

2014 Survey of Letter Writer Reactions to the Letters Guidelines

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Executive Summary

In 2012, the AAMC conducted a survey of Admissions Deans to investigate the role of letters of evaluation in U.S. medical school admissions. Respondents indicated that the letters process could be improved by providing writers with a centralized set of instructions and developing a standardized evaluation (or standardized letters). In response, the AAMC developed the *Guidelines for Writing a Letter of Evaluation for a Medical School Applicant* ('Guidelines') to be used as an optional resource to facilitate the letter writing process for both writers and admissions staff.

The AAMC released the Guidelines in spring 2013. At the time of writing this report, they have been active for one full application cycle. We wanted to learn more about letter writers' reactions to the Guidelines and identify areas for improvement in the Guidelines and in our outreach approach. As such, we surveyed pre-health advisors (PHA) and people who submitted letters to the AMCAS letter writer application. Key findings from the survey are:

- The Guidelines have been communicated effectively, as 82% of survey participants were aware that they existed. However, awareness was different among pre-health advisors and other letter writers, with more PHAs (92%) being aware of the guidelines than non-PHAs (60%).
- 80% of respondents rated the Guidelines as "useful" or "very useful".
- 62% of respondents read the Guidelines once before writing their letters and 28% actively referenced them while writing letters.
- 43% of respondents changed how they write letters as a result of the Guidelines, including more information about competencies and other attributes that are important for entering medical students and improving the organization of their letters.

Given the positive reactions to the guidelines among survey respondents, the AAMC will continue encouraging writers to use the guidelines as a resource. In addition, the AAMC will encourage PHAs and premedical students to share the Guidelines with other Non-PHA letter writers, and will explore options for distributing the guidelines to a wider audience (targeted mail-outs, social media, etc.). Future work may investigate whether the content and structure of letters changed after the introduction of the Guidelines.

2014 Survey of Letter Writer Reactions to the Letters Guidelines

Introduction

In 2012, the AAMC conducted a survey to investigate the role of letters of evaluation in medical school admissions. Admissions Deans (or designees) from 99 U.S. medical schools responded to the survey (response rate = 70%). Three-quarters of respondents thought that: (1) providing letter writers with a centralized set of instructions *and* (2) developing a standardized evaluation (or standardized letters) would be “useful”, “very useful” or “extremely useful”.

After reviewing survey results and the current admissions context, the AAMC developed centralized guidelines for letter writers (rather than a standardized evaluation). This decision was made in partnership with the GSA Committee on Admissions (COA). The AAMC will re-evaluate the need for standardized letters in the future.

The AAMC convened a small working group of Pre-health Advisors and Admissions Officers to create a set of guidelines for letter writers. The group reviewed results of the 2012 survey and discussed practices for writing letters of evaluation. After a series of internal reviews, as well as review from members of the GSA, COA, and National Association of Advisors for the Health Professions (NAAHP), the AAMC released the *Guidelines for Writing a Letter of Evaluation for a Medical School Applicant* (‘Guidelines’) in spring 2013.

The present study was designed to investigate initial reactions to the Guidelines from a subset of letter writers. This report summarizes the methodology and results of the 2014 Survey of Letter Writer Reactions to the Letters Guidelines.

Method

In February 2014, we administered a 5-minute online survey to collect user reactions to the Guidelines. Survey topics included: general accessibility of the guidelines, usefulness, and suggestions for future outreach. At the time of survey launch, the Guidelines had been active for nearly one entire application cycle.

We targeted pre-health advisors (PHA) and people who submitted at least one letter to the AMCAS Letter Writer Application (LWA) in 2013. We targeted these groups because they were the intended recipients of the Guidelines and write the majority of letters of evaluation for medical school applicants.

We used two recruiting strategies. First, we created a random sample of 200 pre-health advisors from the AAMC pre-health advisor lists. Respondents were invited to the survey via email. The survey was open for two weeks. Due to a low response rate, we also distributed the survey link to the NAAHP distribution list. Second, we created a stratified random sample of 300 people who submitted at least one letter from the AMCAS Letter Writer Application (LWA) in the 2014 application cycle. The sample was stratified based on the number of letters written.¹ The survey was active for two weeks.

¹ We created 10 groups based on the number of letters submitted to the LWA in 2013 (1 letter to 10 letters). Thirty nominees were randomly selected within each of 10 groups.

In total, 223 people responded to the survey². Seventy percent of respondents were Pre-Health Advisors; 28 percent were faculty members; the remaining 2 percent were either unidentified or fell into an “other” category.

Results

How involved were respondents with the letter writing process?

Eighty percent of PHAs indicated that they wrote five or more letters during the 2014 application cycle, whereas only 54% of Non-PHAs wrote 5 or more letters. The majority of PHAs wrote committee letters (74%), while the majority of Non-PHAs (76%) wrote individual letters.

How did respondents learn about the Guidelines?

A total of 183 participants (82%) reported that they were aware of the Guidelines prior to taking the survey. However, awareness differed by participant role, with 92% of PHAs being aware of the Guidelines compared to 60% of Non-PHAs. This suggests that the AAMC has been very successful at communicating the guidelines to PHAs, but could improve outreach to Non-PHAs.

Approximately 66% of participants reported learning about the guidelines through the AAMC’s website or at an AAMC conference. Most participants viewed the guidelines in the PDF-friendly format (52%), followed by the webpage (46%) and brochure formats (45%).

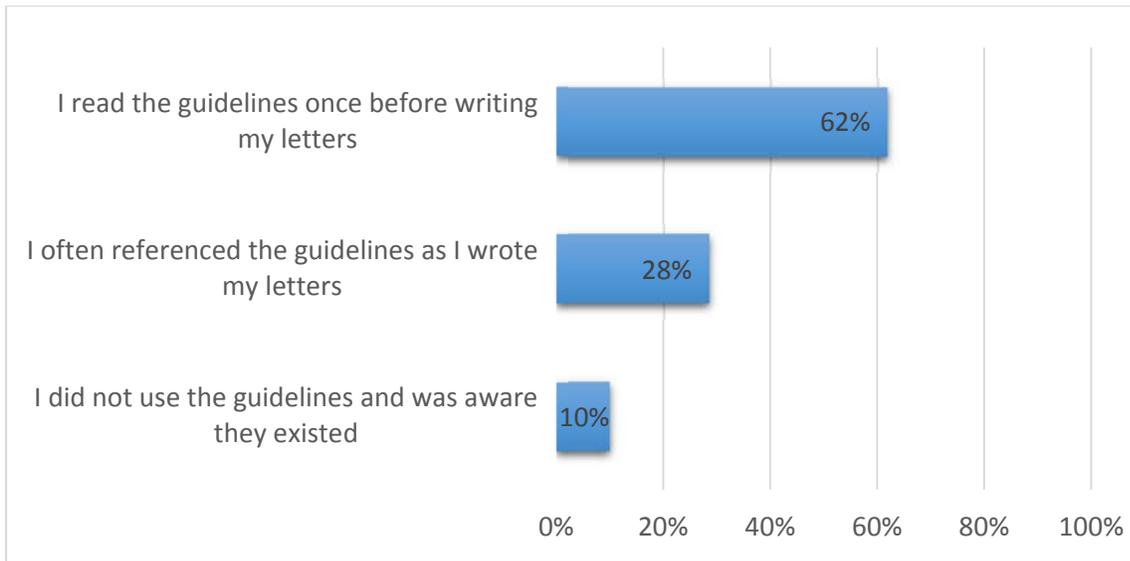
Sixty-two percent of PHAs reported that they distributed the guidelines to faculty members at their schools, but only 7% of faculty surveyed reported learning about the Guidelines through a PHA. This finding reinforces the idea that PHAs should continue to communicate the guidelines to faculty – and Non-PHAs in general – in the future.

How did respondents use the Guidelines?

Of the 183 respondents who were aware of the Guidelines before taking this survey, 62% reported that they read the guidelines once before writing their letters, while 28% referenced the guidelines as they wrote letters. Another 10% of respondents were aware that the Guidelines existed but did not use them.

² It was not possible to compute a response rate because the survey was distributed through the NAAHP distribution list. While we know how many people are included on the distribution list, we do not know whether potential respondents received the email inviting them to participate in the survey.

Figure 1. How did respondents use the Guidelines?

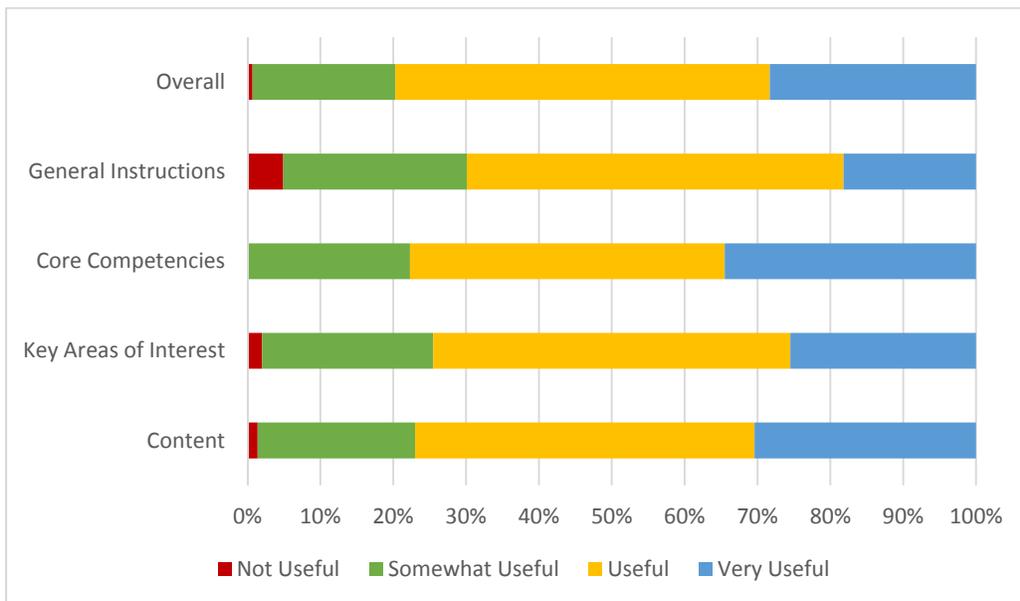


How useful were the Guidelines?

Participants were asked to rate the usefulness of various components of the Guidelines and to assess whether the guidelines changed how they wrote their letter(s). Usefulness ratings were made on a 4-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 = not useful, 2 = somewhat useful, 3 = useful, and 4 = very useful.

Usefulness ratings for each component of the Guidelines are displayed in Figure 2. Eighty percent of respondents gave an overall rating of “useful” or “very useful” to the Guidelines.

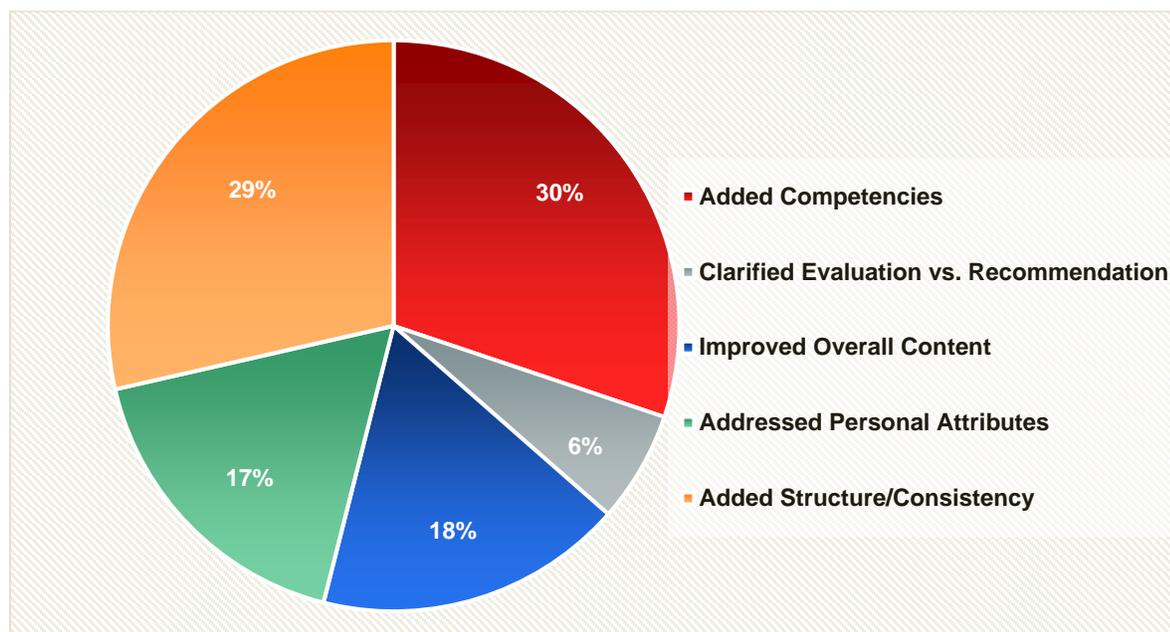
Figure 2. Ratings of Usefulness across Five Components of the Guidelines



How did the guidelines influence your letters?

Forty-three percent of respondents stated that the Guidelines changed how they would compose a typical letter. Participants were asked how the guidelines influenced their letters with an open-ended question. We reviewed the open-ended responses and identified five trends. As shown in Figure 3, the Guidelines clarified which competencies are valued by medical school admissions committees and provided a way to structure letters. Other common responses included the guidelines improving the overall content of participants' letters, highlighting applicants' personal attributes, and helping to clarify the distinction between evaluating and advocating for applicants.

Figure 3. How did the Guidelines Influence your Letter(s)?



Of the respondents who reported that the Guidelines did not change the way they wrote letters, 72% rated them as “useful” or “very useful.” In addition, 61% of them distributed the guidelines to students, or faculty members, or other individuals. Given that the majority of survey respondents were PHAs who have a great deal of experience writing letters, and that medical schools are more satisfied with PHA letters relative to other types of writers (Geiger and Dunleavy, 2013), it is possible that these individuals are already following many of the guidelines or use another effective approach.

What, if any, Supplemental Materials should AAMC Create to Support the Guidelines?

Participants were also asked for open-ended input on possible supplemental materials that might help letter writers in the future. Although responses for this question varied, 73% of respondents indicated that sample letters and/or paragraph examples of positive and negative uses of the guidelines would be a useful supplemental material.

Conclusion

The AAMC is committed to developing new tools that support medical schools in their attempts to learn about competencies more efficiently and earlier in the application process. In spring 2013, the AAMC released the Guidelines to facilitate the letter writing process for both writers and the admissions community. The purpose of this study was to investigate user reactions to the Guidelines and to identify

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ways to improve outreach and communication about them. An analysis of survey results revealed the following major takeaways:

- The Guidelines have been communicated effectively, as 82% of survey participants were aware that they existed. However, awareness was different among pre-health advisors and other letter writers, with more PHAs (92%) being aware of the guidelines than non-PHAs (60%).
- 80% of respondents rated the Guidelines as “useful” or “very useful”.
- 62% of respondents read the Guidelines once before writing their letters and 28% actively referenced them while writing letters.
- 43% of respondents changed how they write letters as a result of the Guidelines, including more information about competencies and other attributes that are important for entering medical students and improving the organization of their letters.

Given the positive reactions to the guidelines among survey respondents, the AAMC will continue encouraging writers to use the guidelines as a resource. In addition, the AAMC will encourage PHAs and premedical students to share the Guidelines with other Non-PHA letter writers, and will explore options for distributing the guidelines to a wider audience (targeted mail-outs, social media, etc.).

One limitation that should be addressed is the small sample size, which precludes our ability to make strong generalizations to all letter writers and to make meaningful comparisons across different types of letter writers. Moreover, the sample did not include student participants. This may be a key population to target in order to increase general awareness throughout the undergraduate, non-PHA and medical communities.

The survey results suggest that the AAMC has developed a useful resource for letter writers that strives to improve the efficiency of the letter writing process. Future areas to consider include developing additional outreach strategies – specifically, those that will target Non-PHAs (e.g., faculty, students) – as well as supplemental resources for letter writers (e.g., sample letters). Future research may examine whether the content and structure of letters has changed after the introduction of the Guidelines.

References

Dunleavy, D. (2012). 2012 study of letters of evaluation in medical school admissions. Unpublished Manuscript.

Geiger, T., & Dunleavy, D. (2013). Letters of evaluation: current practices in the admissions process. *Analysis in Brief*, 11(6), 1-2.