Addressing Concerns and Questions From MCAT® Examinees and Medical School Applicants

The AAMC has developed the following overview based on concerns raised by some medical school applicants regarding this year’s unprecedented application cycle and how several AAMC services and programs have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, including the Medical College Admission Test® (MCAT®) accommodations, the American Medical College Application Service® (AMCAS®) the Fee Assistance Program, and the Video Interview Tool for Admissions (AAMC VITA™). The following overview is intended to help premeds, including MCAT examinees and AMCAS applicants, the advisor community, and the admissions community navigate the many changes and challenges that are part of this very unique application cycle.

The AAMC appreciates the concerns that the premed community has raised. We want examinees and applicants to know that we have established procedures and protocols to protect the health and safety of examinees and preserve the fairness and integrity of the MCAT exam. Despite the challenging circumstances of this year’s application cycle, we are encouraged by what appears to be very strong interest in careers in medicine this year. More than 35,000 students have successfully taken the exam this year, and we expect that 90% of AMCAS applications will have associated MCAT scores by mid-August.

Communications

The AAMC strives to be as transparent as possible with the premed and medical school communities as the environment evolves due to COVID-19. Because most premeds do not share their personal contact information with us until they register for the MCAT exam, social media has been the best way for us to reach a large audience quickly. It also allows us to communicate with students interested in the health professions in the early stages of their educational careers. We continue to use direct emails, our website, listserv messages, and social media to reach applicants, admissions officers, and advisors regarding MCAT testing, application cycle updates, and exam cancellations.

We regret that communication response times have been slower this year. There are a number of reasons for this. We have received a record number of calls and emails compared with past years. From March through June, the AAMC Services Contact Center handled more than 87,000 calls and emails from premed students, compared with 48,000 calls and emails during the same period in 2019. Much of this increase has been due to the unavoidable MCAT cancellations caused by the pandemic. Understandably, examinees are contacting us more often and need more assistance throughout this testing year.

Additionally, we have had a high volume of applicants confirming AMCAS transcript receipts. AMCAS has received more than double the number of transcripts for the 2021 cycle compared with previous cycles. The AAMC has provided additional transcript delivery options for institutions, which resulted in a
high number of duplicate transmissions, significantly increasing the number of transcripts for processing.

This year’s application cycle has been unpredictable for applicants as well as the AAMC. Callers have had more complex and nuanced questions. Our representatives are committed to supporting applicants along their premed journey and have devoted their time to understanding, evaluating, and solving the concerns of each individual. Therefore, the calls are taking longer to answer and the average call duration has gone up 33%. Support specialists need more time to provide the best guidance during these changing circumstances, meaning they can help fewer people per hour.

The AAMC has hired and trained more people to staff our Services Contact Center and we are working to improve response and wait times to meet rising demand. The AAMC continues to explore and adapt to new communication methods so premeds can find the most up-to-date information.

AMCAS/Transcripts

AMCAS application processing is on schedule and meeting the posted processing time frames. Prior to the start of the 2021 cycle, AMCAS provided additional transcript delivery options for institutions. This resulted in a high number of duplicate transmissions and significantly increased the number of transcripts for processing. For more information about transcripts accepted for the 2021 cycle, how to submit transcripts to AMCAS, and processing timelines, visit our website. We have researched and assessed automated transcript processing but due the varying transcript formats and credit models from more than 2,500 undergraduate institutions, it is not feasible at this time.

The AMCAS team has been retrieving transcripts from its P.O. box since May 18. Mailed transcripts take the longest to process. The AAMC posts the latest processing dates daily for applicants to reference. AMCAS has also addressed transcript FAQs, including how applicants can escalate transcript processing delays to our Transcript Inquiries team.

AMCAS received input and feedback from the admissions community, including prehealth advisors, to determine the July 10 transmission date. The community requested this date to allow additional time for applicants to complete their applications while providing enough time for medical schools to review applications. Medical schools are aware of the many challenges experienced by applicants this year and many have adjusted their policies and procedures, including deadlines, for this cycle. Applicants can access these updates on the AAMC Medical School Admission Requirements™ (MSAR®) website.

Fee Assistance Program

The AAMC Fee Assistance Program (FAP) is more comprehensive than any other health professions assistance program. Last year, we provided $11 million in assistance to aspiring physicians. FAP provides free MCAT preparation materials (see more details below), discounted MCAT registration fee, 21 free AMCAS applications, free subscription to MSAR, and up to $800 for an updated psychoeducational assessment for accommodations review, if needed. The AAMC modified the 2020 Fee Assistance Program eligibility criteria to better support our applicants during this unprecedented time, increasing from 300% to 400% of the national poverty guidelines ($104,000 for a family of four). This change is
also higher than any other health professions assistance program. The AAMC is also reconsidering FAP applications from individuals who recently experienced job loss due to COVID-19.

To ensure FAP benefits are provided to those with the greatest need, the program does not draw distinction based on dependent or independent status and requires parent financial information and supporting tax documentation as part of the application process for all applicants. An applicant who has been legally emancipated, has parents who are incarcerated, hospitalized, or institutionalized, or has other extenuating circumstances can apply for an estrangement. The AAMC will verify this information through requested documentation. Learn more on our website.

AAMC Video Interview Tool for Admissions (AAMC VITA)

The AAMC Video Interview Tool for Admissions (VITA) was created in collaboration with our member medical schools in response to COVID-19’s impact on in-person medical school interviews. Most schools are replacing in-person interviews with live virtual interviews using a variety of interactive platforms. The AMCAS application submission cycle began on May 28. We introduced the VITA interview in time for applicants to apply for accommodations if needed before schools start sending out interview invitations in August. The VITA accommodations process has been open since June 25 and coordinates with the MCAT accommodations process to minimize burden on applicants.

We know how important live interactions between applicants and schools are during the application process. Applicants want to learn more about the school’s culture and get a feel for what it would be like to spend four or five years there. Schools want to learn more about applicants’ preparation for medical school and their values and interests.

The AAMC designed the VITA interview to complement the live interview process — not replace it. The VITA interview provides information about applicants’ pre-professional competencies that enhance their success in medical school. Each participating medical school will determine how and at what stage it will add the VITA interview into its application review process. One of the primary benefits of the VITA interview is that it allows schools to refocus their live virtual interview on mission alignment and devote more time to sharing information about their schools and surrounding area with applicants.

The VITA interview does not use artificial intelligence technology (including facial recognition) or any computerized assessment. Rather, applicants selected to interview by at least one school will be recorded answering questions. The videos will then be viewed by the school admissions committee.

Much of the admissions cycle has been affected by COVID-19, including timing, testing, document processing, and interviewing. The AAMC has been working with members of the admissions community to help them adapt and make sure that they have information about applicants in a timely way that meets their workflow processes.

The MCAT Exam

When the pandemic hit, AAMC leadership and its member medical schools developed a plan for the MCAT Testing Program that focused on a few key objectives:
• Testing students safely when states and local communities began to lift their restrictions, and implementing strict social distancing protections.
• Providing students with flexibility to change their dates in response to state and local health advisories or due to an examinee’s preference.
  o We increased the number of test appointments by 50%, providing more time and testing opportunities later in the summer and fall. We knew admissions officers wanted to be flexible with their timelines and accept scores from students taking the exam later in the cycle.
• Continuing to administer the exam in testing centers to protect the integrity and fairness of the test for all examinees.

We are continuously monitoring issues related to the coronavirus pandemic and its impact on examinees and will work with our partners and members of the admissions community on our response. We will continue to post additional updates to these efforts to help students on the MCAT Coronavirus page.

Application Deadlines
Our goal during the pandemic has been to support the needs of both the medical schools and the applicants applying to them. It is important to know that each medical school carefully determines its own admission requirements, including whether it will require MCAT scores. The MCAT exam is an important and validated predictor of success in medical school. As a result, even during this difficult year, most medical schools have indicated they will consider MCAT scores in the admission process. Medical schools are being flexible about reviewing applications that do not yet include test scores. According to a recent survey of AAMC-member institutions, nearly 70% of responding schools have adjusted their application deadlines for 2021 admissions or are considering adjusting them. A similar percentage said they will accept or are considering accepting scores from dates later in the testing year. Schools are aware that all MCAT scores will be expedited for the rest of this testing season. Many medical schools will screen or interview applicants without MCAT scores.

Students can also take stock in the fact that an estimated 90% of our member medical schools use holistic review in admissions. This means looking beyond MCAT scores to consider the whole applicant and putting MCAT scores and grades in the context of applicants’ attributes, access to educational and enrichment opportunities, and lived experiences.

Social Distancing/Health and Safety Measures
The AAMC’s priority during center-based testing is keeping examinees healthy and safe. The AAMC worked with infectious disease and medical education experts and followed guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to develop strict protocols for sanitation and maintaining physical distancing at test centers. Pearson VUE requires that examinees and staff wear face masks in all areas of the test center. The CDC advises that social distancing, wearing face masks, and washing hands can help keep people safe in all public spaces.

Pearson VUE has implemented the following measures for MCAT administrations:

• Requiring examinees to acknowledge that they meet the current health requirements and that they will follow health and safety guidelines while testing
Protecting examinee health and safety begins at check-in. All examinees will be asked to fill out a short questionnaire about their potential exposure to COVID-19 before entering the testing room. Examinees will be asked to acknowledge that they have not been exposed to or tested positive for
COVID-19 or have experienced symptoms within the last 14 days. They will also be asked to confirm that they read and comply with the COVID-19 test center procedures posted on the test center door. Examinees will be asked to sign the ePad and will be informed that by signing, they acknowledge that they will follow the rules for testing and have met all the health and safety requirements for testing as posted.

- **Social Distance Requirements**
  Examinees will be seated at every other workstation under AAMC social distancing guidelines. The number of examinees may vary slightly depending on the capacity of the test center. On average and under normal operating procedures, testing rooms in Pearson VUE Professional Test Centers are designed to test 15 examinees. Social distancing will also be required at check-in and in all common areas.

- **Requiring the Use of Masks for Both Staff and Examinees**
  The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that individuals wear face masks in addition to maintaining a safe social distance in public settings. Examinees will be required to wear a face mask at all times at the test center to protect themselves and others except when eating or drinking. A face mask can be a surgical or cloth mask, including one that is homemade, as long as it covers the nose and mouth.

- **Rigorous Cleaning Between Testing Appointments**
  The test center staff will follow strict cleaning regimens after each exam session, including disinfecting all items that examinees touch during and after testing. Staff will:
  - Clean every testing workstation, keyboard, mouse, touchscreen, headphones, and note boards after use by each examinee.
  - Clean the proctor palm vein device, signature pad, and stylus after each examinee uses them.
  - Clean the check-in and proctor workstations, keyboard, mouse, desk, and chair arms regularly and between each shift change.
  - Clean the lockers and storage area after each testing session. Storage bags for phones are discarded after each use.
  - Clean high-touch points in communal areas such as door handles, door plates, and lockers at least hourly.
  - Provide tissues, soap, hand sanitizer, and paper towels for staff and examinees to use.
  - Conduct routine test center employee wellness checks (e.g., temperature checks) and protocols for identifying symptoms.
  - Utilize sneeze guards at the check-in/reception center.

We are confident in Pearson VUE’s ability to administer the MCAT exam while upholding the health and safety standards that they and the AAMC have put in place for the 2020 testing year. We continue to monitor reports of health and safety issues at testing centers, and we take these reports seriously. Any issues or concerns may be reported to mcatsafety@aamc.org.

This section has been updated to include more detailed information. (July 23, 2020)
Cancellations due to Social Distancing Requirements

When test centers resumed testing on May 29, the AAMC implemented social distancing requirements to limit the number of examinees in test centers and maintain six feet between each test taker. Several states eased restrictions on social distancing in the second half of June, and our testing partner opened up additional seats (beginning with the June 27-28 testing dates) in their scheduling system in those jurisdictions, which followed local laws but did not meet the AAMC’s expectations on social distancing. We learned of this and immediately worked with our testing partner to reestablish the AAMC’s social distancing requirements for scheduling and to ensure this issue will not come up again. No examinee has tested without social distancing in place, and Pearson VUE has agreed to maintain the AAMC’s social distancing requirements in their scheduling system and test centers for the remainder of this testing year.

Unfortunately, we learned of the system issue shortly before examinees were set to take their June 27-28 exams. Approximately 200 examinees who were scheduled to test that weekend, and approximately 600 additional examinees who were scheduled to test between July and September, also had to be rescheduled.

We know this was frustrating for the affected examinees, especially since they found out with so little time before their scheduled exams. However, we made this decision in the best interest of protecting the health and safety of all examinees scheduled to test on those dates.

The AAMC and Pearson VUE are working to help those affected by the recent cancellations. We rescheduled affected examinees for new appointments within a few weeks of when they were previously scheduled to test. We also provided affected examinees with letters so that medical schools are aware of this unexpected issue and can take that into consideration. Affected examinees who are applying through AMCAS should update their test date and resubmit their applications so that schools will know when to expect their scores. This will not delay the processing of their applications.

Online Testing

We considered if and how we could implement remote testing and concluded that it is not a viable option for the MCAT exam as it will not allow us to ensure fairness and equity for everyone and protect the integrity of the exam. It was a tough choice to make, but we still think it was the right one. We have been concerned about the potential for connectivity and technological problems. We must also keep in mind the examinees who do not have stable internet access or a quiet place to take the test for several hours at home. Online or remote testing will require a significant number of proctors and further advances in hosting and monitoring software that is not yet industry standard.

The Full-Length versus Shortened MCAT Exam

Students will still be tested on all four sections of the exam and will be responsible for demonstrating the same knowledge and skills at the same levels of difficulty as on the full-length exam. While there is a small reduction in the number of test questions in each test section, the shortened exam maintains the same format and tests the same things as the full-length test. Students will receive the same scores on the shortened exam as they do on the full-length exam. They will receive five scores: one from each of the four sections and one combined total score. Additionally, scores from the shortened exam have the same precision and are reported with the same confidence bands as scores from the full-length exam. Admissions officers will know which students took the shortened exam. They understand that some of their applicants have had disrupted learning and experienced multiple disruptions in preparing for the MCAT exam. These events will be contextualized in the admissions process and many schools are adding
a question to their secondary applications to collect information on how their applicants have been affected by the pandemic.

The MCAT Exam as a Predictor of Success in Medical School
Data show that there is a strong relationship between MCAT scores and students’ preclerkship, Step 1, and clerkship performance. MCAT scores predict how well students do in preclerkship courses like biochemistry, cellular and molecular biology, cardiovascular and pulmonary systems, and behavioral health. Data also show that MCAT scores predict how well students do in their clerkship courses, both on clinical science exams and in clerkship grades. Additionally, higher MCAT scores are correlated with higher scores and pass rates on the Step 1 exam. Also, preliminary analysis shows that MCAT scores are strongly correlated with Step 2-CK scores.

MCAT scores provide an important signal of students’ readiness for the heavy volume of knowledge they must acquire in the first two years of medical school and apply in their clinical years. MCAT scores consistently predict students’ performance better than undergraduate GPAs in medical school, although both MCAT scores and undergraduate GPAs show strong relationships with students’ performance. Using MCAT total scores and undergraduate GPAs together provides better prediction of medical student performance than using either one alone. These data are available on our website.

Medical schools use MCAT scores in different ways, and scores do much more than provide admissions officers with information about their students’ likely performance in coursework and on the Step 1 exam. Admissions officers use MCAT scores to evaluate students with more modest GPAs, identify which students may need academic support in medical school, and gain important context for students’ transcripts and GPAs.

Accommodations
The AAMC’s commitment to a diverse physician workforce means being inclusive of individuals with disabilities. These individuals have a unique perspective to offer the medical community and an important role to play in health care. The AAMC is committed to providing all individuals with an opportunity to demonstrate their proficiency on the MCAT exam, which includes ensuring access for people with disabilities in accordance with relevant law. If examinees have a disability or medical condition that they believe requires an adjustment to the standard testing conditions, we encourage them to apply for accommodations on the MCAT exam.

Reviewing applications and scheduling appointments for examinees testing with accommodations is a highly individualized process. Each application for accommodations receives an individualized and thorough review to ensure that examinees receive the testing accommodations that are needed for their demonstrated functional limitations. The AAMC then works with examinees to find out where and when they would like to test and to ensure all the approved accommodations are in place for each examinees’ test date. The process for applying for accommodations on the MCAT exam is outlined on the MCAT Accommodations homepage of the AAMC’s website. The site provides information about applying for accommodations through our online system, the required documentation, the review process, and review time frames.

Additionally, the AAMC provides financial assistance to qualifying examinees who need help paying the costs of a clinical or medical reevaluation necessary to support their application for accommodations. If an examinee has any questions or concerns about the review process or their determination, we encourage them to reach out to the MCAT Accommodation Services team.
Accommodations are generally approved for the current testing year and the following testing year. Examinees can always request an extension of previously approved accommodations, and instructions for requesting an extension are on the website. During COVID-19, the AAMC has continued to review applications for accommodations. The review process has not stopped and is continuing on the published timeframes. Additionally, we have made changes to streamline this effort, including accepting documentation, such as reconsiderations and appeals, by email instead of mail and through our online application system.

**Scheduling Process for Accommodations**
The personalized scheduling process works well in a typical testing year, which takes place over the course of weeks and months. But in this very atypical year, this system has caused delays in scheduling. It is taking longer to contact and schedule appointments for examinees and we are taking steps with our test delivery partner Pearson VUE to improve this process for examinees testing with accommodations.

As part of our scheduling process, we always plan for and reserve appointments across our testing network specifically for examinees testing with accommodations. These appointments are not available for examinees without accommodations. In addition, this year we have increased testing capacity by adding new dates and times to the testing schedule. The AAMC and Pearson VUE have added more staff to focus on helping MCAT examinees testing with accommodations. We are exploring additional solutions to schedule appointments for examinees testing with accommodations more quickly.

We have received valuable feedback and comments about the scheduling experience from students. We will continue to improve our processes and we welcome feedback examinees have about their interactions with the AAMC, our testing partner, and the exam day experience. Questions and comments can be sent to accommodations@aamc.org.

**How the AAMC Is Helping Examinees**
In-person testing helps protect groups with fewer resources — the students who may not have access to a quiet place to take the test for several hours and who may not have stable internet access or the needed hardware and software.

MCAT examinees will continue to have free access to the Khan Academy MCAT collection, including all videos and questions, through September 2021. The AAMC and Khan Academy are exploring options for how best to host these free materials in the future. The AAMC believes it is crucial that all examinees continue to have free access to resources like this.

Please read the FAP section above for more information about program benefits. Anyone who receives FAP benefits is eligible to receive all online MCAT Official Prep products for free, including all full-length practice exams. Additionally, we extended access to AAMC MCAT Official Prep products through the end of the testing year. Starting in October, the AAMC will offer the Sample Test, which will mirror the look and feel of the real exam, for free.

For more information, please read an open letter to MCAT examinees from David Skorton, MD, AAMC president and CEO, and Karen Mitchell, PhD, AAMC senior director of admissions testing service, which addresses some of the concerns outlined above.

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