

AspiringDocs.org Meet the Experts Podcast Transcript

What Are The Basics About Interviewing For Medical School?

Sunny Gibson provides detailed information and fundamental techniques on how to prepare for and increase your chances of success in the medical school interview process.

Eric Weissman: Thank you for joining us for the AspiringDocs.org Podcast. I'm Eric Weissman, with the Association of American Medical Colleges. Today we're going to focus on interviewing for medical school with Sunny Gibson, director of the office of minority and cultural affairs at the Feinberg School of Medicine at Northwestern University. Throughout her seven years as a minority affairs professional, Sunny has worked towards increasing diversity in medical education.

Sunny Gibson once again, thank you for joining us.

Sunny Gibson: Pleasure to be here.

Eric Weissman: So we're going to talk about the interview process. Presumably once a prospective medical student has been called in for an interview, they have proven on paper that they are the right material for that medical school. Is that correct?

Sunny Gibson: Yes, once you actually receive an invitation for an interview, the school is really interested in you and is sort of going to take you to the next phase in terms of deliberating whether or not they will accept you. So you've made it along, and you've made a few cuts if you make it to the interview.

Eric Weissman: And what are some of the most important things that a prospective medical student needs to keep in mind as he or she prepares for an interview?

Sunny Gibson: I think one of the most helpful things students can do is to keep their materials organized at the schools that they are applying to. Remember what you sent in for your secondary to that school, the questions that you were asked that might give you some hints about what the interview might focus on. You also just want to know what you said, you want to be the expert on you and your application. You want to review your AMCAS application and you also want to know something about the school. Probably the biggest mistake students make is they get into an interview and the interviewer would ask them, “Why would you want to be a doctor?” and things like that but they’ll specifically say, “Why do you want to go to Duke or come to Harvard? Why do you want to go to this school?” And so if you don’t really have an answer and you demonstrate that you don’t know anything about the school, usually it would go against you. I mean they want you to at least have done a little bit of web surfing or contacting some folks to get some information about the school.

Eric Weissman: Why do people want to go to a specific school? What’s the right answer? I know you can’t give me the specific right answer but what’s the kind of thing that someone should say when asked a question like that?

Sunny Gibson: I guess there's a lot of potential answers. The one that the applicants would say, "Because I want to go to medical school, anywhere I get in would be great," but sometimes people may have family in the area; sometimes they know folks who have gone there and they know it's a good school. Sometimes it's the school's emphasis or the school's mission; maybe the school focuses specifically on something interesting such as a bio-medical engineering component or maybe they have a great public health program and that's been part of the applicant's goals and they can state that to that person. So, just a lot of interest, but if you don't have something, the easiest one is to try to find something in your application that also ties with what the school does. Maybe you did some research in aging, and they have an aging center. Or maybe you're interested in cancer, and they have a cancer center. So, you can base it on interest as well.

Eric Weissman: So a good answer to that question could be highly academic, related to an academic focus of the school or it could be personal, "I've always wanted to live in New York," that's a good reason?

Sunny Gibson: Sure! I've had students say, I went to school in a small town and I want to experience school in an urban environment or I'm very interested in being in a really diverse city community because I'm from a rural area and I want to stretch myself that way. A lot of people would mention that they have family close by or that they have families that have gone to the school, like my cousin went to the school up the road and loves the city, and that kind of stuff. So

yeah it could be a lot of things. I just think being honest and genuine is really important throughout the entire interview.

Eric Weissman: I'm going to ask some questions that are very specific and I'm sure people wonder about these things and maybe they don't talk about it much, what do you wear to one of these interviews? How do you dress?

Sunny Gibson: You wear a suit. And hopefully a reasonably conservative suit. I don't know if you've seen "Dumb and Dumber," where they wear the orange and the blue, this is really not the time to express your individuality; you just wear a very simple professional suit that you feel comfortable in. You should take out your piercings besides just ears if you have them. And don't wear anything super flashy. My guideline for clothing is don't let your clothes say more about you than you have to say for yourself, so you want your clothes to not be distracting your interviewer or causing people to say, "What is that person wearing?" kind of thing; so just a suit. And for girls they often ask, do I have to wear a skirt suit? I don't think so, and I think especially if you're uncomfortable in one, don't wear one, because you won't be comfortable in your interview, just sitting there trying to fidget with your skirt the entire time.

Eric Weissman: So even if you have a suit you should look at that suit and say, well this isn't really conservative or this is maybe a little too flashy. Is that what you suggest?

Sunny Gibson: Well I mean, most people wear blue or black or grey, or on the darker side. I don't think I've ever seen anybody wear red; I've seen somebody wear a brighter blue color before and get away with it.

Eric Weissman: But it was noticed?

Sunny Gibson: Yeah, I mean the person definitely stood out in the crowd. And that can sometimes work for you but it can go against you. I don't think that anyone ever says your suit is really boring so we're going to hold that against you. But they will say "that's a pretty loud suit, I wonder what this might indicate about the student's personality," or their need for attention or maybe they are a rebel rouser. You can wear whatever you want within reason of the school's guidelines when you get accepted, so you might as well just cover your bases on interview day and wear something basic.

Eric Weissman: You mentioned removing piercings so they'll look at that, what about something like hair-cuts?

Sunny Gibson: I would definitely say try to present yourself as if this is the person that you would see when you went to the doctor. Do you want to see that person approaching you and if that person is going to be examining you and evaluating you what should this person look

like? And having wild piercings or a crazy hairdo or a purple streak down the middle of your hair, not exactly something that probably brings a lot of confidence or trust in patient population and that's kind of the way the folks that are evaluating the application are going to be thinking. And that's said for girls as well, making sure that you dress so that you do not have a revealing neckline, that your skirt is not too short and that your clothing is not too tight, because that can sometimes come into play, and just be distracting for an interviewer particularly if the neckline is too low, people just get pretty fixated.

Eric Weissman: So who interviews you? What's that experience for the applicant? Are they going to be in the room with one person, two people, five people?

Sunny Gibson: It varies by school. Most of the time the interviewers are faculty members that can be either basic science faculty or physicians, and typically it's popular in a lot of medical schools to use also senior medical students; third, fourth year medical students as well. Some schools have community members that also interview. And the format differs. I would say the most common is one on one, but sometimes they'll be three faculty members and one medical student, and sometimes they'll be a panel. At our school we do a panel of students and a panel of interviewers at the same time, so I think you would find out in advance what the format is, so that you could feel a little more prepared.

Eric Weissman: And when you go into that room regardless of whether it's one person or a panel, how do you introduce yourself? How do you present yourself right off the bat?

Sunny Gibson: You definitely want to introduce yourself and say your first and last name and shake hands with the person. A firm handshake and not the death grip kind of thing, and not the flipper, timid shake thing but you want a good firm shake. And it's kind of funny but I used to practice handshakes with applicants just to say, "Is this comfortable?" Because you don't really shake hands with people a lot when you're in college, like how many times do you meet a new person? I think young folks don't do the hand shake thing maybe when they meet each other, so practice the handshake and kind of think about it. And make some eye contact when you meet someone and smile. Some students just get so nervous they really forget to smile and they look terrified, and that's a little distracting for your interviewer as well.

Eric Weissman: Well you are steering me in the direction I wanted to go into in a little while, but let's go there now. What if you're someone who gets nervous? If you're someone typically in a public speaking environment or when you're meeting someone and it's like you tend to be a little nervous, you got butterflies in your stomach or maybe have a little bit of anxiety, how can you mitigate that, as you're getting ready to interview?

Sunny Gibson: The first thing is to kind of frame it in your mind – reframe it from nervousness, about “Oh my gosh, I’m going to screw up,” to “I’m just really amped,” “I’m really pumped up for this interview” and “I have a lot of anticipation for it,” “I’m really excited about it.” And then to practice and have someone ask you questions maybe off your application saying, tell me about this experience or that experience so you can practice formulating an answer. And practice with someone or do as many mock interviews as you need to, to feel comfortable. And a lot of students in mock interviews discover that they “um” too much, or they fidget, and you can get some good feedback about your body language or how you’re crafting your answers or if your eye contact is appropriate or not, and that can be very helpful. So even if you don’t have someone specifically that’s a trained interviewer, you can definitely just ask someone, “Can you ask me questions so I can practice responding the first time around?”

Eric Weissman: So you can do a mock interview just with friends, family?

Sunny Gibson: With a friend or if you have a mentor, or if your advisor offers them. I had one student that just interviewed, he went to apply for a few jobs, went to a couple job interviews, just to get some interviewing practice and I know it’s a good idea if you don’t have access to an adviser and he definitely felt more prepared.

Eric Weissman: So you’re walking into that room and a group of people you’ve never met before, is there something you can do to have perhaps

before hand, do you recommend maybe doing a little bit of research on some of the people you're interviewing with? Is that a good idea? Should you try to know those people, know who they are , or does it matter?

Sunny Gibson:

I think at most schools they do not expect you to know and probably won't tell you who you're interviewing with. And if they do, they don't expect you to know anything about them. And one of the good things you can do in your interview is to ask them questions because you don't know them and being genuinely curious about another human being is a good quality in a physician. So you have the opportunity to sort of ask them, what do you do and what made you choose to be a part of this institution, and to get to know your interviewer a little better, because it should be a little bit conversational not just them firing questions and you answering but they should be sharing some information about themselves as well.

Eric Weissman:

Nice. So you could make this a two-way street, you can remove the attention on you by asking a few questions of your own. That's not inappropriate?

Sunny Gibson:

Yeah and I think the best interviews end up feeling a lot like a conversation where the applicant is talking about their experiences and sharing a little bit more about their life and most of the interviewers do the same, because they've all volunteered at almost every school. So they are doing it because they like you

and enjoy exploring applications and talking with applicants and being part of that admissions process.

Eric Weissman: So what kind of questions is that individual or that panel going to ask you when you walk in there?

Sunny Gibson: Well you kind of don't really know in advance but you should definitely be ready to talk about you and your application. And so if you had listed that you had done research – they may say tell me about this research experience or give me the hypothesis of what you studied. What was the best part about working in this community center? So you definitely have to be prepared to just speak in-depth, and enthusiastically, I might add. Don't be blah. A lot of the interviewers say, "These students they don't get passionate about their application. They're just afraid that we're going to be judgmental if they show some emotions." And so I think with enthusiasm, to kind of talk about your experiences and who knows what will get thrown at you if you get ethical dilemmas or other things but I don't think that students can try to think about the questions in advance because if you do you can really come across as really rehearsed and phony, so over preparing can sometimes backfire because then you sort of sound rehearsed. And I think people pick up on that fairly easily.

Eric Weissman: Okay, so you don't want to wear all your piercings, you don't want to have crazy hair, you don't want to be dressed like you're going out to the club, you don't want to sound overly rehearsed, what

are some other things that you maybe want to avoid in an interview? Other common mistakes that people make? Those obvious, little things that people might do?

Sunny Gibson: Being late is a big one, so be early to your interview date and map things out in advance.

Eric Weissman: How early?

Sunny Gibson: At least 15 minutes early.

Eric Weissman: So be in that office, register with whoever you need to register with and be sitting down in the waiting area fifteen minutes before your interview?

Sunny Gibson: Yes. Ten or fifteen minutes before your interview will start, and if you're going to a new place say you're coming to Northwestern to downtown Chicago and you're not really sure where you're going, then get your directions, figure out where you're going to park, plan for inclement weather and all kinds of stuff because you don't get a second chance at showing up on time so it's definitely important. The other thing I would avoid in an interview is speaking negatively about others. Let's say they ask you a question about malpractice, and you proceed to bash lawyers, and you say how horrible you think lawyers are tearing down the profession of medicine, and my partner is lawyer. Well obviously I may have a totally different perspective or I may think that what you expressed is very narrow and kind of ignorant about this other

profession. And so you don't want to say negative things about other people. The other thing would be not to say negative things about yourself. Don't say bad things about yourself because you are trying to put your best foot forward and if it's possible, know what information the interviewer has on you. Some interviews are open where they have your whole file and they have access to everything that the admissions office has seen up to that point, including your letters of recommendation. Some of them are completely blind. Where they are meeting you for the first time and you're meeting them for the first time and they've never seen your folder. And the admissions committee may do that because they would like to know what this person's opinion or view is without them having all these background information. So the worst thing that you can do in a blind interview when asked a question, is to say, "Well I really regret that I got that D in Biochemistry," or you bring up something in your application that isn't flattering but you have a complete complex about it that they didn't even know and they wouldn't have even put it in an evaluation about you but now you just introduced it. And so I think a lot of students are really afraid of those weaknesses and it's not a time to talk about your weaknesses unless you're specifically asked a question about something like that or a challenge or something. Try to be gentle on yourself and not to be too self-critical.

Eric Weissman: So go in focused on the positive, focused on what it is you've done that you want them to know about?

Sunny Gibson: Right and definitely your strengths because a lot of interviewers would say tell me about yourself. So you have to be sort of prepared for those really broad, open-ended questions and definitely be prepared to talk about your motivation for wanting to become a physician and the most common answer I get in a lot of mock interviews the first time around is, "Well I love science and I love people, and medicine is the intersection of that and I want to do that." I don't know if that's in a book somewhere but that's a bad answer.

Eric Weissman: Like a Miss America Pageant, I want to help people.

Sunny Gibson: It is, and it's everyone's answer, that's what makes it a bad answer is it doesn't really apply to me. I could say that and the other fifty people interviewing that day could say the exact same thing and it would also be true. So try to be specific as possible about your experiences and your motivations that help you stand out to your interviewers as well.

Eric Weissman: Let's talk about standing out so perhaps for someone, the way they typically stand is by appearance, you don't want to do that but what are some good ways to stand out in addition to what you just mentioned. What do you recommend as a way to be memorable?

Sunny Gibson: To your interviewers I would definitely use your good people skills and be a good listener, share your experiences and talk about

your experiences with some enthusiasm. And anytime you can learn something from your interviewer and teach them something new, that usually makes things stick out in people's minds if you happen to have expertise about something that's interesting, cultural, from your community or something, or from research that you've done. Usually that impresses interviewers because they are interested in learning new things and in turn if you are curious about them they are able to teach you something.

Eric Weissman: So you do recommend people talking about non-academic aspects of their lives, interests that they have, hobbies that they have, that might be unusual or that's good fodder for an interview?

Sunny Gibson: Most definitely, as long as it relates to the questions. So some students just get pretty fixated on why I definitely have to mention that I grew up in South America and I have to find a way to say that no matter what and then they sort of bring it out of context, and that sort of makes you look weird. Why would you say that when I didn't ask you something related to that? And sometimes the interviewer would say, "Was there anything else you want to know?" And then you would have the opportunity to kind of do something new, but I would definitely think about what are the most unique things about me and what do I think are the strengths of my application, and can I make sure that after this interview, the interviewer knows what those things are.

Eric Weissman: Are there non-verbal cues that someone should look for in an interview? You're sitting there, you're being interviewed by an individual or a panel, do you want to notice anything about them or should you be looking at their body language? And similarly, what should you be doing about your body language?

Sunny Gibson: So I think in the interview their body language, things about eye contact, how far or how close you might sit to someone, if they're fidgeting, they may ask you do you have any more questions, as they're getting up out of their chair? Which would be a body language read that, "Oh I know we're probably out of time," so you may say if you really have a burning question or "I see we're short on time I don't have any more questions," kind of thing. So you definitely want to be in tuned with your interviewer and when you're answering questions, the attention span of people is definitely finite and so you don't want to talk for too long if you notice that person getting bored or they put their finger up and they seem they are trying to jump in because you're getting off track with your answer. You definitely want to make sure that you pay attention and you want to pay attention to your own body language as well, for some people a little bit of hand gesture is fine, but you don't want to be doing charades and gesturing too widely, and twisting in your chair or fidgeting or never making eye contact or staring people down either.

Eric Weissman: Is there a typical length of a medical school interview or does it vary?

Sunny Gibson: I think thirty to forty-five minutes is pretty standard but shorter ones doesn't mean that it's bad and longer ones doesn't mean it's good and it just sort of varies on how long it goes and how much time is allotted.

Eric Weissman: In your experience do people feel like those interviews go by quickly or do they think there are endless?

Sunny Gibson: I think it depends. Sometimes it feels like a downright disappointment and sometimes it's just a breeze and people do well and so it varies.

Eric Weissman: Just out of curiosity, if you're going there and you have a connection to the school, let's say someone in your family went there or friend went there, or there's like a person you know, someone in the faculty; is that worth bringing up or is that self serving?

Sunny Gibson: With some schools that will get you absolutely nowhere and with other schools it might be a consideration. But where it's a consideration they usually have asked you somewhere else, sort of why do you want to go to this school on the secondary, or do you know anyone or are you related to anyone from this school, or are you interested in this school because of someone that you know? So if it comes up in an interview naturally you might mention it if it's interesting but I wouldn't sort of slip it in because I

don't think there is some sort of advantage for you saying you have a connection.

Eric Weissman: Finally Sunny, what's one piece of advice, a really good, general, broad piece of advice that you think students should think about as they are preparing for an interview to go to medical school?

Sunny Gibson: That they should have some confidence that they're also interviewing the school. And so it's kind of a two way street when you're interviewing. You shouldn't be so timid, scared or nervous that they are not going to like you or that you're not going to get into this school. They're interested in you at this point and so you need to go in with some confidence and also be checking out the schools. And so be interviewed and do well at that, and be an investigator while you're there as well. And I think the confidence is just a huge piece, not arrogance but some confidence in your abilities and I don't think that you can prepare for an interview to change who you are and so it's really about showcasing who you are and letting the person that you're having a conversation with know what your strengths are and why you want to be a doctor. And that should be fun.

Eric Weissman: Sunny Gibson thank you very much for joining us.

Sunny Gibson: You're welcome.