicity, citizenship, gender identity, family planning, etc can make candidates feel uncomfortable, and are inappropriate in a selection process. Questions about medical knowledge are also not appropriate for the social – if your program wants to ask those kinds of questions, they'll do them during the interview. Seek out the guidance of your Program Director or Chief Resident about the kinds of questions that should be avoided.

9. You were a candidate not too long ago – try to remember how stressful the process was for you when you interact with candidates. Be empathetic. Applicants may need to leave early to go to other interviews – that's not a reflection of their lack of interest in your program, that's just the nature of the interview process and not being able to control your own schedule. Don't try to "trick" candidates into revealing how keen they are on the program, how they plan to rank, or pressure them into talking about other programs they're interested in. The process works best when both candidates and programs are able to meet with a wide selection of options and make ranking choices based on what they value most.

Conclusion

The opportunity to select your future colleagues is a unique privilege – not many other professionals have the same opportunity to shape the future of their profession! Your input will impact not only the careers of candidates and the future of your program, but ultimately the care that patients receive across the province. You know from your own experience that the CaRMS interview process is a time of uncertainty, change, and promise for every candidate. So, enjoy this opportunity, be conscious of the ways you can contribute to a positive experience for candidates, and use your role to help your program be the best it can be.

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Inspired by our love of medicine