

Impact of the Step 1 Scoring Change on the Upcoming Application Cycle

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The recent transition of United States Medical Licensing Examination Step 1 to a pass–fail system was intended to promote student wellness. However, some have raised concerns for increased emphasis on subjective measures of performance.¹ Among plastic surgery residency program directors (PDs), perceptions of the change have largely been negative.² While long-term effects have been considered, in the immediate future, a mixture of students with numeric and passing scores will create a challenge for programs comparing applicants.

In total, 40% of PDs (n = 36) completed a survey about anticipated short-term effects of the scoring change. Respondants compared the use of Step 1 in applicant evaluation in the upcoming application cycle (2022–2023) with the most recent cycle (2021–2022). (See **Table, Supplemental Digital Content 1**, which displays the survey questions, <http://links.lww.com/PRSGO/C107>.)

As anticipated, numeric Step 1 scores will continue to factor into evaluations in the short term, but Step 2 scores will be of increased importance. In the next cycle, more programs will give Step 2 greater or equal weight than Step 1 (19% and 53%, respectively, up from 11% and 44%) and fewer will give Step 1 greater weight than Step 2 (28% down from 44%). Notably, a minority of PDs (11%) stated that they will no longer consider numeric Step 1 scores (**Table 1**).

In the next application cycle, twice as many of the programs surveyed will institute Step 2 cutoff scores. In the most recent cycle, 22% of PDs endorsed using a Step 2 cutoff score, while 55% anticipate having a cutoff in the next cycle. The majority of anticipated cutoff scores for Step 2 were between 221–230 (23%) and 231–240 (23%) (**Table 1**). Historically, mean Step 2 scores have been higher than mean Step 1 scores (eg, 256 versus 249 for matched plastic surgery applicants in 2020).³ Identical Step 2 cutoffs may in practice be more inclusive than prior Step 1 cutoffs.

Similar to previous reports, letters of recommendation and previous knowledge of the applicant were ranked as

Table 1. Relative Importance of Step 1 and Step 2 in Upcoming Application Cycles

	Current Application Cycle (n = 36)	Upcoming Application Cycles (n = 32*)
Relative weight of Step 1 and Step 2 for determining interview invitations		
Step 1 > Step 2	16 (44%)	9 (28%)
Step 2 > Step 1	4 (11%)	6 (19%)
Equally weighted	16 (44%)	17 (53%)
Cutoff score for Step 1		
No cutoff score	18 (50%)	17 (53%)
221–230	3 (8%)	2 (6%)
231–240	6 (17%)	4 (13%)
241–250	9 (25%)	7 (22%)
>250	0 (0%)	2 (6%)
Cutoff score for Step 2†		
No cutoff score	28 (78%)	14 (45%)
221–230	1 (3%)	7 (23%)
231–240	2 (6%)	7 (23%)
241–250	4 (11%)	2 (6%)
>250	1 (3%)	1 (3%)

*Four PDs responded that they will no longer consider numeric Step 1 scores in evaluating applicants.

†One PD did not give a cutoff score range for Step 2 in upcoming application cycles (n = 31).

Table 2. Hypothetical Scenarios for Applicant Evaluation and Relative Importance of Research

Question	PD Response (%)
Do you anticipate that research experiences like research fellowships will carry more significant weight than in the past?	19 (53)
With comparable Step 2 scores, will an applicant with a low Step 1 score be at a disadvantage relative to an applicant with a pass for a Step 1 score?	17 (47)
With comparable Step 2 scores, will an applicant with a high Step 1 score be at an advantage relative to an applicant with a pass for a Step 1 score?	25 (69)

the most important factors for applicant evaluation. (See **Table, Supplemental Digital Content 2**, which displays rankings of factors, <http://links.lww.com/PRSGO/C108>.)^{4,5} Half of PDs (53%) stated that research would carry greater weight in the next cycle (**Table 2**). When presented with hypothetical scenarios, a strong Step 1 score remained beneficial to applicants, whereas a low Step 1 score may not be detrimental in many cases. While 69% of PDs answered that an applicant with a high Step 1 score would be at an advantage over an applicant with a pass, only 47% of PDs stated that an applicant with a low Step 1 score would be at a disadvantage compared to a pass (**Table 2**).

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This study suggested a gradual shift in emphasis from Step 1 to Step 2, although some programs may immediately stop considering Step 1. Importantly, over half of PDs would not view a low Step 1 score negatively. For these programs, a low Step 1 score may be considered similar to a pass. Those who performed strongly on Step 1 will benefit in most cases from having taken the examination before the switch.

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DISCLOSURE

The authors have no financial interest to declare in relation to the content of this article.

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