Comments on the 2018 Ottawa Consensus Statement - An Admissions Officer’s Point of View

Hana Lee[1]

Corresponding author: Ms Hana Lee hana.lee@utoronto.ca
Institution: 1. University of Toronto
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Abstract

Patterson et al. (2018), after a multi-stage consultation of scholars in the health professions and education communities, presented an updated Ottawa consensus statement, in which they sketch out four critical issues and ten recommendations to advance the field of recruitment and selection. There is no question that this work cannot be achieved in isolation. A symbiotic relationship among health education scholars, admissions committees and admissions officers will bolster this knowledge mobilization process. I argue that admissions officers’ role is to facilitate this collaboration and modernization of selection criteria and methods using their tacit knowledge, experience, and networks.

Keywords: 2018 Ottawa Consensus Statement; medical school admissions; high-stakes selection; admissions officer

Introduction

Recruitment and selection in the health professions education area is increasingly becoming an insurmountable feat for many admissions committees. Not only are the involved personnel challenged with an increasing number of applications each cycle, but the profiles of candidates are becoming more “standardized” with each passing year as if there is a socialized universal definition of an ideal candidate.

As applicants become indistinguishable, both in an academic and non-academic sense, admissions committees often increase their scrutiny on the merits of their selection criteria and methods. Yet, ironically, committees often find themselves gravitating toward familiar admissions requirements, such as academic achievements, aptitude tests, and personal essays, despite a lack of critical consensus on their predictive validity. This reliance on metacultural elements unintentionally abates differentiation in the candidate pools and, in some contexts, intensifies representation and exclusion issues in their academy.

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recommendations to advance the field of recruitment and selection. A concerted effort is needed to "translate [...] research findings into practice" (Patterson et al., 2018). There is no question that this work cannot be achieved in isolation. A symbiotic relationship among health education scholars, admissions committees and admissions officers will bolster this knowledge mobilization process. I argue that admissions officers’ role is to facilitate this collaboration and modernization of selection criteria and methods using their tacit knowledge, experience, and networks.

Professional Identity of Admissions Officers

To begin, it is important to describe the professional identity of admissions officers. The admissions officers are the non-academic, professional staff who oversee the operational and service-oriented aspects of recruitment and selection in the academy. While many in the profession are beginning to receive formal education in higher education and college counselling, most obtain their training through direct field experiences. As admissions officers amass their expertise, they may become influencers that can draw on their professional experiences and indirectly shape the advancements in the field. This is an important consideration, as admissions officers are often the very first and frequent contacts that applicants have with their respective health professions education programs.

Key Issues and Priorities

While Patterson et al. (2018) discuss four broader issues in the 2018 Ottawa Consensus Statement, my goal is to highlight select areas that admissions officers will find the most successes in shaping while the field moves to implement "more sophisticated evaluation approaches and theoretical frameworks."

First, admissions officers often struggle with the adverse effects of the selection process’ overreliance on the academic achievements, namely grade point averages (GPA). Although there is a strong consensus on the predictive validity of scholastic achievements, GPAs mostly inform the selection committees on the candidates’ mastery of their coursework and not of their "domain-general abilities" (Niessen & Meijer, 2017). Exacerbating the issue is the informal grade inflation practices deployed by many undergraduate programs in the higher education sector. Despite the well-intended rationale, such practices add undue pressure on premedical students and admissions personnel who are often asked for the programs and schools that will maximize applicants’ chances of getting into medical schools. Students with access to various forms of social capital and resource will have an advantage over their peers in their knowledge of and ability to select courses, programs, and even institutions that will maximize their admissions chances.

With access to big data, there is now an opportunity to better understand and address the issues of the field's growing dependence on the GPAs. With the guidance of education scholars and selection committees, admissions officers across jurisdictions may collect large-scale datasets on applicants' academic achievements. Using this data, committees may be able to determine a threshold GPA that may predict applicants’ chances of succeeding in medical school and allow committee to focus their evaluation efforts on broader admissions criteria. To facilitate such collection and analyses of data across schools and education systems, admissions officers must play a role in supporting discussions and referring education scholars to their professional colleagues to establish data sharing agreements with partner institutions within various education systems.

Second, the consensus statement addresses the importance of using evidence-based approaches when broadening selection. While methods such as the multiple-mini interviews and situational judgment tests show greater validity in predicting "inter- and intrapersonal attributes" (Patterson et al., 2018), other selection methods, including personal statements, CVs, and letters of recommendation, do not. If the common experience across the field is that there is little evidence of these methods’ effectiveness, the selection committees should consider alternative tools. For
example, selection committees in other professional areas, including the business and engineering faculties at the University of Toronto, have begun to use asynchronous online interview and essay tools to assess candidates' personal attributes and address issues around coaching and plagiarism.

As limited analyses exist on the effectiveness of the asynchronous online video interview tool, selection committees may consider running a pilot study prior to implementation to ensure that the tool assesses candidates on the desired personal attributes. Admissions officers can enhance the outcomes of the pilot and subsequent implementation by recruiting a diverse group of test applicants and raters from various specialties, training levels, experiences, and demographic backgrounds. Analyses involving diverse perspectives will ensure the selection committees are selecting a method that unfairly advantages or disadvantages any groups of applicants. To better assist implementations involving new technology platforms, admissions officers must also enhance their digital fluency.

Introduce the Changes in Incremental Steps and Communicate Broadly

In order to monitor the specific impacts of each changes in the selection criteria and methods, selection committees often introduce the changes in incremental steps. Admissions officers must harness their administrative expertise and act as the bridge between the education scholars and selection committees to ensure that feedback among all stakeholders are transparently shared. The admissions officers must additionally communicate these changes with applicants and, where applicable, the broader community to ensure that the advancements in the field does not unintentionally exclude or disadvantage any groups during the high stakes process.

Take Home Messages

- Academic landscape is rapidly changing, and selection committees will face increasing pressure from stakeholders within and outside of the academy to modernize their selection criteria and methods to recruit and admit top candidates.
- A symbiotic relationship should be established between education scholars and selection committees to engage in continuous dialogue about the ideal selection criteria and methods, knowledge translation, and impacts assessment.
- Admissions officers can play a more prominent role in facilitating the collaborative efforts and advancements in the field by offering tacit knowledge, experience and networks.
- Selection committees should consider implementing major changes in incremental steps to minimize risks for the academy and applicants and consider diverse perspectives in piloting new methods.

Notes On Contributors

Hana Lee is the Associate Registrar, Admissions and Registration for the MD Program at the Faculty of Medicine, University of Toronto, Canada. She has over a decade of experience in the areas of higher education admissions and student success.

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Appendices

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