At the American Physician Scientists Association (APSA), we envision a world where the best and brightest are able to freely and equitably disseminate the products of their knowledge, creativity, and innovation.

The number of under-represented minorities (URiM) applicants has stagnated over the past several years, despite the overall growth the general medical applicant pool (1), and URiM are disproportionately overrepresented in national poverty rates [1]. Recent events have also disproportionately affected pre-medical students who are facing financial insecurity. Additionally, the necessary closures of businesses and academic enterprises to protect public health has robbed trainees of opportunities, including participation in paid internships and research and clinical experiences that are critical aspects of preparing for the medical admissions process. For some, these are also avenues enabling independence, support, and necessary financial stability within their family unit. While the AAMC has modified their Fee Assistance Program (FAP) eligibility requirements, the new eligibility criteria take into account 2019 income, which may not be reflective of the additional financial strains created by recent events. Furthermore, this FAP applies to primary applications and for many programs is the basis for issuing a secondary fee waiver. Unfortunately, some schools only provide secondary application fee waivers if the student is a part of the FAP.

Below, we propose measures that programs can adopt to alleviate this untimely financial strain and empower applicants who are financially insecure and/or URiM.

Specifically, we are asking programs to commit to the following actions:

1. **Publish explicit instructions for fee waivers on program websites.** Many students with financial insecurity are in need of secondary fee application waivers, regardless of whether they qualified for an AAMC primary application waiver. We thus ask dual-degree programs to commit to transparency on how these waivers are granted and to encourage applicants in need to contact the program administrators.

2. **Protect student privacy.** It is essential to respect the privacy of applicants. We ask applicants’ financial status and/or waiver requests not be included in materials available to the admissions committee. Many trainees fear overt exclusion or unintended biases that are associated with requesting a fee waiver. The fear of retribution and exclusion from disclosure is a lived experience for those currently applying to dual-degree programs.

Our community must be open, transparent and proactive to ensure that these fears and lived experiences are addressed with empathy; in doing so, we can ensure applicants who are experiencing financial insecurity and/or identify as an URiM do not feel alienated or self-selected from our career path (3). Diversity can and does increase the impact of scientific work, therefore, diversity needs to be represented in all forms throughout the physician-scientist pathway (4-6). These particular hardships speak to an
applicant’s resiliency and their ability to succeed in this long trajectory. These trainees’ lived experiences provide invaluable perspectives and services to the world of research and medicine.

The first step in this process is to listen empathetically and learn unapologetically. We call on our physician-scientist community to move into action to support trainees who were disproportionately impacted by the ongoing pandemic and the emotional and physical turmoil accompanying the current socio-political landscape.

**Call to Action:** To increase transparency for applicants, assuage applicants’ fears of the repercussions of financial information disclosure, and demonstrate commitment to diversifying the physician-scientist workforce, we call on dual-degree programs to affirm receipt of this letter and agree to thoughtful, empathetic review regarding the above action items. We hope that during this time of instability in our community, we can stand firm in our tenacious optimism and ensure rigorous recruitment of the nation’s best and brightest trainees - no matter their circumstance (6-7).

Signed,

Executive Council & Committees  
American Physician Scientists Association
References


