COVID-19’s Impact on Universities and Society: Holistic considerations for Admission Committee discussions by medical school admissions officers

We recognize that each school faces varied circumstances and there can be no “one size fits all” solution. We invite committees to have discussions about students’ life circumstances and the considerations that follow in order to promote consistency, equity, and fairness for all applicants.

These considerations are not intended to be used as a checklist, interview guide, applicant interview prompts, or to modify a school’s existing policies on applicant privacy and the types of information a school may properly consider in making admissions decisions. Rather, these considerations are intended to expand empathy and understanding of the current and future classes of applicants, to encourage discussion and reflection among admissions officers around the changes and challenges of this admissions cycle, and to inform the hand-off of the accepted cohort of students from Admissions to Student Affairs and Curricular Affairs so that they are aware of circumstances impacting the academic and personal readiness of the 2021 incoming class and classes in the years to come. NOTE: This guidance document will be even more relevant for the next cycle and likely the two subsequent cycles thereafter.

Consider the impact of this pandemic on our medical school applicants who may be facing:

- Personal or family member illness due to COVID
- A health condition
- Financial stress
- Food insecurity
- Housing insecurity or an abrupt change in housing
- Less than ideal study from home situations
- Loss of school-provided accommodations
- Family members dependent on them for income or assistance with other needs
- No or limited Wi-Fi
- No computer and having to engage in online learning via cell phone
- No or altered access to campus support resources such as printing, tutoring, library support, etc.
- Loss of loved ones and lack of closure due to social distancing
- Loss of mentors due to COVID-19 and/or due to social distancing
- Mental health issues and stress
- Disproportionate fatalities in their culture or community
- Direct acts of racial hatred and discrimination against people of Asian descent due to coronavirus racism
- Intimate partner violence either directly or indirectly

In a holistic review process, schools look at a potential medical student’s Experiences, Attributes, and Metrics (EAMs) to widen the lens through which we assess applicants in support of school mission and further leverage the benefits of diversity, equity, and inclusion. For the upcoming admissions cycle, and cycles to come, we must consider the downstream effects of the pandemic on students’ abilities to meet criteria for admission that is beyond their control. Below are some specific examples to help guide your thinking as an admissions officer. These examples are not meant to cover every scenario but can serve as a starting point for discussions with your admissions committee to consider.
Experiences

Community Service: School-supported or independently sought community service opportunities may be limited or non-existent. Additionally, students who are supporting themselves or family members financially and/or who have suffered employment loss may not be able to dedicate time to service activities. Students from more privileged backgrounds may have the means to create service opportunities for themselves. While we recognize some students will be able to go above and beyond during this crisis, it is critical that we continue the holistic review practice of evaluating each applicant in context.

- Not everyone can take advantage of or create service opportunities at this time
- Emphasize evaluation of interpersonal and intrapersonal competencies gained from service-oriented experiences rather than time-based measurements
- Be explicit that community service experiences will be viewed in context with the understanding that the pandemic may have had an impact
- Value candidates who create service opportunities for themselves and others without penalizing candidates who do not

Healthcare Experience: Students may not be able to meet the number of hours normally required or recommended to be considered for your school. Consider, among other possibilities, evaluating healthcare experience from the lens of competency rather than hours. Can the student describe what a physician does? Does the student have an appreciation for what a career in medicine entails?

- Add narrative prompts to your secondary application to gather this information
- Broaden acceptance of medically related experiences beyond shadowing such as being the primary caregiver for a member of the family that has COVID-19 related illness and/or being the primary language translator/interpreter/cultural broker for a member of the family when contacting their English-only speaking physician for advice and treatment (in-person or via telehealth).
- Be explicit that healthcare experiences will be viewed in context with the understanding that the pandemic may have had an impact

Research Experience: Students may not be able to meet the number of research hours normally required or recommended to be considered for your school. Consider, among other possibilities, evaluating alternative forms of experience such as submission to peer reviewed journals, independent research, or science tutoring.

Attributes

Race/Ethnicity/Member of Marginalized Community: Students may be experiencing the impacts of the pandemic in disparate ways related to their racial or ethnic identities, communities of origin, and/or sexual orientation. Committees should consider the disproportionate losses for communities of color and the disparate impacts of racism and social inequality for students. Not everyone feels safe in every context. Different communities have been impacted in various ways. Racism may impact how students navigate their continued preparation. Racial or ethnic identities and/or communities of origin resources can be found here.

Disability: Students with school-provided services, accommodations, and support may have little or no access to them during the pandemic. These include learner supports such as closed captioning, note-taking, and private testing accommodations that are difficult to provide for online courses on short notice.

Socioeconomic Status: The economic status of students and their families may have changed significantly from their last tax return and, given recent job losses, may not be reflected in the indicators on the application (EO1
or EO2). Bear in mind the means by which each indicator is derived on the AMCAS application. Students may be facing hardship that is not reported in their applications.

- EO1 and EO2 are based on parental education and occupation reported by the applicant
- First generation is self-reported
- Disadvantage is self-reported
- Family income level is self-reported
- Fee Assistance Program (FAP) eligibility is verified by AMCAS staff and is usually 300 percent of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) for household size. For this cycle, the Fee Assistance Program (FAP) will be 400 percent of FPL.

Consider adding questions to your secondary application about COVID-related changes or impacts.

**Metrics**

*MCAT Scores:* The belief that applications need to be submitted on June 1st puts unnecessary pressure on pre-medical students and with MCAT testing being delayed for some students, there will be lag time until all applications are complete. Consider the following, among others, for discussion at your school:

- Assure students that they do not need to submit on June 1st
- Use the possible delayed data transmission as an opportunity to strategize how to conduct a more holistic assessment of applicants
- Begin the review process even if you don’t have all applicant MCAT scores
- Release secondary applications to everyone who meets other requirements while clearly communicating the EAMs that have been accepted in the past. Or post your secondary application questions to your website so that students can prepare their answers while waiting for their MCAT scores in the event that some applicants experience a delay

*GPA:* Students may have some pass/fail grades and online coursework. The pandemic may adversely impact a student’s ability to achieve their normal standard of performance. Students should not feel pressured to elect graded options when they are in distressed situations. Additionally, dips in GPA add confounding factors to the evaluation of academic preparedness. See AMCAS resources on alternative grading [here](#). Consider communicating that you will accept pass/fail coursework without prejudice. See call to action [here](#). Encourage your committees to continue to view metrics within applicant context.

**Travel and Interviews**

Conducting in-person interviews may not be feasible for some applicants while creating additional stress for other applicants who are financially impacted by the pandemic. Additionally, depending on the geographic location where the student lives and where the school is located, travel may expose them to unnecessary risk of contracting the coronavirus. There may be applicants who are immunocompromised or who have vulnerable individuals in their households. Applicants experiencing symptoms who need to postpone interviews may incur additional cost if they have to reschedule travel plans.

*If you conduct virtual interviews, consider the following, among others, for discussion at your school:*

- Ensuring that all interviewers have recently taken unconscious bias training. A free online seminar from AAMC is available [here](#).
- That the interview process is structured or semi-structured and that all interviewers are asking a carefully crafted set of interview questions to reduce the risk of conscious or unconscious bias
• Asking all candidates about technological capabilities for Wi-Fi and adequate device support.
• Evaluate resources at your disposal to address these disparities in technology in advance.
• Consider technology accessibility for differently abled applicants.
• Provide all candidates guidance on how to set themselves up for a successful video interview.
• Recommendations and tips for conducting virtual interviews can be found here.
• Visiting the campus and community provides an opportunity for applicants to assess climate and inclusion, especially for underrepresented students. If conducting virtual interviews, provide opportunities for candidates to have current student interactions that typically accompany in-person interviews.
• If you are conducting virtual interviews, consider doing this for the entire season so that the process is equitable for all applicants.

**Extending the Conversation**
The hand-off from Admissions to Student and Curricular Affairs post-acceptance for this cycle and for the next two cycles should consider the importance of empathy in the holistic review process for this cycle and future COVID-impacted cycles. We must be even more intentional and robust in our communication between Admissions to their Student Affairs colleagues to raise awareness and empathy of the aforementioned challenges and circumstances faced by the incoming class that were considered during the admissions process to inform proper supports are set in place for students as needed, as early on as possible.

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