

SHORT COMMUNICATION

Step 1 as Pass/Fail: Navigating Dermatology Application Components as Holistic Review Expands

Albert G. Wu MS¹, Abigail Cline, PhD MD², Marian Russo, MD²

¹ New York Medical College School of Medicine, Valhalla, NY

² Department of Dermatology, Metropolitan Hospital, New York, NY

Historically one of the most competitive specialties, dermatology saw only 82.9% of US MD seniors successfully matching into the specialty in 2022 (national average = 92.9%)¹. The 2022-2023 application cycle will be the first where applicants may have their Step 1 scores listed as “Pass/Fail” rather than numerically. In an attempt to clarify how the step scoring representation change could shift application evaluation, we sent a 53-question survey via email to dermatology program directors (PDs) to evaluate the importance of 26 application aspects. Respondents were asked to rate these aspects on a 1-5 Likert scale (1= Not all important to 5= Extremely important), as well as how its importance would be affected, if at all, by Step 1 becoming Pass/Fail. Respondents predicted that longitudinal methods of candidate evaluation such as letters of recommendation, away rotations, and medical school transcripts, would increase in importance after the score change, while criteria most likely to become less important included USMLE Step 1 and USMLE Step 2 scores (Table 1).

As the number of applicants to dermatology continues to increase, residency programs have been developing methods of holistic evaluation, including considering a

candidate's journey to dermatology, professional goals, and volunteerism, in addition to traditional metrics of exam scores, academic record, and publication total.² In the most recent application cycle, the Association of Professors of Dermatology (APD) approved implementation of a supplemental application and preference signalling in an effort to give applicants more tools to represent themselves³. These additions represent an effort by programs to more clearly understand each applicant, even in the wake of rising application numbers and the logistical constraints of reviewing each one. Therefore, students should take the time to thoroughly explore their motivations and passions for going into the field, so they can clearly represent themselves. Hopefully, this journey would bring applicants into contact with mentors and professionals who are able to offer guidance and support, while creating meaningful experiences for residency programs to look to to better understand candidates. These may still create barriers for many individuals, including those without a home institution dermatology program, those lacking mentors⁴, or those unable to find opportunities to explore their interest in the field.

Table 1. Ranking of Anticipated Importance of Survey Items by Mean Response (n=26)

Survey Categories	Evaluated Items	Importance (out of 5)	Predicted Change
Applicant Characteristics	Letters of Recommendation	4.58	More Important
	Honors in Rotations	4.23	More Important
Scholastic Work	Medical School Transcript	4.12	More Important
	Dean's Letter	3.77	More Important
	Extracurricular Activities	3.69	No Change
	Rotation at your program	3.69	More Important
	Personal Statement	3.65	More Important
	Other Awards/Honors	3.62	More Important
	USMLE Step 1 Score	3.38	No Change
	Number of Publications	3.35	More Important
	USMLE Step 2 Score	3.27	Less Important
	Oral Presentations	3.00	No Change
	Poster Presentations	3.00	No Change
	Telephone Call on Behalf of Applicant	2.96	More Important
	Alpha Omega Alpha (AOA) Membership	2.92	No Change
	Other degrees (MPH, MBA, MS, PhD)	2.85	No Change
	Applicant Reputation	Previous Application	2.73
Applicant's Medical School		2.73	No Change
Research Fellowships		2.62	No Change
Previous Residency		2.50	No Change
Race		2.31	No Change
Applicant's Graduate Institution (other than Medical School)		2.15	No Change
Applicant's Undergraduate Institution		2.08	No Change
Personal Appearance		1.96	No Change
Age		1.38	No Change
Gender		1.31	No Change

Even with these changes, there are still significantly more applicants than residency spots. An arms race is being waged within the objective measures of the application, most prominently in research publications⁵, the average for which has increased over 300% since 2007- and while other metrics such as volunteer and work experiences have not increased significantly⁶, dermatology applicants were above the national average in every matched applicant characteristic published by the 2020 NRMP Charting the Outcomes of the Match report. Qualitative measures, including away rotations, interviews, and letters of recommendation, as well as longitudinal

measures of academic and clinical performance, may be the most practical way for programs to evaluate a candidate's fit for their philosophy, goals, and values.

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Corresponding Author:

Albert G. Wu
 New York Medical College School of Medicine
 40 Sunshine Cottage Rd
 Valhalla, NY 10595
 Email: awu4@student.nymc.edu

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