

PRS

Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery

PRS-D-20-02427

DOI: [10.1097/PRS.00000000000008377](https://doi.org/10.1097/PRS.00000000000008377)

## VIEWPOINT

# The Virtual Visiting Professor: Temporary Form of COVID-19 Social Distancing or Potential Paradigm Shift?

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October

2021

Volume 148

Number 4

Viewpoints

2021

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The visiting professor is an important tradition in plastic and reconstructive surgery. Innovative techniques and developing frontiers in our field are disseminated in cross-institutional learning opportunities such as visiting professorships. Residents can network with the visiting professor, which can enhance career opportunities.

During the peak of coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19) social distancing restrictions, seven virtual visiting professor lectures were performed during educational conferences at our institution over a 3-week period. The lectures followed a standard format to capture aspects of a true visiting professor over 1 hour: (1) introduction of virtual visiting professor by faculty (3 minutes); senior/chief residents introduce

themselves (7 minutes); interactive life lessons from the virtual visiting professor (10 minutes); and lecture and questions (40 minutes). Visiting professors and residents were surveyed after the lectures. (See Figure, [Supplemental Digital Content 1](#), which shows the survey administered to visiting professors immediately after virtual lecture, <http://links.lww.com/PRS/E626>. See Figure, [Supplemental Digital Content 2](#), which shows the survey administered to residents immediately after virtual lecture, <http://links.lww.com/PRS/E627>.) All visiting professors found the virtual lecturer program convenient. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, one professor (14.3 percent) was in favor of teleconferencing for lectures, two of seven (28.6 percent) were against teleconferencing for lectures, and four of seven (57.1 percent) were neutral. Following relaxing of COVID-19 social distancing, six of seven visiting professors (85.7 percent) would like to continue virtual visiting professorships ([Tables 1 and 2](#)).

**Table 1. Virtual Visiting Professor Survey Responses**

	Visiting Professor Responses
Total	7
Approximately how many lectures do you give per year?	11.3
How many lectures have you ever given while visiting other institutions?	4.9
How many years have you been in practice?	6.4 yr
How convenient do you find virtual visiting professor lectures?	
Not convenient	0%
Neutral	0%
Somewhat convenient	0%
Convenient	14.3%
Very convenient	85.7%
Is a virtual visiting professorship something you would like to continue after COVID-19?	
Yes	85.7%

No	14.3%
How similar did your virtual visiting professor lecture allow you to connect with residents at the visiting institution compared to an in-person visit?	
In-person is far superior	42.9%
In-person is somewhat better	57.1%
Which manner do you think provides a larger connection to the residents?	
In-person lecture	85.7%
Virtual lecture	14.3%
Equal	0%
How likely are you to give visiting professor lectures at additional institutions if a virtual option is offered?	
I would give fewer lectures	0%
I would give the same amount	0%
I would probably give more lectures	71.4%
I would definitely give more lectures	28.6%
How many previous Webinars or teleconferences have you given before the COVID-19 pandemic?	
0	28.6%
1–5	57.1%
6–10	14.3%
>10	0%
Before the COVID-19 pandemic, what was your opinion on teleconferencing for educational lectures?	
In favor of teleconferencing	14.3%
Neutral	57.1%
Not in favor of teleconferencing	28.6%
How many residency programs would you prefer to have at each visiting professor lecture?	
1	42.9%
2–5	42.9%
6–10	0%
>10	14.3%
On average, how many cases did you do per week before COVID-19?	10.3
On average, how many cases do you do per week during COVID-19?	2.8

Table 2. Resident Survey Responses

	Resident Responses
Distribution	
Integrated 1	2
Integrated 2	2
Integrated 3	2
Integrated 4/independent 1	4
Integrated 5/independent 2	4
Integrated 6/independent 3	3
How educational do you find the visiting professors?	
Not educational	0%
Neutral	0%
Somewhat educational	5.9%
Educational	29.4%
Very educational	64.7%
What is your preferred learning method?	
Reading	29.4%
Online lecture/video	52.9%
In-person lecture	17.6%
Do you prefer in-person or virtual visiting professor?	
In-person	35.3%
Virtual	29.4%
No preference	35.3%
Based on the lectures you received, how much did you learn?	
Nothing	0%
Minimal	0%
Moderate educational amount	64.7%
Large educational amount	35.3%
How educational do you find the virtual visiting professor lecture compared to previous in-person visiting professor lecture?	
Far less educational	5.9%
Somewhat less educational	5.9%
Same educational	41.2%
Somewhat more educational	47.1%
Far more educational	0%
What characteristics of virtual conferencing do you agree with?	
Worse image quality	5.9%

Better image quality	52.9%
Harder to hear speaker	17.6%
Better to hear speaker	47.1%
More distractions	23.5%
Less distractions	64.7%
How important do you think a face-to-face meeting with a visiting professor is for your career aspirations?	
Not important at all	0%
Neutral	35.3%
Somewhat important	29.4%
Important	23.5%
Very important	11.8%
Do you plan to pursue a fellowship?	
Yes	64.7%
No	35.3%

When surveyed on their experiences, six of 17 residents (35.3 percent) preferred in-person visiting professors and five of 17 (29.4 percent) preferred virtual visiting professors. Residents found the virtual visiting professor more educational [eight of 17 (47.1 percent)], whereas seven of 17 (41.2 percent) found the virtual visiting professors to have the same educational value as in-person, and two of 17 (11.8 percent) found the virtual visiting professors to be less educational. Residents thought face-to-face meetings with a visiting professor were more important for career aspirations, and only six of 17 (35.3 percent) and five of 17 (29.4 percent) found it to be somewhat important. The mean cost of each visiting professor event during the 2018 academic year was \$1780 ± \$238. The cost of an average virtual visiting professor was \$15 per visit (gift card) ( $p < 0.0001$ ).

This study revealed that both visiting professors and residents found our virtual visiting professor program maintained its educational value and elements of personal connection. Visiting professors found them convenient and worth continuing after travel restoration after COVID-19. The benefits of a virtual professorship are clear. A visiting

professor may be able to give a visiting lecture, establish a national reputation in their area of expertise, and share their educational approach with learners at another program without having to travel or sacrifice their routine clinical or research opportunities. There is a financial burden to the institution with an in-person visiting professor. The hosting plastic surgery program typically pays airfare, hotel, meals, and an honorarium. The visiting professor sacrifices clinical and research opportunities including missed relative value unit earning potential.

A routine virtual visiting professor represents a potential paradigm shift. It may not replace all in-person visiting professors entirely given some of the advantages an in-person experience offers, but the virtual visiting professor offers a comparable experience at a lower institutional cost. These results suggest that institutions should consider implementing a virtual visiting professor program to augment traditional visiting professor lectures even after social and travel normalization after the COVID-19 pandemic. Facilitating virtual personal interactions between the professor and the residents during the program is necessary.

#### DISCLOSURE

The authors have no financial disclosures to report.