

United States Senate

December 19, 2019

COMMITTEES:
FINANCE
HEALTH, EDUCATION, LABOR,
AND PENSIONS
ENERGY AND NATURAL
RESOURCES
VETERANS' AFFAIRS
JOINT ECONOMIC COMMITTEE

David Skorton, M.D.
President and Chief Executive Officer
Association of American Medical Colleges
655 K Street, NW Suite 100
Washington, D.C. 20001-2399

Dear Dr. Skorton:

For students with disabilities, testing accommodations provide an opportunity to level the playing field with their peers who do not have a diagnosed disability. Whether taking a college entrance exam such as the SAT or the ACT, or a graduate entrance exam like the LSAT, GMAT, or MCAT, students with disabilities deserve an equal opportunity to succeed in postsecondary and graduate-level education.

For that reason, I was disheartened to recently learn that, among the major postsecondary and graduate-level entrance exams, the MCAT exam is perhaps the most difficult for students to get an accommodation for their disability. Despite the fact that approximately 14% of all students enrolled in K-12 education have a disability under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)¹, only .3% of students who took the exam from 2011-2013 received accommodations for a disability². It is difficult to believe that a mere .3% of exam takers had a disability that required an accommodation when so many students enrolled in our schools have a certified disability.

Take students with dyslexia as an example. Dyslexia is the result of an unexpected difficulty in reading for an individual who has the intelligence to be a much better reader, most commonly caused by a difficulty in the phonological processing, which affects the ability of an individual to speak, read, and spell³. Dyslexia is not correlated to an individual's cognitive abilities or intelligence, and the science tells us that dyslexic students use an inefficient system to read, which makes reading slow and labor intensive⁴. To establish an equal playing field with their peers, a student with dyslexia may simply need extra time on an exam or, depending on the severity, text-to-speech assistive technology that is easy to use and based on science, and allows a student's cognitive abilities to shine through.

This is important in the context of the MCAT exam because we know that dyslexia does not affect cognitive abilities. While dyslexia is wildly underdiagnosed, we know that approximately

¹ "Children 3 To 21 Years Old Served Under Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Part B, By Age Group And Sex, Race/Ethnicity, And Type Of Disability: 2017-18". *Nces.Ed.Gov*, 2019, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d18/tables/dt18_204.50.asp.

² Cynthia A. Searcy, Keith W. Dowd, Michael G. Hughes, Sean Baldwin, Trey Pigg. "Association of MCAT Scores Obtained With Standard vs Extra Administration Time With Medical School Admission, Medical Student Performance, and Time to Graduation." *JAMA*, 2015; 313 (22): 2253 DOI: [10.1001/jama.2015.5511](https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2015.5511)

³ First Step Act of 2018, 18 U.S.C. § 3635 (2018), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/senate-bill/3747/text>

⁴ "Dyslexia FAQ," The Yale Center for Dyslexia & Creativity, "2017." <http://dyslexia.yale.edu/dyslexia/dyslexia-faq/>.

1-in-5 (20%) Americans have dyslexia, including 80 to 90 percent of those with learning disabilities⁵. If 20% of Americans have dyslexia and individuals with dyslexia benefit academically from appropriate accommodations, deductive reasoning tells us that, with only .3% of MCAT exam takers receiving an accommodation for the MCAT, it is likely that thousands of individuals with dyslexia who take the MCAT are not receiving the accommodations they are entitled to under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. This is problematic for a number of reasons and results in creating a barrier to medical school education for qualified and capable students, thus limiting the supply of available physicians in a time when we face significant shortages in the near future⁶. This simply is unacceptable.

Dyslexia is one example and it begs the question – how many students with disabilities are not getting the accommodations they are entitled to receive? To better understand this question, the following are a set of questions I hope you will provide answers to in a timely manner.

1. Of MCAT exam takers, how many students applied for an accommodation in each of the last five academic years? Of those students, how many successfully received an accommodation?
2. Of the accommodations requested by exam takers, what kind of accommodations were most common? For those who received an accommodation, what kind of accommodations were most commonly provided?
3. To what degree are exam takers made aware of the availability of accommodations prior to taking the MCAT?
4. What is the AAMC doing to ensure all students with disabilities have equal access to accommodations?

I understand the importance of making sure that only those who need accommodations receive one when pursuing a medical education. Under no circumstances should accommodations be abused or fraudulently used to gain access to medical school. However, for students with disabilities, it is vital that they have equal access to reasonable accommodations when taking the MCAT.

Thank you for considering my request. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Bill Cassidy, M.D." in a cursive style.

Bill Cassidy, M.D.
United States Senator

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Association of American Medical Colleges. *2019 Update: The Complexities Of Physician Supply And Demand: Projections From 2017 To 2032*. IHS Markit Ltd., Washington, D.C., 2019, p. 2, <https://www.aamc.org/data-reports/workforce/data/2019-update-complexities-physician-supply-and-demand-projections-2017-2032>.