

Initiative to Transform Medical Education (ITME)

The Importance Of Assessing Behavioral Competencies in the Medical School Admissions Process



Executive summary and
recommendations

AMA Initiative to Transform Medical Education (ITME) Conference on Medical School Admissions

Adequate evaluation of desirable behavioral competencies, such as altruism, motivation for medicine, dedication, and intellectual curiosity, is a key gap in the current medical school admissions process. To enhance the assessment of applicants on all desirable characteristics (cognitive as well as behavioral competencies), the American Medical Association (AMA), in collaboration with the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC), held a conference in 2009 that led to recommendations developed specifically for three influential groups in the medical school admissions process: medical schools, admissions committees, and the medical education community.

Background

The current medical school admissions process makes good use of quantitative tools to assess the knowledge and certain other cognitive capabilities of applicants. The MCAT and GPA have been heavily relied upon by medical schools as predictors of applicants' success during medical school and beyond. Quantitative measures of applicants' academic performance and ability, especially on the MCAT, have been developed with great expertise.

Medical educators and admissions officers, however, recognize that current tools used to assess cognitive capabilities are not sufficient to capture all of the qualities needed to become a successful physician. The evaluation of applicants' behavioral competencies, such as altruism, motivation for medicine, dedication, and intellectual curiosity, is not well advanced in the current admissions process in that there are limited measures and tools to assess these characteristics. Addressing this gap is challenging but provides an opportunity to improve the assessment process of medical school applicants.

The AMA and the AAMC are committed to transforming medical education and to advancing the medical school admissions process to its highest level. Through ITME's set of recommendations for change in medical education,

issued in 2007, the AMA called for "Apportion[ing] more weight in admissions decisions to characteristics of applicants that predict success in the interpersonal domains of medicine." Similarly, the goal of the AAMC's current admissions initiatives is "to improve the selection process to create a diverse, capable, and caring physician workforce for the 21st century."

Conference

The AMA, with the collaboration of the AAMC, held the AMA ITME Conference on Increasing Attention to Behavioral Competencies in the Admissions Process on December 9-10, 2009. This invitational conference was attended by a diverse group of 30 leaders from a variety of fields whose activities influence the admissions process. Participants included deans of admissions, student affairs and medical education; pre-professional advisors; researchers; medical school faculty members; and medical students who have had the unique perspective of recently undergoing the admissions process.

The conference provided participants with information on the admissions process and a forum for strategic thinking and group interaction. Conference participants also learned about a range of efforts, including these four from the AAMC: The Fifth Comprehensive Review of the MCAT (MR5), the Holistic Review Project, the Scientific Foundations for Future Physicians (SFFP), and the Social and Behavioral Sciences Project. Other presentations described:

- The current admissions process used at public and private medical schools,
- The National Board of Medical Examiners Assessment of Professional Behaviors (APB) pilot project,
- The use of the Multiple Mini-Interview (MMI) in admissions, and
- A new medical school's perspective on developing an admissions process.

Group discussions focused on three main areas: identifying and measuring desirable applicant characteristics, strengths and weaknesses of the current admissions process, and creating a more comprehensive admissions process.

All components of the conference were guided by the four conference objectives:

1. Identify and prioritize desirable applicant characteristics;
2. Discuss how well those characteristics are currently assessed through the admissions process;
3. Identify tools and processes that can be used to measure desirable applicant characteristics; and
4. Discuss an action plan and implementation steps to enhance the medical school admissions process.

Outcomes

Objective 1: Identify and prioritize desirable applicant characteristics

Conference participants identified a range of desirable characteristics, which were categorized as cognitive characteristics, personal characteristics and demographic characteristics. There was agreement that the term “non-cognitive” did not adequately capture the depth of the characteristics that are considered important to being a successful physician. Therefore, the term “behavioral competencies” was suggested as an alternative. Whether or not behavioral competencies were intrinsic or teachable was a key point of discussion. No definitive answer emerged, but it was noted that factors such as age and experience may influence an applicant’s ability to demonstrate his or her behavioral competencies in the admissions dossier. Some behavioral competencies, such as honesty, should be assessed before entry into medical school; others should be acquired or enhanced in the medical school environment. Professionalism and professional identity, for example, are acquired during medical school, but there may be prerequisites that can be identified during the admissions process.

Objective 2: Discuss how well those characteristics are currently assessed through the admissions process

Cognitive characteristics, such as existing knowledge and the ability to acquire new knowledge, are assessed quantitatively primarily through cumulative undergraduate GPA and the MCAT total and subtest scores. Conference participants agreed that behavioral competencies are not measured as systematically during the admissions process. Behavioral competencies such as altruism, professionalism, and resilience are best assessed using qualitative tools. This requires medical schools to have valid and reliable tools to measure these elements and the adequate resources to conduct a thorough review of the entire application of each applicant. There is evidence that applicants with strong behavioral competencies are passed over in favor of applicants with higher GPA and MCAT scores.

Objective 3: Identify tools and processes that can be used to measure desirable applicant characteristics

Tools and modalities identified to assess behavioral competencies include holistic review, interview, letter of evaluation, pre-medical coursework, extracurricular activities, and written statements.

Objective 4: Discuss an action plan and implementation steps to enhance the medical school admissions process

The conference produced the following recommendations to enhance the medical education admissions process. These recommendations will be widely circulated to the three key stakeholder groups for which they were developed: medical schools, admissions committees and the medical education community.

AMA ITME Conference on Medical School Admissions

Recommendations for increasing attention to behavioral competencies in the admissions process

Medical schools

- Align the admissions committee's mission, goals and processes with those of its medical school.
- Maintain the current strengths of the admissions process.
- Promote transparency at all levels of the admissions process.
- Clarify the admissions goals and process for applicants and pre-professional advisors.
- Consider desirable behavioral competencies in the recruitment process for applicants.

Admissions committees

- Identify the behavioral competencies that are valued and ensure that they are assessed throughout the entire admissions process.
- Clarify the terminology used to denote social and behavioral science competencies.

- Bring the larger community into the admissions process.
- Encourage the holistic review of applications.
- Consider employing new tools to allow for the assessment of desirable behavioral competencies of the applicants.
- Make use of available technology, such as electronic portfolios.

Medical education community

- Encourage innovation in admissions practices.
- Disseminate admissions best practices among medical schools.
- Encourage use of shared technologies.
- Develop multi-school cooperatives to conduct research on medical school admissions processes, including the development and testing of tools to assess desirable behavioral competencies.

We wish to acknowledge the contributions of Henry M. Sondheimer, MD, Senior Director, Student Affairs and Student Programs of the Association of American Medical Colleges.

Visit the following web sites for more information:

www.ama-assn.org/go/itme

www.aamc.org/meded/admissions

www.aamc.org/opi/holisticreview/start

