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The Central Application Service for Physician Assistants (CASPA): An Update

APAP Central Application Taskforce

Background

The APAP board appointed a task force in the fall of 1996 to explore a central application service for PA programs.

The first step was a survey in early 1997 to ask programs what sort of applicant information would be useful to collect centrally and what other questions schools would rather handle on their own. As might be expected, most programs said they would want any central service to collect the basics: demographic data; academic, health care, and volunteer/work histories; and to calculate some GPAs. Schools split on a few more individualized items like the personal essay.

The Central Application Service for Physician Assistants (CASPA) Task Force:

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Overall the response was positive. Of the 77 schools responding, 44 said that with more information they would seriously consider taking part in a central service, and another 27 said at that point they were not sure. Only four programs said they had no interest then.

After presenting these results at the annual meeting in May 1997, the APAP board asked the task force to prepare an RFP, guided by this survey of programs, to look for vendors willing to run a service, to evaluate the vendors' proposals, and to recommend an approach to the board. The proposals have been received and evaluated, and follow-up discussions are continuing with possible vendors to clarify everyone's understanding. There was also a productive information and idea exchange during the Hot Topics session at October's APAP Educational Forum in Milwaukee. We would like to continue that conversation through this and other forums.

What Would a Central Application Service Look Like for PA Programs?

Like the other application services for allopathic, osteopathic, dental, veterinary, and podiatric medicine, a PA central application service would collect, organize, and distribute basic applicant information to the individual schools an applicant designates.

The goal of the service would be to reduce routine clerical chores and yet to preserve each school's ability to add any distinctive features to their application process. CASPA would *not* evaluate records or participate in the selection process in any way. Applicant evaluation and selection is the sole responsibility of individual programs.

Participation by the programs would be voluntary. Most of the schools in the other major health professions choose to

take part in their service—but not all. The goal, of course, is to design a service that will be helpful to the greatest number of schools, but it may not be a good fit for some.

Applicants' fees would fund the service. There would be no fee to programs to participate.

The Application Process

Paper applications would be widely available—most likely from a central source as well as through individual programs that would like a supply on-site. To the extent practical, we also want to explore the lead of other services as they develop application alternatives through the Internet and individual disks. However, paper applications would always be available. Included with the application packet will be information on all PA programs, as with the current PA Programs Directory, including prerequisites, application deadlines, etc.

Applicants would complete an application and return it to the service. Its design will be guided by the spring 1997 survey from PA programs and will include demographic information, an education history, and room for various test scores, as well as profiles of individual health care and volunteer experiences.

In addition, applicants would have one complete set of transcripts sent from their schools and would complete a course-by-course listing of their education, grouped by area, such as biology, chemistry, math, social science, etc. With the transcripts as reference and the listings as a guide, CASPA would then compute several GPAs, for undergraduate, graduate, science, and the last 30 credits of college work. Each GPA would be accompanied by the total number of grade points and credit hours used for the calculation and the month or term through which it was current. (This will allow programs the tools to easily modify the components of a GPA and even tailor a new one to their needs, as well as add last-minute course work to a GPA as it is completed.)

Applicants will distribute recommendation/evaluation forms, which will be designed with guidance from programs, and when completed they will be part of their central application. Programs would be free to require their own form as part of a secondary application (see below), in addition to the central application form, if they wished, or they may ask for extra forms to be completed by designated people or categories of evaluators. Individual schools would continue to decide exactly what form and process they would like to use for recommendations/evaluations and would be free to identify their own variation or use the CASPA's standard forms alone, in part, or as a complement to their own system.

Authentication of Transcripts and Evaluations/Recommendations

Tampering with admissions documents or creating false ones has become a fact of life nationally. Universal Recommendations, a company that verifies and processes recommendation forms for PA applicants, identified 5% of

recommendations as fraudulent. Therefore, the CASPA task force members unanimously believe that a central service must include an authentication component for transcripts and evaluations or recommendations, which would include routine screening and profile checks against red-flag criteria. Information on fraudulent applicant materials would be made available to all programs. By dealing with this systematically at a national level, there may also be a long-term prevention effect.

Reporting to Programs

After an applicant's record is complete and the information is verified with the applicant and authenticated and the GPA calculations are run, each program the applicant designates will receive both a paper photocopy of the application and transcripts and an electronic version of the summary data. The goal of the electronic version will be to have it in a form that will be most compatible with the widest range of program software. The method of transfer may be by disk or a secure file transfer over the Internet. The information flow to programs will be coordinated with each school's deadlines.

In addition there will be periodic summary reports to programs and a final report at year's end. Data from these reports could be used to eliminate major sections from the program's annual APAP reports. Copies of proposed application materials and reports will be sent to all schools for feedback during their development.

Secondary Program Applications

Any program may add whatever distinctive features they wish to the central application process in the form of their own program-specific secondary application, which each program would produce and distribute either to all applicants who designate their school or to a selected subset of them after the programs have screened the central applications.

Some schools may decide to use CASPA alone while others may wish to have a short secondary application to gather some information that is unique to their program. The personal essay, for example, would be left to each program's secondary application as one way for schools to continue to define their individual values and identity. Schools may collect their own fee, if they wish, for any secondary application.

Fees

The fee structure will be a policy issue for APAP and will need to balance a number of factors. On one hand, because applicant fees, not assessments to programs, will support the service and because it is a service to applicants, it will be important to run an efficient operation to keep fees as low as possible.

On the other hand, some programs are concerned that the ease of checking off more schools on a single application

form and paying a few dollars more for each new choice might lead applicants to "shotgun" selections and apply to 20, 30, or more schools and clog the system with applicants who are less than serious or informed about many of their program choices.

One solution might be an accelerating fee structure that allows a reasonable number of schools to be selected for modest, incremental fee steps but which, after a certain point, becomes sharply more costly for a very large number of choices. This is just one model. Others need to be suggested and explored.

Other components in the fee balance are individuals with limited resources or from populations or areas of need. Reduced fee scales or fee waivers could be built in, as other national services have done. Individual schools, depending on their own priorities and resources, could also fine-tune the financial impact for selected applicants by adjusting any secondary application fee or granting a waiver.

Would the Size of the Applicant Pool Change?

It would most likely increase to some extent, based on the experiences of other services, but the extent would be largely modulated by fee structure policy.

Any change in the size of the applicant pool might mean different things to different schools. Some schools might welcome a boost to broaden their range of candidates or for newer programs to establish a solid pool.

Other schools may already be overwhelmed with more applications than they want. For many of these schools a central service would bring the tools to speed up evaluation of candidates and increase the efficiency of their staff time. Complete paper records would arrive already assembled and ready to be filed. They would be followed by frequent reports that summarize key individual data.

Schools could decide to set criteria to screen out some records initially that are too far outside their standards to consider seriously, or they could review all records more easily, since they would already be complete and put together. Overloaded schools could also decide whether to screen and select a smaller group before sending their own secondary application, if they use one.

For the last few years most schools have gotten used to large and steadily growing applicant pools, like those in the earlier growth years of the 1970s. But many will also remember the lean years of the 1980s and the shrinking, then flat pools. Should the cycle swing back again to smaller pools, a central service would give all schools the broadest look at whatever group of applicants was available nationally.

Other Considerations

Applicants' attitudes about a central service

The University of Florida surveyed its 1998 applicants, explained what a central service was, and asked their opin-

ion about it. Most, 83%, said they would have used it this year if it had been available, 9% said they weren't sure, and 8% said no. Because of the cost of sending multiple packets of transcripts to schools, the average applicant had already spent \$58 on transcripts alone. Nearly 30% of them spent between \$60 and \$250.

An unexpected comment surfaced frequently. A number of applicants were frustrated because they could not apply to two or three more schools they were interested in. They worked all day and sometimes weekends and took prerequisite classes at night and said they simply did not have the time to complete any more lengthy applications. They said they would have gladly paid to have their application sent to another few schools.

Because a portion of the fee would go to authenticate recommendations and transcripts, each applicant's fee would also be an investment to help ensure that all applicants have a fair chance. Screening would reduce the risk that some applicants might gain unfair advantage from fraudulent materials.

PA program reports and planning

Information collected from CASPA could be used to lighten the individual program's reporting load. In fact, the data from this service would add a critical factor that has been missing nationally, the lack of which has hampered effective planning.

No one now knows the size of the national PA applicant pool, and therefore no one knows the demand for the education or how it is changing. We only know, program by program, how many applications each school receives — not how many people are applying and to how many schools. We don't know whether the recent burst of applications is due to a far greater number of people in the pool or to a moderate increase in people applying individually to an increasing number of schools.

This information is key for schools, states, the federal government, legislators, etc. to make wise decisions about the real level of demand and whether it justifies opening new PA programs or increasing class size. These decisions are now made on thin data at best or none at all. The consequences of making uninformed decisions on applicant demand are increasingly perilous for the profession.

APAP

APAP's plan is to own CASPA and contract out its management. The contract would define the revenue that APAP would receive after the vendor developed and ran the service. After the service is established and ongoing, it is anticipated that the revenue will contribute significantly to establishing APAP on a sound financial basis and allow it to invest more in projects supporting PA education, without having to rely so heavily on member program dues.

The current status

The clarification process continues with potential vendors. Since it is APAP's intent to own the service and contract out its management, the vendor would develop or modify the essential computer software. The goal is for APAP to have the option to purchase the rights to the software, if it wishes, in the future. This issue would be a slightly new approach, since four of the five existing services for other health professions are both owned and managed by their respective education associations and the fifth, a new service, is taking steps to return to this model. At this point, discussions are ongoing, after which the APAP board will make a decision on the best approach.

What can individual programs be doing now to prepare to decide about participating?

1. Talk to other programs or colleges in your institution or at nearby schools that participate in a central application service. Most of the major health professions have their own service: allopathic, osteopathic, dental, veterinary, and podiatric medicine. Ask how it works for them and what the problems are. Then let us know your ideas so we can see if there is a way to avoid some problems or soften their impact.

2. Talk with them about their experience receiving electronic data on applicants by disk or through a secure file transfer protocol on the Internet, and explore the capabilities of your institution and program. There may well be the capacity to share access resources.
3. Of the 77 programs responding to last spring's surveys, 53 weren't sure whether there were any state laws or institutional rules preventing them from participating in a central application service. Explore this issue with your school and with any other programs in your area that do participate in a service. Since most schools in the other health professions participate, this issue probably has a solution for your program.
4. Identify faculty and staff for training sessions, possibly at future annual and mid-year meetings.
5. Most importantly, continue the conversation with us as the form of the service takes shape, so we can put together a system that will serve applicants, programs, and PA education. While nothing will satisfy all of us perfectly, and there will certainly be the usual start-up problems, we would like to put together a service that we can recommend to the board that will help as many of us as possible.

Contact Timi Agar Barwick or any of the Taskforce members with your ideas, questions, or concerns, and we will go over each of them.