

Self-reported Disadvantaged Status Question Update

Background

The self-reported disadvantaged status (SRD) question in the American Medical College Application Service® (AMCAS®) application was created over a decade ago. The question was designed to provide medical school applicants an opportunity to describe aspects of their background and experiences that may not be easily presented in other parts of the application. It was also intended to provide admissions committees with information to better understand the context of an applicant’s journey and to assist with mission alignment through holistic review.

In 2019, the AAMC became aware of research highlighting some limitations of the question (e.g., unclear guidance, negative reactions to the term “disadvantaged”). As a result, a working group comprised of AAMC staff and admissions leaders from MD-granting medical schools explored the appropriateness of the current wording and of the guidance provided for the question itself in the AMCAS application to determine whether it should be revised.

Between spring 2020 and winter 2021, this group used qualitative (i.e., interviews with medical school applicants and admissions officers) and quantitative (i.e., years of AMCAS applicant data) methods to examine how applicants interpreted and responded to the SRD question in the AMCAS application. Results confirmed that many applicants were confused by the instructions, typically wrote about financial aspects of disadvantage only, and that many felt demeaned by the term “disadvantaged.” However, admissions officers and applicants also saw value in the intent behind the question and the opportunity for it to provide rich contextual information about an applicant’s journey and how their lived experiences align with schools’ missions and/or the communities they serve.

As such, the working group recommended the question be retained but revised to use updated terminology and to improve instructions and guidance to applicants. Similar versions of the final updated SRD question were piloted with the Summer Health Professions Education Program and in the supplemental Electronic Residency Application Service application, which both received generally positive feedback from applicants and decision makers.

How will the question be updated in the AMCAS application?

Beginning in the 2024 AMCAS application cycle, the self-reported disadvantaged status question will be replaced with a question, *Other Impactful Experiences* (see pages 3-4 for the complete question and corresponding help text). Revisions to the question were guided by research and include:

1. Updated terminology to avoid unintentionally offensive language (e.g., removing “disadvantaged”)
2. Improved instructions and examples to improve clarity for applicants and to assist them with providing information that is valuable to admissions officers (e.g., responding “yes” and providing an essay are optional, a more explicit definition, and examples of prior experiences that are relevant)

How should the question be used by medical schools?

The *Other Impactful Experiences* question in the AMCAS application is designed to help promote holistic review by providing admissions officers with a snapshot of applicants’ lived experiences. It will help

contextualize other aspects of the applicant's experiences and/or identify applicants whose lived experiences align with the school's mission and/or the communities they serve.

Closer to the 2024 AMCAS application cycle opening, the AAMC will provide additional background and guidance materials on the appropriate use of the *Other Impactful Experiences* question, as well as complete training related to holistic review and unconscious bias to ensure the information is being reviewed through an equitable lens.

Is there guidance for applicants about if or how they should answer this question?

This question is designed to give applicants the opportunity to provide additional context about the challenges they may have experienced during their lives.

This question is intended for those applicants who have had impactful life experiences and who have faced or overcome challenges in a variety of areas such as family background, financial background, community setting, education, religion, or other life experiences. The experiences described can be from any point in an applicant's lifetime and do not need to be related to the field of medicine or health care. Medical schools do not expect all applicants to answer "yes" to this question and providing an essay to this question is optional. Some applicants may not have experiences that are relevant to this question. Other applicants may not feel comfortable sharing this level of personal information in their application.

How does information gathered from this question compare to information collected elsewhere in the application?

There is no particular way to prepare responses to this question compared to information collected elsewhere in the application. For some applicants, their impactful experience(s) may be core to their personal and professional goals, so they may want to weave it into other parts of their application. For other applicants, their impactful experience may provide important contextual information but is not central to their professional goals, so they may want to emphasize other information in their personal statements or other parts of the main AMCAS application while still answering this question.

Other Impactful Experiences

Below is the relevant section as it will appear in the AMCAS application.

Other Impactful Experiences

To provide some additional context around each individual's application, admissions committees are interested in learning more about the challenges applicants may have overcome in life. The following question is designed to give you the opportunity to provide additional information about yourself that is not easily captured in the rest of the application.

Please consider whether this question applies to you. Medical schools do not expect all applicants to answer "yes" to this question. This question is intended for applicants who have overcome major challenges or obstacles. Some applicants may not have experiences that are relevant to this question. Other applicants may not feel comfortable sharing personal information in their application.

Have you overcome challenges or obstacles in your life that you would like to describe in more detail? This could include lived experiences related to your family background, financial background, community setting, educational experiences, and/or other life circumstances.* [How do I know if I should answer "yes" to this question?](#) [This link in the application will direct to the help text – see page 4 for details.]

[Response required]

- Yes
- No

Please use the space below to describe why you selected "yes." [This text and the textbox only appear if "yes" is selected for this question.]

1325 characters left of 1325

Other Impactful Experiences Help Text

[This pop-up text will appear if an applicant selects “How do I know if I should answer “yes” to this question?”]

Other Impactful Experiences Description

The following examples can help you decide whether you should respond “yes” to the question, and if so, what kinds of experiences you could share. Please keep in mind that this is not a fully inclusive list and any experiences you choose to write about should be ones that directly impacted *your* life opportunities.

Example Experiences

- *Family background:* serving as a caretaker of a family member (e.g., siblings, parent/guardian), first generation to college
- *Community setting:* rural area, food scarcity, high poverty or crime rate, lack of access to regular health care (e.g., primarily used urgent care clinics or emergency room, no primary care physician)
- *Financial background:* low-income family, worked to support family growing up, work-study to pay for college, federal or state financial support
- *Educational experience:* limited educational opportunities, limited access to advisors or counselors who were knowledgeable/supportive of higher education requirements
- *Other general life circumstances* that were beyond your control and impacted your life and/or presented barriers (e.g., religion)

Writing Instructions

- *Select the most impactful experiences.* Describe the challenge(s) or hardship(s) you consider most impactful in your life.
- *Write about how experiences impacted your life.* Write about any topics you deem important to discuss, including information that might be mentioned elsewhere in your application (e.g., your personal statement). You can use the space provided in this question to further elaborate on those topics, if desired.
- *Use a narrative style format.* Describe your impactful experience(s) in a narrative format to help admissions committees understand your story but be mindful of the 1,325-character limit.