

Assessing a Paradigm Shift: Perceptions of the USMLE Step 1 Scoring Change to Pass/Fail

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INTRODUCTION

The United States Medical Licensing Exam (USMLE) Step 1 scores are heavily factored for dermatology interview selection.¹ Recently, the Step 1 scoring system changed from a three-digit score to Pass/Fail on February 2020, to take effect in January 2022 at the earliest.² As Step 1 has historically served as a screening tool for application review, we distributed an IRB-approved non-incentivized survey among dermatology program directors (PD) to assess the potential impact on dermatology interview selection.

This survey was disseminated by e-mail using SurveyMonkey. Of 127 PDs who received the e-mail, 76 opened the invitation, 45 clicked through the survey, and 37 completed the survey after 10 days of collection. Most responders were from university-based residencies (70.27) represented from the regions in Question 3 (Table 1).

A majority perceived that Step 1 will not be or will only be slightly important (69.44%) for interview selection. Most perceived that Step 2 Clinical Knowledge (CK) scores should be required for interviews (71.98%). More than half of PDs perceived that their program will require Step 2 CK scores in the future (64.87%).

A majority perceived that this change will not affect their recruitment ability for competitive applicants (44.44%). More than half of respondents (56.76%) collectively perceived that this change will negatively impact applicants from 'lower-ranked' medical schools, which is defined by the National Resident Matching Program (NRMP) survey as non-highly regarded by program directors.¹ Almost half of respondents collectively answered that applicants will need to obtain additional extracurricular/extramural resources for interview consideration (43.24%). A majority were unsure whether future resident quality will be affected. In response to a follow-up survey sent to the PD's, 42.86% did not support the change from numerical score to Pass/Fail; however, 33.33% felt it would positively impact interview selection of those from underrepresented minority groups.

Our survey showed that the Step 1 scoring change may not be well received among dermatology PDs. Applicants will likely need to take Step 2 CK earlier than the Electronic Residency Application Service (ERAS) application deadline, attend audition rotations, and have additional extramural experiences to

be granted interviews; especially if they attend 'lower-ranked' medical schools. This may severely limit options for financially-disadvantaged applicants. Interestingly, over one-third believed there could be some positive impact on applicant diversity.³

Unfortunately, the assumption that removing the numerical score for Step 1 would result in an increase in diversity highlights a bigger issue. The belief that these applicants do worse on Step 1 further adds to the instances of bias and microaggression that they regularly encounter; and furthermore, continues to perpetuate the stereotype that "diverse" applicants regularly underperform on USMLE Step exams without taking into account the barriers faced by this subgroup of applicants when compared to their counterparts.⁴

Additional methods are being considered to complement Step 2 CK, such as institution-based examination, but these options will vary by institution. Our study's limitation is its response rate, likely from response fatigue of other similar surveys, which is consistent with response rates from dermatologists to other non-incentivized surveys.⁵

DISCLOSURE

Dr. Friedman is the residency program director at the George Washington University School of Medicine and Health Sciences for the Department of Dermatology.

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TABLE 1.

Multiple Choice Question and Answers from Survey		
Question	Answer	N (%)
1. What is your administrative position?*	Program Director	35 (92.11%)
	Associate Program Director	3 (7.89%)
2. What best describes your program?	University-Based	28 (70.27%)
	Community-Based	6 (15.38%)
	Community-Based/University-Affiliated	4 (10.26%)
	Military-Based	1 (2.56%)
3. What region of the united states is your program located?	New England (CT,MA,ME,NH,RI,VT)	3 (7.69%)
	Mid Atlantic (NJ,NY,PA)	6 (15.38%)
	East North Central (IL,IN,MI,OH,WI)	10 (25.64%)
	West North Central (IA,KS,MN,MO,ND,NE,SD)	2 (5.13%)
	South Atlantic (DC,DE,FL,GA,MD,NC,SC,VA,WV)	8 (20.51%)
	South West (TX,AZ,OK,NM)	4 (10.26%)
	East South Central (AL,KY,MS,TN,AR,LA,PR)	3 (7.69%)
	Rocky Mountain Region (MT,ID,WY,UT,CO,NV)	2 (5.13%)
	West Pacific (WA,OR,CA,HI,AK)	1 (2.56%)
4. What is the total number of first year positions in your program?	1-3	21 (53.85%)
	4-8	15 (38.46%)
	9+	3 (7.69%)
5. Now that usmle step 1 will be reported as pass/fail, how important will it be in selecting applicants for an interview?*	Extremely important	3 (7.89%)
	Very important	2 (5.26%)
	Moderately important	6 (15.79%)
	Slightly important	15 (39.47%)
	Not at all important	12 (31.58%)
6. Should USMLE Step 2 CK be required now for an interview?	I strongly believe it should be required	14 (35.90%)
	I believe it should be required	14 (35.90%)
	I am undecided whether it should be required	5 (12.82%)
	I do not believe it should be required	6 (15.38%)
	I strongly do not believe it should be required	0 (0.00%)
7. Does your program currently require Step 2 CK results in order to be considered for an interview?	Yes	8 (20.51%)
	No	31 (79.49%)
8. Moving forward to 2022, do you believe that your program will require Step 2 CK results in order to be considered for an interview?	I strongly believe it will be required	14 (35.90%)
	I believe it will be required	11 (28.21%)
	I am undecided whether it will be required	7 (17.95%)
	I do not believe it will be required	4 (10.26%)
	I strongly do not believe it will be required	3 (7.69%)
9. How will the change of USMLE Sep 1 to Pass/Fail impact your program's ability to recruit competitive applicants?*	It will significantly increase our program's ability to recruit competitive applicants	0 (0.00%)
	It will slightly increase our program's ability to recruit competitive applicants	1 (2.63%)
	It will not have an effect on our program's ability to recruit competitive applicants	18 (47.37%)
	It will slightly decrease our program's ability to recruit competitive applicants	12 (31.58%)
	It will significantly decrease our program's ability to recruit competitive applicants	7 (18.42%)

TABLE 1. (CONTINUED)

Multiple Choice Question and Answers from Survey		
Question	Answer	N (%)
10. How do you think the change from USMLE Step 1 to Pass/Fail will affect the diversity of applicants to your program?	It will significantly increase the diversity of applicants	6 (15.38%)
	It will slightly increase the diversity of applicants	8 (20.51%)
	It will not affect the diversity of applicants	22 (56.41%)
	It will slightly decrease the diversity of applicants	1 (2.56%)
	It will significantly decrease the diversity of applicants	2 (5.13%)
11. Do you believe that the change to USMLE Step 1 to a Pass/Fail system will decrease the likelihood of applicants from "lower ranked" schools being selected for an interview?	I strongly agree	8 (20.51%)
	I agree	13 (33.33%)
	I am undecided	10 (25.64%)
	I disagree	6 (15.38%)
	I strongly disagree	2 (5.13%)
12. Do you believe that the change to USMLE Step 1 to a Pass/Fail system will require applicants to obtain additional extracurricular resources, such as a research year, to be selected for an interview?	I strongly believe that applicants will need to obtain additional extracurricular resources	7 (17.95%)
	I believe that applicants will need to obtain additional extracurricular resources	10 (25.64%)
	I am undecided whether applicants will need to obtain additional extracurricular resources	10 (25.64%)
	I do not believe that applicants will need to obtain additional extracurricular resources	8 (20.51%)
	I strongly do not believe that applicants will need to obtain additional extracurricular resources	4 (10.26%)
13. Do you believe that the change of USMLE Step 1 to Pass/Fail will impact the future quality of residents?	I strongly believe that it will impact the future quality of residents	3 (7.69%)
	I believe that it will impact the future quality of residents	9 (23.08%)
	I do not know whether it will impact the future quality of residents	16 (41.03%)
	I do not believe that it will impact the future quality of residents	7 (17.95%)
	I strongly do not believe that it will impact the future quality of residents	4 (10.26%)
14. Do you support the decision to change Step 1 scores to Pass/Fail?*	Yes, I do support the decision to change	6 (28.57%)
	No, I do not support this change	9 (42.86%)
	I am unsure about this decision	6 (28.57%)
15. Do you believe the Step 1 score to Pass/Fail will impact interview selection that are from an underrepresented minority group (Blacks, Mexican-American, Native American, and Mainland Puerto Ricans?) If yes, to what degree?*	Yes, this will have a positive impact for these applicants	7 (33.33%)
	Yes, this will have a negative impact for these applicants	5 (23.81%)
	No, this will not have an impact for these applicants	1 (4.76%)
	I am unsure whether this will have an impact for these applicants	8 (38.10%)

*This question had 38 responses instead of 39. **Follow-up survey question with 21 responses.