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# Dermatology resident selection: Shifting toward holistic review?



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**T***o the Editor:* Dermatology is one of the most competitive specialties yet also one of the least diverse.<sup>1</sup> According to the American Association of Medical Colleges (AAMC), underrepresented in medicine (UIM) refers to racial/ethnic populations that are underrepresented in medicine relative to the general population.<sup>2</sup> When compared with other specialties, dermatology was one of the least diverse, second only to orthopedic surgery, despite evidence showing that a diverse physician workforce is correlated with increased patient satisfaction and improvement in health care disparities.<sup>1</sup> The current resident selection process places significant emphasis on “objective” measures of academic performance such as United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE) scores, AΩA membership, and grades, especially during the prescreening process where programs receive hundreds of applications for limited open positions. The 3-step USMLE was created to provide a unified path to medical licensure and its secondary use for resident selection has become an unintended consequence. In light of this and other concerns over student learning and well-being, the USMLE announced a change from reporting a 3-digit numeric score to pass/fail effective January 1, 2022.

Induction into AΩA can positively impact career trajectory and is associated with an increased likelihood of matching into the specialty of choice, a career in academic medicine, and attaining the rank of full professor, dean, or departmental chair<sup>3</sup>; however, several studies have pointed to racial disparities, with white students more likely to be selected when compared with UIM students.<sup>4</sup> Given the recent changes in USMLE score reporting and established bias in receiving AΩA designation, how then should we approach selecting the next generation of dermatologists?

Increasing diversity has become a priority within the dermatology national leadership. The authors propose reexamination of “historical” residency selection criteria with a shift to a more holistic approach to increase diversity and positively impact our future workforce. Holistic review has been implemented in >90% of medical schools; however, evidence that this has been widely adopted by dermatology residency programs is lacking. According to the AAMC, holistic review involves an individualized way of assessing an applicant’s capabilities through balanced consideration of experiences, attributes, and academic metrics. This approach still incorporates important metrics, such as grades, examination scores, publications, and clerkship performance; however, these are balanced with other important aspects and achievements, such as distance traveled (the applicant’s personal and professional journey that led them to dermatology), commitment to addressing health care disparities, leadership, volunteerism, and other life experiences.<sup>5</sup>

The authors recognize that the use of holistic review may present unique challenges, particularly in developing a comprehensive system for review of large numbers of applications and given that each residency program is unique in its mission, values, and educational training opportunities. However, dermatology as a specialty must have a robust discussion on how best to implement holistic review, with emphasis on defining the experiences, attributes, and metrics that would more strongly predict a resident’s performance and reflect their professionalism and commitment to the specialty. By taking a more holistic approach, there is potential for selecting an exceptionally diverse group of trainees and future leaders who will truly enrich our specialty.

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**Conflicts of interest**

Dr Luke serves on the Association of Professors in Dermatology (APD) Program Director Holistic Review Subcommittee. Drs Cornelius and Lim have no other relevant conflicts.

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