
The medical school admissions process is adapting to the growing health needs of our society, as well as changes in medical education. One example of this evolving process is an increasing use of competency-based admissions—an approach to admissions that places a greater emphasis on competencies that relate to medical school performance and physician outcomes. Another example is holistic review, which supports a more balanced consideration of the whole applicant relative to the explicit missions that the medical school serves in order to support medical school diversity.

Admissions officers often use multiple sources of applicant data to achieve competency-based admissions and holistic review in their admissions practices. A common approach is to review letters of recommendation or evaluation, which describe different perspectives on the qualities an applicant has displayed in various social contexts, including college courses and work settings. Admissions officers have rated letters among the most important pieces of applicant data in deciding whom to invite to interview and admit into medical school. Notably, letters were the third highest rated data source in determining whom to interview, behind undergraduate grade point average (UGPA) and MCAT® scores and letters ranked higher than UGPA and MCAT scores in deciding whom to admit.

While letters play a vital role in the admissions process, concerns regarding their reliability and validity have been raised, and the unstructured format of letters may be inefficient, as it fails to provide letter writers with instructions or guidance about what information medical schools hope to learn from letters. In the context of changes in admissions and the importance of letters within the application process, this Analysis in Brief (AIB) presents descriptive results of a survey administered to collect information on current practices regarding the use of letters.

Methodology

In spring 2012, admissions deans from all U.S. medical schools with unique admissions offices were invited to participate in an online survey on the letters of evaluation process (n = 142). Ninety-nine admissions deans responded to the survey, including 62 public and 37 private institutions (resulting in an overall response rate of 70 percent).

The survey was developed as a part of the AAMC Admissions Initiative. Respondents were first asked to describe how letters were used for the 2012 application cycle. Respondents were asked to rate the importance of letters in various admissions decisions and the extent to which specific enhancements to letters, such as having a standardized letter of evaluation, would be useful to the letters process using a five-point Likert scale ranging from “not important” to “very important.” They also rated satisfaction with letters on a five-point Likert scale ranging from “not satisfied” to “extremely satisfied.”

Results

How do admissions committees use letters of evaluation?

All respondents reported that their medical schools use letters of evaluation in the admissions decision-making process. Eighty-five percent (n = 84/99) of schools require applicants to submit committee letters—letters written by a pre-health advisor or committee that summarize an institution’s evaluation of an applicant—or three individual letters, which represent evaluations from single letter writers.

Ninety percent of schools require admissions committee members to review letters, while 65 percent of schools include admissions staff in this process. Typically three or more people reviewed each applicant’s letters. Most respondents indicated that committee members and/or staff read at least 50 percent of the letters received during each admissions cycle; however, they spent less than 15 minutes reading each applicant’s letters.

Table 1. Reported Use and Importance of Letters of Evaluation at Stages of the Admissions Process in U.S. Medical Schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage in Admissions Process</th>
<th>Percentage of responding schools (n=99) that use letters to make a decision at each stage</th>
<th>Importance of letters to each selection decision*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Select secondary applicants</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2.2 (.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invite interviewees</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>3.8 (.83)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offer acceptances</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>4.1 (.85)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Column results based only on schools that use letters to make a selection decision at each stage: n=10 for deciding whom to invite to submit secondary applications, n=78 for deciding whom to invite to interview, and n=92 for deciding whom to admit. Ratings made on a 5-point Likert response scale ranging from 1 = not important to 5 = extremely important.
Responding admissions officers rated information from letters as “important” in deciding whom to interview and admit (Table 1). Private schools were more likely to use letters to decide whom to interview than were public schools (86 percent versus 74 percent, respectively) and rated them as more important to their decision about whom to interview (means: Private = 4.13, Public = 3.64) and whom to accept (means: Private = 4.43, Public = 3.95).

**What is measured by letters?**

The majority of respondents indicated that their schools do not provide any instructions to letters writers about letters (84 percent). About 11 percent of schools provide some guidance about the desired content of letters. Four percent ask letter writers to evaluate applicants on several dimensions and provide narrative descriptions.

Admissions officers reported that they use letters to evaluate personal competencies, particularly “red flags” related to personal competencies. More than 85 percent of respondents indicated that they use letters to evaluate: social and interpersonal skills, reliability and dependability, teamwork, integrity and ethics, service orientation, and resilience and adaptability. In addition, more than 60 percent of schools use letters to provide information about applicants’ academic “red flags,” academic readiness, and the context for interpreting UGPA and MCAT scores. Public schools (87 percent) were more likely to use letters to evaluate applicants’ academic readiness than were private schools (76 percent).

Are admissions officers satisfied with current letters?

Twenty-nine and 36 percent of participants reported being “not satisfied” or “somewhat satisfied” with the quality of information about academic readiness and personal competencies, respectively, provided by current letters. As shown in Figure 1, respondents were slightly more satisfied with letters written by pre-health advisors (mean rating of 3.5 out of 5) than with volunteer supervisors (3.2 out of 5), research advisors (3.1 out of 5), faculty (3.0 out of 5), and employers (2.9 out of 5).

How could letters be improved?

Seventy-five percent of respondents indicated that providing general instructions or requiring writers to provide ratings and narrative descriptions about a set of core competencies would make letters more useful in the future. Respondents did not think that requiring letter writers to write narratives alone or provide ratings alone would result in useful information. Seventy-four percent of respondents reported that they would adopt standardized letters of evaluation if the majority of medical schools adopted them. However, the likelihood of adopting standardized letters varied by type of school, with public schools being more likely to adopt letters if the majority of medical schools adopted them than private schools (81 percent versus 63 percent, respectively).

**Discussion**

These results highlight several important issues concerning current and future uses of letters of evaluation. First, all medical schools included in the survey use letters of evaluation in their screening processes to learn about applicants’ personal competencies. Second, more than half of admissions officers indicated being less than satisfied with the quality of information provided by letters. Three out of four schools indicated that a centralized set of guidelines would improve the usefulness of letters, and that their respective schools would be likely to use this tool during the screening process.

One explanation for these results may be related to the open-ended nature of letters of evaluation, which are difficult to assess for reliability of content. Further, the letters may conflate issues concerning current and future uses of letters of evaluation. First, all medical schools included in the survey use letters of evaluation in their screening processes to learn about applicants’ personal competencies. Second, more than half of admissions officers indicated being less than satisfied with the quality of information provided by letters. Three out of four schools indicated that a centralized set of guidelines would improve the usefulness of letters, and that their respective schools would be likely to use this tool during the screening process.

This study has limitations. Despite a high response rate, these data do not include all medical schools and not all responding schools answered all questions, leading to a small sample size for some items. Similarly, results are limited to the survey questions, which may not capture all aspects of the letters process. This study was exploratory, however, and can inform future research, such as whether the introduction of guidelines improves the quality of information collected via letters or what letter writers’ attitudes about centralized guidelines and standardized letters are.

Gathering such information could help identify strategies for improving letters in the future.

**Authors:**

Tom Geiger, M.A., Research Specialist, Admissions Initiative, tgeiger@aamc.org

Dana Dunleavy, Ph.D., Manager, Admissions Research, ddunleavy@aamc.org

**Association of American Medical Colleges**

2450 N Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20037-1127
analysis@aamc.org
www.aamc.org/data/aib

---

7. The Admissions Initiative is part of the AAMC’s ongoing efforts to support and guide the transition to competency-based medical education. For more information see: https://www.aamc.org/initiatives/admissions/