

# Value of personal statements to dermatology programs: a survey-based critical review

Kendall L Flanigan BS BA, Caroline T Mears DO, Dean S Morrell MD

Affiliations: Department of Dermatology, University of North Carolina School of Medicine, North Carolina, USA

Corresponding Author: Dean S Morrell MD, 410 Market Street, #400CB# 7715, Chapel Hill, NC 27516, Tel: 984-974-3900, Email: [morrell@med.unc.edu](mailto:morrell@med.unc.edu)

## Abstract

The personal statement is a required component of the residency application, offering applicants the opportunity to showcase their personality as well as unique thoughts and experiences not explicitly stated elsewhere in their application. Although the applicant-generated nature of personal statements can gauge an applicant's professionalism, creativity, sound judgement, and tact, specific criteria for evaluating personal statements and comparing them to one another is lacking. Research on the value of personal statements in the application process is also lacking. The purpose of this research project is to quantify the perceived value of the personal statement to program directors and faculty members of U.S. dermatology programs involved in residency application review. Analysis of our survey responses determined that although the majority of participants consider the personal statement to be a necessary element of an application, it was rated least important compared to other components of the application. An applicant's Medical Student Performance Evaluation, clerkship grades, research projects and publications, board scores, and letters of recommendation were consistently rated as more important than the personal statement. These findings suggest the personal statement lacks the standardization needed for decision makers to confidently choose the best new dermatology residents for their program.

*Keywords: personal statement, dermatology, residency, application, Electronic Residency Application Service, ERAS*

## Introduction

The personal statement is one of the few components of the residency application that lacks

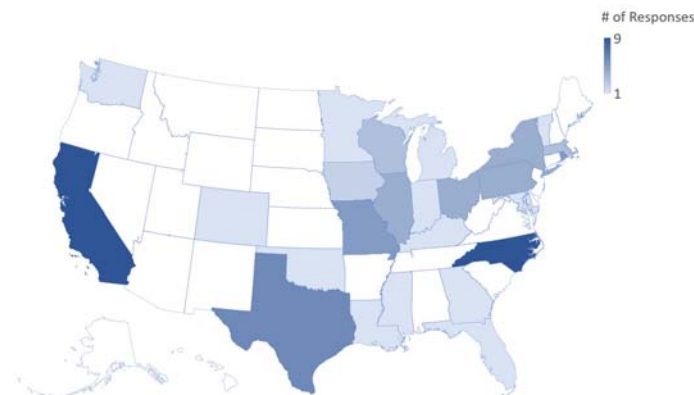
clear standardization and quantification, that relies on ambiguous rather than specific criteria to evaluate applicants. Additionally, research on the personal statement is lacking. This leaves both applicants and decision-makers without a structure to guide them, either in their portrayal of themselves or in their appraisal of candidates, respectively. Without ample objective criteria to evaluate applicants' personal statements, it is difficult to effectively stratify qualities among candidates. Although overall global impressions of residency applications tend to correlate among readers, White et al. demonstrated a profound lack of inter-rater correlation in reviewing personal statements [1].

Specialties vary in the significance attributed to the intangible characteristics of an applicant and the subjective portions of their application, including the personal statement. This was tested in a study by Taylor, Weinstein, and Mayhew comparing the process of resident selection for Program Directors (PDs) from Family Medicine and OB/GYN residencies who ranked several application criteria on a scale of 1 (most important) to 6 (least important), [2]. In their process of extending invitations for interviews, Family Medicine PDs rated the personal statement as their second most important consideration, whereas OB/GYN PDs rated the personal statement as their least important consideration [2]. In their process of match ranking, Family Medicine PDs rated the personal statement as their third consideration (third only to the applicant interview and the "Dean's Letter" (study predated the renamed Medical Student Performance Evaluation)); again OB/GYN PDs consistently rated the personal statement as their last consideration [2].

Max et al. evaluated personal statements for anesthesiology residency applicants at a major

academic teaching hospital [3]. The study determined that only a relatively small percentage of PDs found the personal statement to be important in selecting candidates for interview invitations [3]. The data showed a high prevalence of common themes among personal statements, limiting their utility in differentiating candidates [3]. Although the PDs placed little importance on personal statements when choosing applicants to interview, nearly all program directors agreed that personal statements remained helpful as a conversation piece during interviews [3].

Lacy, Chen, and Morrell evaluated the correlation of applicant personal statement content with match outcomes [4]. They considered all applications to the dermatology residency program at the University of North Carolina School of Medicine during the 2012 cycle (N = 422, N Matched = 308, N Unmatched = 114), [4]. This sample size represented 83.1% of the total pool of applicants to postgraduate year two positions in 2012 (N = 508), [5]. Reviewers were blinded from any personal identifiers or additional Electronic Residency Application Service (ERAS) data or match outcome [4]. The study determined that the most common themes among both matched and unmatched groups included personal accomplishments and positive qualities of dermatology, whereas discussion of dermatologic cases occurred significantly more frequently in matched versus unmatched applicants (60.06% versus 46.49%,  $P=0.013$ ), [4]. In the unmatched group, "name-dropping" and religious influences were more frequently discussed (37.72% versus 26.95,  $P=0.014$ ; 5.26% versus 0.65%,  $P=0.002$ ), [4].



**Figure 1.** Total number of responses collected by state, with darker colors indicated greater total responses.

We used the information provided by these papers to develop our research questions: How important is the personal statement in evaluating applicants for dermatology residency? Does it serve as a tool to stratify candidates for residency programs? What components strengthen or weaken a personal statement? Finally, how necessary is the personal statement overall, and should it be removed from the dermatology residency selection process?

## Methods

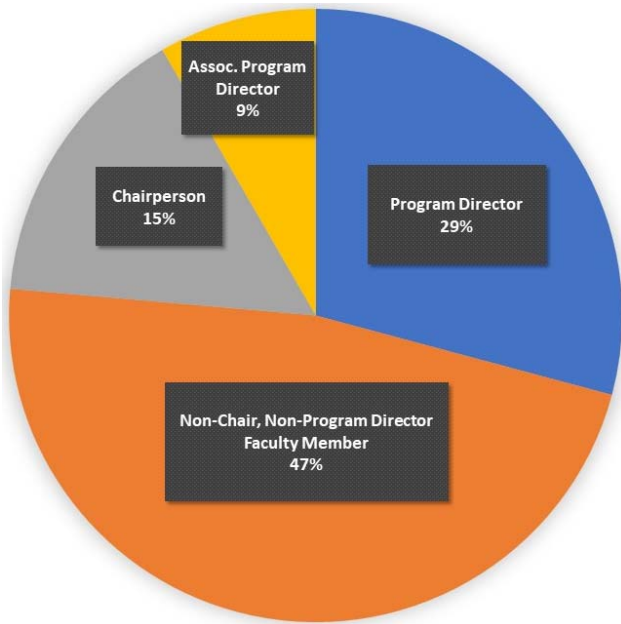
This study was approved by the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill Institutional Review Board as an exemption. An internet-based survey was directed to all members of the Association of Professors of Dermatology. Association of Professors of Dermatology Members were asked to forward the survey to other faculty members involved in the residency application review at their respective programs. Participants completed a 10-question survey regarding the utility of the personal statement for dermatology residency applications. We then evaluated survey responses to draw conclusions and postulate improvements for the current system based on our data.

## Results

The content of all survey responses (N=72) represented 47 different dermatology programs nationwide. The results are summarized by institution (**Table 1**) and by state (**Figure 1**).

Program Directors (PDs) comprised 29% of responses (N=21). Non-Chair, non-PD faculty members comprised 47% of responses (N=34). Chairpersons comprised 15% of responses (N=11). Associate Program Directors comprised 9% of responses (N=6). All survey participants confirmed that they have been involved in resident application review. The percentage breakdown of survey participant occupations is shown in **Figure 2**.

Participants were asked to rate the importance of the personal statement in evaluating residency applications on a scale of 1 (*not important at all*) to 5 (*very important*). Most participants indicated the

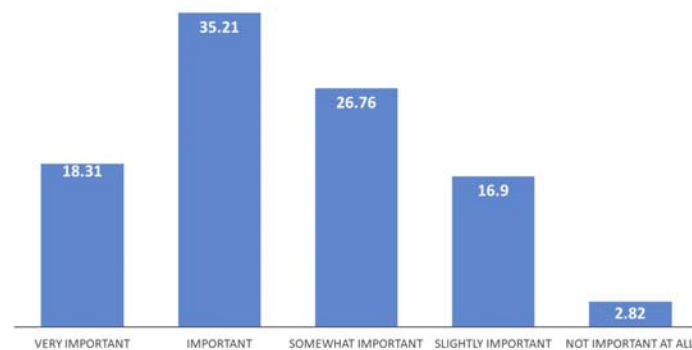


**Figure 2.** Percentage breakdown of survey participants, representing input from 48 dermatology programs nationwide.

personal statement was important, but the degree of importance ascribed differed greatly among responders (**Figure 3**).

Participants were asked to rate the importance of the following items on a scale of 1 (*not important at all*) to 5 (*extremely important*): Medical Student Performance Evaluation, personal statement, clerkship grades, research projects and publications, board scores, and letters of recommendation. The personal statement was ranked the least important of the aforementioned items (**Figure 4**).

Participants were asked to indicate any criteria they identify as positive, contributing to a strong personal



**Figure 3.** Percentage of survey participants who identified the relative importance of the personal statement in their review of an applicant for admission. The personal statement was assigned as “Very Important” or “Important” by 53.52% of survey participants.

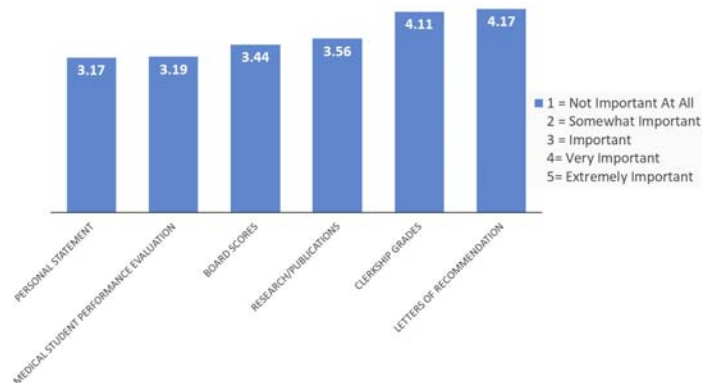
statement (**Figure 5**), or negative, contributing to a weak personal statement (**Figure 6**). Participants were asked to rate the importance of the following statements on a scale of 1 (*not important at all*) to 5 (*extremely important*), (**Figure 7A, Figure 7B**):

- I look for someone who has made a contribution to the field of dermatology.
- I look for someone who has included information specific to my program.
- I look for positive personality characteristics.
- I look for proper grammar and syntax.
- I look for dermatology experience (e.g. as a patient, family member, or shadowing).
- I look for avoiding inappropriate topics.
- I look for “Other” [a personalized criterion submitted by the participant].

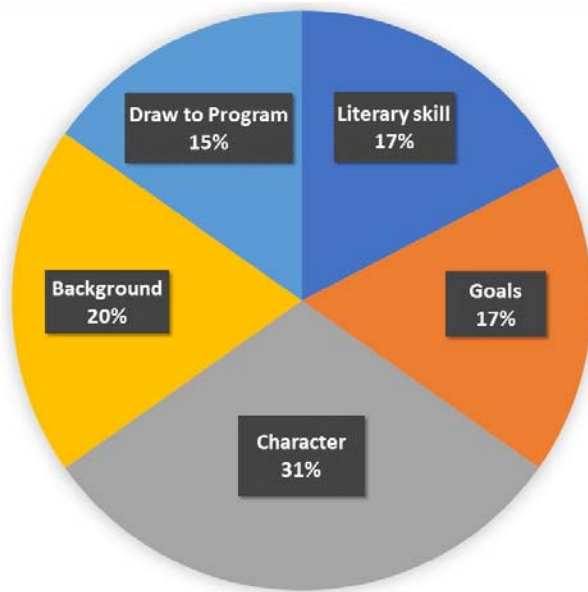
The mean importance of these seven statements rated on a scale of 1 (*not important at all*) to 5 (*extremely important*) is shown in **Figure 7C**.

Next, participants were asked to identify the personal statement as a “necessary” or “unnecessary” component of their review of an applicant for admission. The majority of participants classified the personal statement as “necessary” (79%, N=57), (**Figure 8**).

Participants were asked to rate their relative confidence in their ability to select superior



**Figure 4.** Mean importance (on a scale of one to five) of various components of residency applications as ranked by survey participants. Highest importance was assigned to “Letters of Recommendation (LORs)” (4.17/5), while least importance was assigned to “Personal Statement” (3.17/5).



**Figure 5.** Percentages of survey participants who identified various positive criteria as components of strong personal statements. "Literary Skill" includes talented and/or creative writing and proper grammar. "Goals" include personal and professional plans for the future. "Character" includes unique personal characteristics, passion, work ethic, and authenticity. "Background" includes overcome adversity, commitment to service and leadership, and biographical influences. "Draw to Program" includes mention of specific aspects of the program the applicant appreciates.

residency applicants on a scale of 1 (*not confident at all*) to 5 (*very confident*). The majority of participants indicated only feeling "somewhat confident" in their decisions (49%, N = 35), (**Figure 9**).

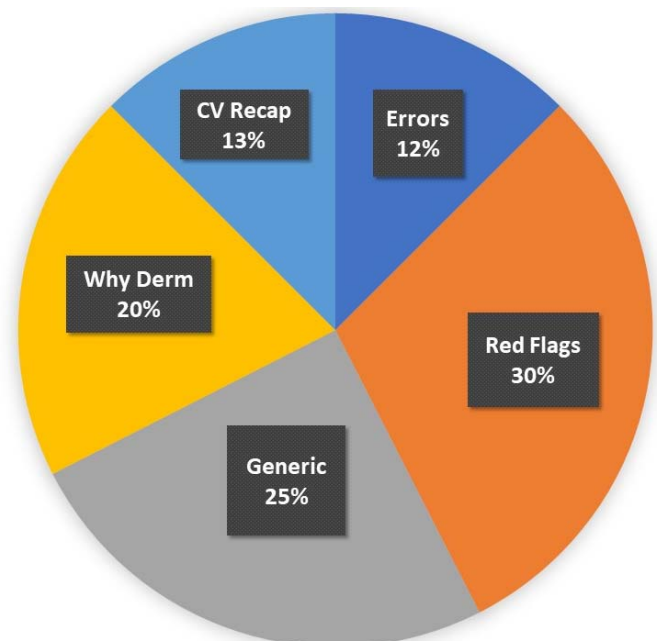
Finally, participants were asked "If you could change the current residency application process, what would you change?" Seventy-eight percent of participants (N=56) responded to this optional open-ended question and were divided into four categories based on common themes: limiting the total number of programs to which applicants can apply, making the application process more cost-effective, changing the format of the application, and "Other."

## Discussion

Personal statements are literary contributions to candidates' applications. The value that individual programs assign to the personal statement can vary between, and even within, dermatology residency

programs. White et al. performed a retrospective analysis of 174 surgical residency applicants and selected 8 (5%) applications randomly from the total pool to be rated by committee members on a 7-point scale from negative (would not invite for interview) to positive (will invite for interview), [1]. The outcome showed that for overall global application summaries, the correlations between each pair of raters ranged from 0.79 to 0.94 with an overall average of 0.88 [1]. For the personal statements, inter-rater correlations ranged from  $-0.83$  to 0.63 with an overall average of  $-0.09$  [1]. These results demonstrate that personal statements are difficult to consistently evaluate.

Given such data, it is rational that residency programs might assign more significant value to quantitative elements of applications (i.e. board scores, clerkship grades) as opposed to qualitative elements (i.e. personal statement, letters of recommendation, the Medical Student Performance Evaluation). This method may be practical given the

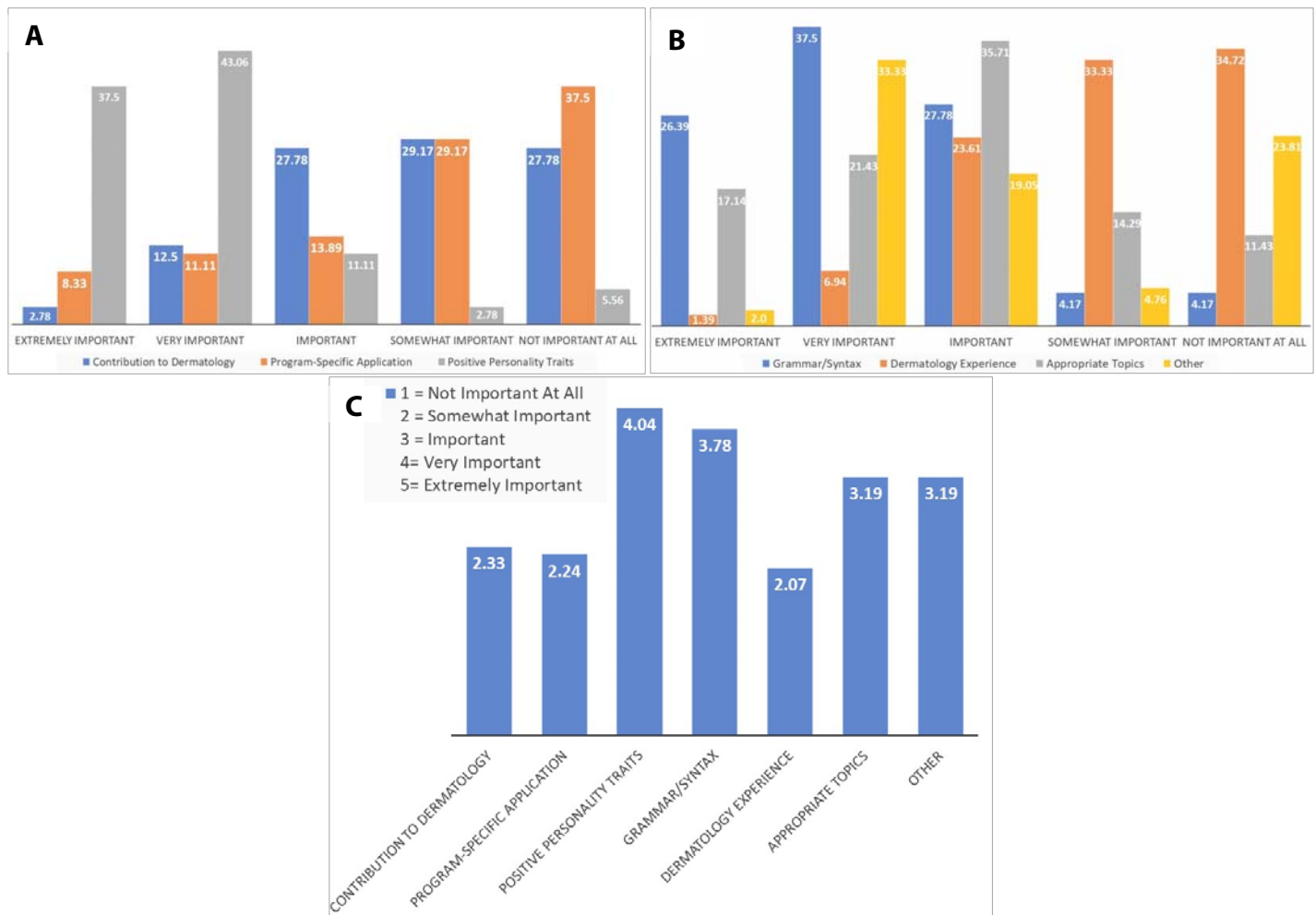


**Figure 6.** Percentages of survey participants who identified various negative criteria as components of weak personal statements. "Errors" include spelling or grammatical errors. "Red Flags" include bizarre, strange, unprofessional, or inappropriate statements. "Generic" includes formulaic, cliché, unoriginal, or insincere statements. "Why Dermatology" refers to unnecessary expression of the applicant's favor for dermatology. "CV Recap" refers to reiteration of information already included elsewhere in an application.

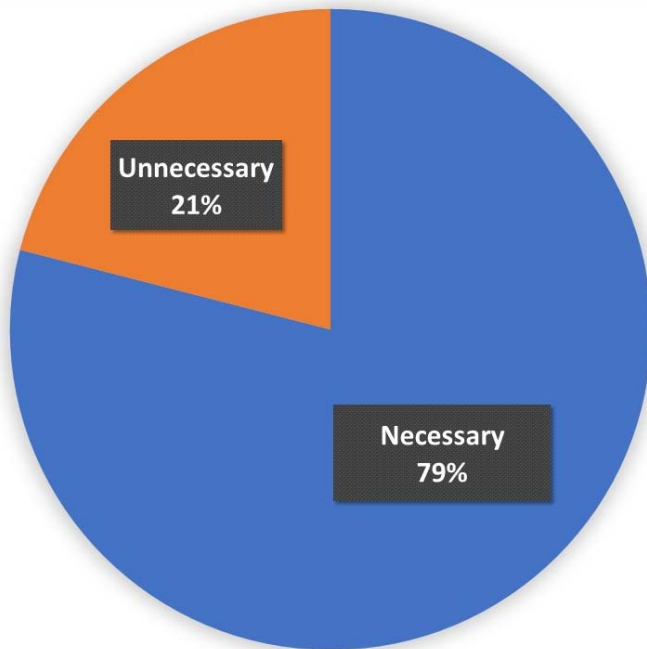
large volume of applications per program and may allow for programs to establish minimum standards to keep their initial evaluation of applicants consistent from year-to-year.

Our study evaluated application reviewers' opinions regarding, primarily, the value of an applicant's personal statement, as well as the value of other qualitative and quantitative elements of the dermatology residency application. Overall, we found that most participants identified the personal

statement as some degree of "important," however the level of importance assigned varied greatly. Although 53% indicated the personal statement was "Important" or "Very Important," nearly half of participants (N=33) indicated the personal statement is less than "Important" (Figure 3). The mean importance of the personal statement as ranked by survey participants was 3.17 indicating an overall perception that the PS is only "somewhat important." The PS was the least important component of the ERAS application compared to the



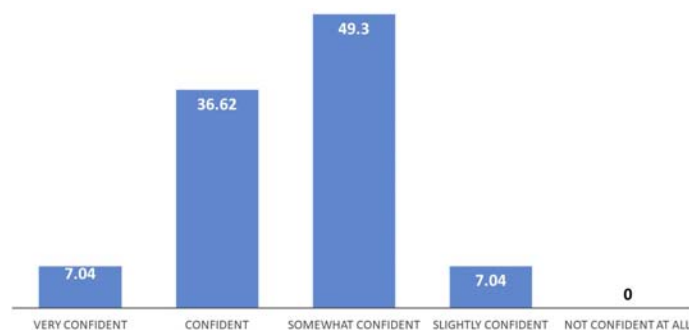
**Figure 7. A)** Percentage of survey participants who identified the relative importance of various personal statement components. "Positive personality traits" was assigned primary importance ("Extremely Important" or "Very Important") by 80.56% of survey participants. "Program-Specific Application" was assigned the least importance ("Somewhat Important" or "Not Important At All") by 66.67% of survey participants, second only to "Dermatology Experience" (68.05%), (Figure 7B). **B)** Percentage of survey participants who identified the relative importance of various personal statement components. "Grammar/Syntax" was assigned primary importance ("Extremely Important" or "Very Important") by 63.89% of survey participants, second only to "Positive Personality Traits" (80.56%), (Figure 7A). "Dermatology Experience" was assigned the least importance ("Somewhat Important" or "Not Important At All") by 68.05% of survey participants. "Other" includes variable components personalized by the survey participants. **C)** Mean importance (on a scale of 1 to 5) of various components of personal statements as ranked by survey participants. Highest importance was assigned to "Positive Personality Traits" (4.04/5) and "Grammar/Syntax" (3.78/5), while least importance was assigned to "Dermatology Experience" (2.07/5) and "Program-Specific Application" (2.24/5).



**Figure 8.** Percentage of survey participants who identified the personal statement as a “necessary” or “unnecessary” component of their review of an applicant for admission.

MSPE, board scores, clerkship grades, research projects and publications, and letters of recommendation. Letters of recommendation were rated most important (mean 4.17 out of 5.00) followed by clerkship grades and research. Many participants identified specific positive and negative criteria they consider to be elements of strong and weak personal statements, respectively, as well as neutral criteria.

Positive criteria, or components of strong personal statements, comprised five categories (**Figure 5**). “Character” refers to demonstrated strong personal characteristics, passion, work ethic, professionalism,



**Figure 9.** Percentage of survey participants who identified their relative confidence in their ability to select superior residency applicants.

and authenticity. This category was the most commonly cited positive criterion (31% of participants). “Literary skill” refers to demonstrated proficiency in grammar and creativity in writing style (17% of participants). “Goals” refers to demonstrated personal and professional priorities that match those of the program to which an applicant has applied (17% of participants). “Background” refers to demonstration of an applicant’s challenging upbringing, unique life struggles, and any service or leadership experiences (20% of participants). “Draw to program” refers to demonstration of the applicant’s specific personal and/or professional interest in the institution to which they have applied, including undergraduate attendance or clinical rotation completion (15% of participants).

Negative criteria, or components of weak personal statements, comprised five categories (**Figure 6**). “Errors” refers to grammatical and spelling mistakes (12.5% of participants). “Red Flags” refers to any bizarre, unprofessional, or inappropriate statements. This category was the most commonly cited negative criterion (30% of participants). “Generic” refers to formulaic, cliché, unoriginal, or insincere statements. This category includes exaggerated personal stories about an applicant’s epiphany to pursue dermatology (25% of participants). “Why Dermatology?” refers to unnecessary expression of the applicant’s favor for dermatology, as any applicant is presumed to have interest in the field, and any exaggerated interest may come across as flattery (20% of participants). “CV recap” refers to reiteration of information already included elsewhere in an application (12.5% of participants).

Neutral criteria, or components of a personal statement that help elucidate potential concerns about an applicant, include addressing topics such as previous failure to match, low board scores, time out of school, leaving a prior field of medicine for dermatology, and any other extenuating circumstances (cited by 13% of participants)

Participants were asked to rank the importance of the following statements (**Figure 7A, B**):

*I look for someone who has made a contribution to the field of dermatology.*

*I look for someone who has included information specific to my program.*

*I look for positive personality traits.*

*I look for proper grammar and syntax.*

*I look for dermatology experience (e.g. as a patient, family member, or shadowing).*

*I look for avoiding inappropriate topics.*

*I look for "Other" (survey participants had the option to write personalized comments).*

Of these, "Positive Personality Traits" demonstrated in the personal statement was assigned primary importance by 80.56% of survey participants (**Figure 7A**) with a mean importance of 4.04 out of 5.00 (**Figure 7C**). "Grammar/Syntax" was assigned secondary importance by 63.89% of participants (mean 3.78 out of 5.00), (**Figure 7B**). "Other" was assigned tertiary importance by 35.3% of participants. In this category, participants typed any additional criteria they look for when evaluating personal statements. Interestingly, responses varied widely, from a desire to understand an applicant's sense of humor to an interest in their longitudinal commitments to passion projects. Overall, this survey question highlights the fact that there is significant variation among criteria that reviewers prioritize when evaluating personal statements. Interestingly, "Program-Specific Application," "Contribution to Dermatology," and "Dermatology Experience" were rated as least important in descending order.

Despite discrepancies in preferences among personal statement reviewers, the data determined that most participants identify the personal statement as a necessary component of an application (79%, N=57), (**Figure 8**). Participants then rated their relative confidence in their ability to select superior residency applicants for their program on a scale of 1 (*not confident at all*) to 5 (*extremely confident*). Surprisingly, almost half of participants (49.3%, N=35) described feeling only "Somewhat Confident" in their decisions. Based on these findings, it appears that although the personal statement is viewed as a necessary component of the residency application, it does not necessarily increase the likelihood that a reviewer is confident in

their ability to select the right candidate for their program.

The final survey question asked participants to identify elements of the current residency application process they would like to alter. Seventy-eight percent of participants (N=56) responded to this optional question.

Limiting the number of programs to which applicants can apply was the most common suggestion (46% of participants). Participants suggested that this could increase the likelihood that applicants are genuinely interested in the programs they chose and that applicants' interview opportunities are more likely to include their favorite programs.

Changing the format of the current application was the second-most common suggestion (30% of participants).

Overall, participants suggested shorter, more concise applications, with research, volunteer, and work experiences limited to only meaningful entries. Recommendations of 41% of participants (N=7) urged increased standardization of grades among medical schools and standardized letters of recommendation forms.

Despite the now commonly-used Medical Student Performance Evaluation form (a standardized Dean's letter), standardized letters of recommendation have yet to become universally accepted. The Association of Professors of Dermatology has supported a standardized letter of recommendation (SLOR) form for dermatology applications for the last few years and officially accepted an SLOR form created by researchers Kaffenberger et al. for use along with the traditional narrative letter of recommendation (NLOR) for the 2014-2015 resident application cycle. In 2016, Kaffenberger et al. conducted a retrospective analysis to compare the SLORs and NLORs from all applicants to a single institution within the 2014-2015 application cycle [6]. When compared to the NLOR, the SLOR was easier and faster to interpret ([ $P < 0.0001$ ] for both), contained more information about the writer's relationship with the applicant ( $P < 0.001$ ), contained less exaggeration of the applicant's positive traits

( $P < 0.001$ ), and had a “higher inter-rater and intra-rater reliability for determining applicant traits including personality, reliability, work-ethic, and global score” [6]. These results add credence to the perceived value of a standardized recommendation letter.

Finally, 9% (N=5) of our participants suggested improvement in the cost-effectiveness of the application process by grouping interviews by region or implementing virtual or Skype interviews to save time and money.

## Conclusion

The perceived value of the personal statement varies widely among application evaluators in dermatology

residency programs. Although the majority of these individuals surveyed did identify the personal statement as a necessary component of the residency selection process, they placed the least amount of importance on the personal statement compared to other components of the application. According to feedback from these participants, there are significant opportunities for improvement in the current dermatology residency application process, many of which are needed to allow decision-makers to feel confident in their ability to choose the best dermatology residency applicants for their program.

## Potential conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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