

To: All SOM Medical Students, Class of 2023

From: Drs. Franks, Scott, Leuck, and Flynn

Re: School of Medicine Comments on USMLE Step 1 Pass/Fail Decision

Date: February 29, 2020

As you know, the USMLE Step 1 exam is about to change from an exam which is scored to being pass/fail. We understand that the change in scoring of this exam may be confusing to you and cause concern and uncertainty. This message should reflect what has already been communicated to you by the SOM leadership. We strongly believe that this change is long overdue and is in all medical students' best interest, but understand that this change has great significance for you. We also know that there are concerns about the possible "ripple effect" regarding the role of Step 2, how residency programs will "screen" applicants without a Step 1 score, etc. We are closely monitoring all of these changes, and have anticipated some of your questions with answers addressed in the FAQs included below.

Prior to the unexpected announcement that the USMLE Step 1 exam would change from a scored exam to one that is pass/fail, the school structured a six-week period that all students would be able to study for and take the exam in the Fall of 2021. This time frame falls prior to the earliest date of anticipated change to pass/fail scoring. We will maintain this component of our curriculum and all of our students will have the option to sit for the scored exam during this period.

However, some of you may wish to consider delaying sitting for Step 1 until the pass/fail policy starts. The [official announcement](#) regarding this change indicates the change to pass/fail will "take effect no earlier than January 1, 2022 with further details to follow later this year." We will monitor the timing of this transition and if the change is not substantially delayed from this initial projection, you will be able to request delaying Step 1 until the pass/fail scoring is implemented. We will also provide individualized counseling for each student to help in the decision of when to take the exam.

USMLE Pass/Fail FAQs

What is the SOM's position on the changes?

The USMLE licensing exams are designed to determine a minimum knowledge competency for the practice of medicine. They were not designed as a selection test for residency even though they have been increasingly used for this purpose, creating disproportionate emphasis on the exam. Medical student educators have advocated for a change in scoring to pass/fail for many years, recognizing the emphasis on this score is not aligned with the purpose of the exam and creates tremendous and unrealistic pressure for students. As outlined by the National Board of Medical Examiners, the status quo was unacceptable. The SOM is supportive of the move toward holistic review of candidates within graduate medical education and supports this step as the first of many that will be required to meet this standard.

How will the SOM move forward in response to these changes?

The SOM is well positioned to present our students as strong candidates for residency training programs. In our deliberate choice to develop a curriculum both for today, but critically for the future, we have been able to design distinctive training and experiences that embed opportunities for all students. These include an active, learner-centered curriculum, robust clinical skills and communication training, an innovative longitudinal clerkship curriculum occurring earlier and giving students the opportunity to build on their clinical training and experiences, a required research focus and experience for all students, as well as efforts to create well-rounded professional candidates and support for their success through our physician development coaching program, career advising, and other supports. Our deliberate choices are leading national trends in anticipating the change to a pass/fail USMLE Step 1 exam. We will continue to anticipate these trends and be in dialogue regionally and nationally regarding the changes residency programs will need to make toward more holistic review of candidates. We also will remain flexible in our ability to respond to any opportunities to leverage and promote the success of our students in the match.

Is all the pressure going to now shift to Step 2?

We do not know how each individual residency program will move forward in their review of applicants. What we do know is that our students will be well prepared to take Step 2 CK and CS based on extensive clinical experience, extensive practice and assessment of clinical skills, and extensive practice with multiple administrations of exams utilizing NBME questions on Phase 2 LIC exams. Students also have ample built in time to study for and take Step 2 well before they apply for residency positions. We require students to complete the USMLE Step 2 CS and Step 2 CK

exams by December 1st of their last year, but there is no restriction on taking the exam earlier. Our Phase 3 schedule intentionally provides the flexibility for students to choose when they take their Step 2 CS and CK exams. We are committed to following the trends in holistic review for residencies to inform the decision made within the SOM to promote your success in the match.

More information about the change to pass/fail can also be found on the USMLE website (<https://www.usmle.org/usmlescoring/faq.html>); several of their FAQs are excerpted here:

What went into the process and who was involved in the decision to change Step 1 score reporting from a 3-digit numeric score to solely pass/fail outcome?

This decision by the USMLE co-sponsors (FSMB and NBME), have been discussed for years, culminated in a year-long process that included the Invitational Conference on USMLE Scoring (InCUS). In reaching this decision, the USMLE co-sponsors engaged educators, medical school leaders, regulators, examinees and members of the public through surveys, presentations at national meetings, webinars, podcasts, etc.

Various score reporting options were considered, including maintaining the status quo (i.e., no change to score reporting). The views of all stakeholders were considered throughout the complex score reporting debate. Specific consideration was placed on supporting the educational engagement and overall experience of medical students – and on increasing the dialogue about how multiple assessments of competency could be used by stakeholders in medical regulation and medical education.

Why is score reporting for Step 1 changing from a 3-digit numeric score to solely a pass/fail outcome?

The USMLE co-sponsors believe that changing Step 1 score reporting to pass/fail can help reduce some of the current overemphasis on USMLE performance, while also retaining the ability of medical licensing authorities to use the exam for its primary purpose of medical licensure. The USMLE co-sponsors also believe that moving to a pass/fail Step 1 while retaining a numeric score for Step 2 Clinical Knowledge (CK) represents a positive step toward systemic change, while limiting large-scale disruption to the overall educational and licensing environment.

This change is an important first step toward facilitating broader, systemic changes to improve the transition from undergraduate to graduate medical education. We

will remain actively involved in the additional work sparked by InCUS, of the broader systems review of the UME-GME transition undertaken by the organizations in the Coalition for Physician Accountability.

How will I differentiate myself from others if my Step 1 examination does not have a score?

The USMLE co-sponsors recognize that an ideal system for evaluating candidates for residency is holistic. This system should feature trusted quantitative and qualitative assessments of a candidate's competencies and unique characteristics. In such a system, USMLE would serve as just one of these objective measures and be weighted appropriately. We feel our curriculum and your role in it offers us several key areas on which to focus when we advocate for each of you as you move forward with your residency program selection. We know that this is more reflective of you as a future resident and physician than a three-digit number on an exam. We anticipate "educating" residency programs of the essential attributes you will bring to their program!

More information can be found at: <https://www.usmle.org/inCus/>