

The Evolving Medical School Admissions Interview

The medical school admissions interview is an important piece of the holistic admissions process because it provides information about applicants' fit with schools' unique educational missions and goals and their readiness for medical school, among other things. All U.S. medical schools use admissions interviews and, as reported in a companion *Analysis in Brief (AIB)*, interviews are rated as the most important factor in deciding which applicants to accept into medical school.¹

While numerous studies have examined the reliability and validity of medical school admissions interviews, a description of the typical interview *process* has not been published in nearly 20 years.^{2,3} This *AIB* looks at recent interview practices by describing the typical medical school admissions interview process used to select the interview pool, the process by which interviews are conducted, and the characteristics assessed by the interview.

Twenty years ago, the typical admissions interview was characterized by one-on-one interviews conducted by faculty and staff. Interviewers received little guidance about the content of questions but were required to use graphic rating scales to evaluate applicants. Since then, many medical school admissions interviews use

techniques such as semi-structured interviews⁴ and the Multi-Mini Interview (MMI).^{5,6} In 2011, admissions committees conducted over 80,000 admissions interviews (median = 566; range = 87 to 1,438).⁷

Methodology

In summer 2008, at the behest of the committee conducting the 5th Comprehensive Review of the MCAT exam (MR5), admissions deans from each of the U.S. and Canadian medical schools that use the Medical College Admission Test (MCAT) were invited to participate in an online survey about their policies and practices (n=142).

The survey asked respondents to describe the use and importance of various application data at each stage of the admissions process, the procedures used at each stage of the admissions process, and the sources of information used to evaluate various applicant characteristics. Ninety percent of the admissions officers responded to the survey (65% were from public and 35% from private schools). The sample mirrors the distribution of public and private schools and was geographically diverse.

Results

How is the interview pool selected?

More than half of admissions officers

reported that admissions committee members (64%) and staff (56%) review application materials to decide which applicants to interview; only 12 percent reported that their schools use computer-based algorithms to make this decision.⁸ Sixty-nine percent of respondents indicated that two or more people review each applicant's information. At most schools (53%), the review takes 15 minutes or more. The companion *AIB* indicates that both academic (e.g., undergraduate GPAs and MCAT scores) and non-academic (e.g., medical community service, personal statements) data are used to select the interview pool; however, more weight is given to academic data at this stage in the admissions process.

What process is used to conduct a typical admissions interview?

As was the case 20 years ago, many admissions officers (83%) indicate faculty and staff and, in some cases medical students, conduct one-on-one interviews. Fifty nine percent of schools conduct two interviews with each interviewee. At more than 50 percent of schools, interviewers review personal statements, letters of evaluation, MCAT scores, and undergraduate GPAs prior to or during the interview.⁹ Admissions interviews typically last between 30 and 44 minutes each.

1. Dunleavy DM, Sondheimer H, Bletzinger RB, Castillo-Page L. Medical School Admissions: More than Grades and Test Scores. *AIB*. 2011; 11 (6).
2. Puryear JB, Lewis LA. Description of the Interview Process in Selecting Students for Admission to U.S. Medical Schools. *J Med Educ*. 1981;56:881-5.
3. Edwards JC, Johnson EK, Molider JB. The Interview in the Admission Process. *Acad Med*. 1990;65:167-77.
4. Patrick L, Altmaier E, Kuperman S, Ugolini K. A structured interview for medical school admission, phase 1: initial procedures and results. *Acad Med*. 2001;76:66-71.
5. The MMI consists of several short structured interview stations in which applicants are "presented with scenarios that require them to discuss a health-related issue with an interviewer, interact with a standardized confederate while and examinee observe(s) the interpersonal skills displayed, or answer traditional interview questions" (Eva et al., 2004, pg. 314).
6. Eva K, Rosenfeld J, Reiter H, Norman G. An admissions OSCE: the multiple mini-interview. *Med Educ*. 2004;38:314-26.
7. Medical School Admissions Requirements (MSAR). Washington, DC: Association of American Medical Colleges, 2011.
8. The process used to select the interview pool did not differ significantly between public and private schools.
9. Percentages exceed 100 because respondents were allowed to select all response options that applied.

Table 1: Percentage of Responding Admissions Officers Who Ask Questions about Personal Characteristics during the Admissions Interview

| Personal Characteristics | Percentage |
|---------------------------------|------------|
| Motivation for a medical career | 98% |
| Compassion and empathy | 96% |
| Personal maturity | 92% |
| Oral communication | 91% |
| Service orientation | 89% |
| Professionalism | 88% |
| Altruism | 83% |
| Integrity | 82% |
| Leadership | 80% |
| Intellectual curiosity | 76% |
| Teamwork | 74% |
| Cultural competence | 72% |
| Reliability and dependability | 70% |
| Self-discipline | 70% |
| Critical thinking | 69% |
| Adaptability | 67% |
| Verbal reasoning | 66% |
| Work habits | 66% |
| Persistence | 65% |
| Resilience | 65% |
| Logical reasoning | 56% |

Note: For a complete list of characteristics assessed during the medical school admissions interview, see the supplemental materials.

Results show that the current admissions interview is more structured than it was in the past. Sixty-four percent of schools provide general guidance to interviewers about the content of the questions they should ask. Similarly, most employ a standard rating process to evaluate applicants during the interview. For example, at over 50 percent of schools, interviewers evaluate applicants by rating them on multiple dimensions or by rating overall interview performance with a numeric rating scale.

What characteristics are assessed in the typical admissions interview?

Respondents indicated that their schools most often use the interview to ask questions about non-academic characteristics and skills. Over 85 percent of respondents indicated that their interviews include ques-

tions about applicants' motivation for a medical career, compassion and empathy, personal maturity, oral communication, service orientation, and professionalism (see Table 1). Less than 50 percent of respondents indicated that their interviews include questions about applicants' academic content knowledge (e.g., biology, chemistry, psychology, etc.).¹⁰

Discussion

These data provide descriptive information about the current medical school admission interview. Compared to the Johnson et al.¹¹ description of the interview, results show few changes in the typical medical school interview process (e.g., number of interviews, length and format of the interview, etc.) over the past 20 years. One significant change to the interview, however, is the increase in

interview structure, with more schools providing guidance about interview content and scoring to interviewers.

These data also show that medical schools use the interview, almost exclusively, to assess applicants' personal characteristics. Reliance on the interview is likely due to the difficulty of assessing personal characteristics with other admissions tools currently available earlier in the admissions process. These data, when considered in light of the companion *AIB*, suggest that admissions committees' value information on personal characteristics and may use the interview to supplement academic data gathered from other parts of the application.

This study is not without limitations. Despite the high response rate, there are not data from all medical schools. Similarly, results are limited to the questions included in the survey, which may not capture all aspects components of the interview.

Results of this study will be used to inform initiatives focused on transforming medical school admissions. Future research on the medical school admissions interview should focus on the utility and effectiveness of increasing the interview's structure. For example, researchers could investigate whether more structure corresponds with increased predictive validity. Similarly, future research should focus on the development, implementation, and effectiveness of innovative interview methods such as the MMI.

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10. Refer to the supplemental materials for a complete list of characteristics assessed during the medical school admissions interview.

11. Johnson EK, Edwards JC. Current practices in admissions interviews at U.S. medical schools. *Acad Med.* 1991;66:408-412.