

Expert Skills Program

Admissions Interview Strategies

Overview

The interview works as both a positive and negative screen. An interview can confirm a positive feeling about the applicant through questions that are related to the personal statement, the letters of recommendation, and experiences listed in the application. An interview can also uncover discrepancies in the application and interview and screen out applicants that appear untrustworthy. Admissions is not a reward system, it's a marriage proposal. Both parties are attempting to make a commitment to each other, and they want it to be a happy partnership. This is clearly a situation that begs for simplification and trust.

Simplification during an interview begins with sorting the questions you are asked into one of two groups.

- a) Questions related to your experience.
- b) Questions related to hypothetical situations (Who gets the transplant?) or health care system situations (current access to health care, e.g., Medicare?).

As we proceed with interview strategies the first rule is: Whenever possible, bring your answer back to some aspect of your past experiences. E.g., "This is similar to my experience with..." or "I observed a similar situation..." This is a lead in to then provide your reaction or response to the situation. The advantage is that you gain credibility by relating to your own experience and you relax better when talking about your own experience.

Experience-related questions

1. Experience related questions can originate from your personal statement or as an open-ended question. You can describe inspiring experience, educational experience, decision making experience and so forth.
 - a) In either case, provide enough detail to give a clear idea of what you did and/or what happened. This satisfies the Sensing types who trust people who remember important facts about their lives.
 - b) Follow the details with an explanation of how it changed you and/or what vision it provided for your future role in health care. How it changed you can be framed as a learning experience. A vision can be the impact of a role model you have shadowed or worked for. This satisfies the Intuitive types that want your view of your future and what you learn from your experiences.
 - c) Restated from above, even if a question isn't directly asking about your experience, it is very effective to relate your reply to your experience as an example, e.g. "That situation is similar to something I experienced when I worked as a scribe."

Hypothetical situation-related questions

Another name for this type of question is guess what answer I want to hear? These are often ethical dilemma questions.

1. Do not start to answer the question directly. Instead, say this, “Here is the way I see my options.” If you want some variation, you can say, “Well, here is the way I see my options.”
2. Then list the options you see available. You do not have to know all the options, in fact, the interviewer might be so involved in your approach that they will join in. That is when you know you are going to be OK.
3. After you have listed your options, you can then answer by citing the *pros and cons* for each option. This allows you to lean toward one choice without the need to be correct. More important that you are open-minded, thoughtful, and analytical. Highly desired characteristics for a medical student.
4. Some sample options are: a) refer to an ethics committee, b) consult a colleague with relevant experience, c) consult with an individual like an administrator or supervisor who is affected by the situation.

Health care system-related questions

This is more difficult if you aren't familiar with the data or other circumstances. The best approach when challenged with a social issue is to suggest finding causes rather than effects.

1. If you lack familiarity, admit it. Then proceed to describe how you would inform yourself to be able to see all sides of an issue. Many social issues have no obvious answers.
2. If you scan both the JAMA and NEJM TOCs for about three months before the interview, you will likely get a feel for what the important issues are. No need to memorize, just establish familiarity. You might get lucky and be able to say, “I saw something concerning that in a recent NEJM and I would go back and read in depth to answer your question.”

Additional General Advice

1. Take any set of practice interview questions and describe your answer in a way that you take full responsibility for your actions/decisions.
 - a) If you have made an error or misjudgment, take responsibility and then explain how you are acting to improve.
 - b) If you have been successful, convey your excitement by describing how you will serve your patients better.
2. Patient-oriented answers are always strong. How you feel isn't necessarily helpful, but how the patient is affected is very helpful. You convey how you feel when you describe how the patient feels.
3. Lastly, review your personal statements and other narrative for experiences that you describe and then practice saying how each experience changed you. I ask interview questions directly out of the personal statement. Others might also do this, so be prepared.
4. If you are confronted with a vague question, answer with a clarifying question, e.g. “Do you mean...?”. This is actually quite frequent and is not a fault or weakness.