

An MSPE primer

Tuesday, April 14, 2009

There are many pieces of information a residency program uses to evaluate a candidate. The ERAS® application, the CV, letters of recommendation, grades, board scores, and information gleaned from the interview all play a big role in the process. Another important piece is the Medical Student Performance Evaluation (MSPE).

The MSPE — or it's previous incarnation, the Dean's Letter — has been a part of medical school for decades. Not to be confused with a letter of recommendation, the MSPE is a synthesized evaluation of a medical student's academic performance and professional attributes. The document is written in the fall of your fourth year and is used by residency programs to objectively compare your performance with that of your peers.

Schools have differing curricular models and grading systems which make it difficult for residency programs to decipher how well a student has performed during both their basic science years and core clinical rotations. There have been efforts in the medical education community since the late 1980s to standardize the evaluative information provided to residency programs about students.

Prior to these efforts, most Dean's Letters, as they were called, made all students sound as if they were poised to win a Nobel Prize and would make nothing but the finest physicians. The letters more often served as a tool to advocate for a student rather than a pure evaluation of performance.

Since those days, the MSPE replaced the Dean's Letter and evolved into its current format, which seeks to provide a well-rounded view of a medical student's attributes. Released in 2002, [comprehensive guidelines](#) for the preparation of the MSPE are provided by the AAMC that encourage schools to include the same type and level of information about all students. The goal of this standard evaluation model is to level the playing field and allow program directors can make better informed decisions.

The MSPE generally consists of six sections:

Identifying information. This section contains your legal name and the name and location of your medical school.

Unique characteristics. This is usually a narrative statement about any distinctive qualities you may have including demonstrated leadership, research activities, and community service involvement during medical school. It's also the place where your MSPE-writer can provide information about any hardships you may have encountered.

Academic history. This section provides your dates of matriculation and expected graduation, participation in joint degree programs, as well as extensions, gaps, or any remediation or adverse actions that may have occurred during your education program.

Academic progress. This section is typically the meatiest portion of the document and includes information about your academic performance and your professional attributes throughout medical

school. There are narrative portions about overall performance in the preclinical curriculum and in each of the core clinical clerkships and elective rotations completed to date. There is also narrative information about softer skills and qualities such as enthusiasm, initiative, as well as compatibility with faculty, peers, health care team members, and patients.

Summary. The summary section includes a summative assessment that compares your performance to those of your medical school peers. This comparison should be based on your school's evaluation system and includes information about any school-specific categories used to differentiate among students.

Appendices. There are five appendices; the first four of which provide graphic representations of your performance relative to your classmates in each basic science course, in each core clerkship, in relation to your professional attributes, and your overall performance in medical school. The final appendix is a medical school information page which provides the specific or unusual characteristics of your medical school which will help program directors understand the information about you within the context of how your school functions. It is the "key" to understanding the evaluation system at each school.

A [Professionalism Assessment Form](#) is also available for adoption or adaptation by medical schools desiring to assess and report further on the professionalism attributes of their students.

Each school's student affairs dean is responsible for every MSPE the school produces, but he or she may well share the writing of the MSPEs among several faculty members. Most schools follow the AAMC guidelines about what information to provide, but each school has its own process for preparing the document.

Initiating your MSPE usually entails meeting with your student affairs dean or your school's designated writer. The goal of the meeting is to ensure your evaluation reflects personal insight into your performance. This meeting is also a good opportunity for your dean to check in with you about your career goals and make sure you are on track as you move toward applying for residency. You usually need to provide a copy of your CV and possibly your personal statement. Some schools may also recommend that you bring the list of programs you're considering since the MSPE meeting often turns into a career advising session. Once your MSPE has been written, you usually have a chance to review it and correct any factual errors. You will not be able to edit any of the evaluative statements. Once completed and reviewed, the MSPE is delivered to programs through the Electronic Residency Application Service (ERAS®) and has a standard release date of October 1. Even if you're not applying to all of your programs through ERAS, schools will not release the document until October 1. Until 2012 the release date was November 1 but concerns were raised by residency programs over the document being released too late in the process to be of much use, so the date was changed to the earlier release.

In fact, a study of residency programs' selection criteria found that the MSPE was ranked lowest of all criteria by the program directors surveyed. The authors suggest this is possibly due to the late release or the variability in quality of the MSPE across institutions. It also may be less useful in the early stages of the resident selection process since some of the information included can be acquired from other sources, such as ERAS, letters of recommendation, and the medical school transcript. However, it remains useful as a summary document while programs interview and begin ranking applicants.

As you gear up for the residency application process, ensure you understand your school's process for preparing the MSPE. Ask when you can start making an appointment with your dean to begin the process, what resources you need for the meeting or to assist in the preparation (e.g., CV, personal statement), how you should submit your MSPE to programs not participating in ERAS, and about the general timeline for preparation. Start early — the more information you have about the MSPE and steps to take at your school, the better prepared you'll be.

- **Jeanette L. Calli, M.S.**

Program Manager, Careers in Medicine

Jeanette has a master's degree in higher education with a specialty in career development counseling. She has been working with medical schools and students on career planning and specialty choice for 11 years and is primarily responsible for developing CiM content, day-to-day management of the program.