

Part 4. Student Advising, Standing, and Promotion

Academic Counseling

Academic Monitoring and Counseling

Medical schools generally have a number of avenues available for academic counseling, and the purposes for counseling frequently overlap. The first line of academic counseling is an individual faculty member who has direct contact with students during their course work. This contact does not always involve the course director, but there may be another faculty member with whom the student feels comfortable. Some schools utilize the tutoring skills of doctoral students enrolled in one of the school's graduate programs. In most schools, course directors routinely contact students who are performing at an unsatisfactory level, either after an examination or midway through a course or clerkship, and some of these students are candidates for individual or group tutoring. The identification and management of tutors may be handled by individual course directors, faculty members, or other departmental personnel, or by the office of Student Affairs.

Most students desire a support system that allows them to seek advice that will help them to improve their performance in specific courses or on nationally standardized examinations. Ideally, these support systems will involve many levels of assistance—from graduate students to individual faculty members to course directors to department heads to the Student Affairs dean. Knowing that some students in serious academic difficulty will not seek help independently, Student Affairs officers and course directors should work collaboratively to identify and intervene with these students.

Students enrolled at medical schools that are located on the campus of the parent university may have access also to the services of other academic assessment and remedial programs (e.g., for assistance with reading speed and comprehension and other learning challenges that are not content-specific).

Dual/Joint/Combined Degree and Special Programs

Many medical schools offer dual degree programs and other programs designed for specific categories of students. The Student Affairs dean often serves as an initial source of information about these programs.

Examples of common dual degree programs include:

M.D./Ph.D. Programs. Combined M.D./Ph.D. programs are established to offer interested and highly motivated students the opportunity to train in a program tailored to their individual research and career interests. Through these programs, students who have an interest in academic medicine and medical research are able to combine the medical school curriculum with a graduate studies curriculum. Over six or seven years (or more), individuals enrolled in the combined degree program meet the degree requirements of both the medical and graduate school, thus acquiring the knowledge, skills, and experience required for careers in the most exciting and challenging areas of medical research. It is expected that students graduating from these programs will develop into academic physicians capable of assuming faculty positions in either basic or clinical departments of medical schools, and, in these positions, provide leadership in academic medicine and research related to human welfare.

M.D./M.P.H. Programs. Many schools offer enrolled medical students an opportunity to concurrently obtain both a medical degree and a Master of Public Health degree. Schools of public health usually have a mission to prepare health professionals to improve the health of the population. These programs strive to provide all students with a foundation in the basic disciplines of public health, while allowing them to pursue individual interests and build upon existing strengths and previous experiences. Graduates acquire the intellectual and analytical skills to define, evaluate, and solve the complex problems encountered in public health and health care systems administration.

Other Dual Degree Programs. There are many other examples of dual degree programs offered by medical schools in conjunction with other educational programs, including college/M.D. programs, Master's degree programs in Education and Business, and J.D. programs with affiliated law schools. Information about such programs can be found in the electronic AAMC Curriculum Directory located on the AAMC Web site at:
<http://services.aamc.org/currdir/section3/degree2.cfm>.

Examples of common special programs include:

Primary Care/Rural Scholars Tracks. The goal of these tracks is to identify and educate students who are likely, as physicians, to practice primary care medicine in rural or other underserved settings. Students in these tracks are trained to improve the delivery of medical care and the quality of health care systems through a combination of education, service, collaboration, and research specific to the needs of underserved areas and patient populations. These types of practices frequently demand a much broader perspective on medical care than the traditional medical school curriculum typically provides, and the curriculum in these tracks is designed to meet these educational needs. Students admitted to these tracks generally meet the same admission criteria as all other accepted applicants.

Honors Programs. An honors program is offered by some medical schools to supplement the regular medical curriculum and challenge the exceptional student, while also stimulating individual interests. These programs often require completion of an independent research project that encompasses the basic and clinical sciences in the pursuit of a problem of scientific interest.

Advisory Systems

The office of Student Affairs is the frontline for a wide array of advisory services for medical students. The concerns of medical students are frequently quite diverse and sometimes quite complex, ranging from appropriate specialty and residency program choice to financial challenges to potentially serious mental health problems. Student Affairs personnel should develop systematic approaches to each type of concern, while remaining sufficiently flexible so as to be able to respond effectively to the needs of individual students.

Careers in Medicine Program

The office of Student Affairs is usually responsible for guiding students through the medical specialty selection and residency program selection and application processes. Careers in Medicine (CiM) is an on-line, four-year career-planning program that is provided by the AAMC and implemented by each individual medical school. Beginning early in the first year and culminating with the Match during the senior year, this four-phase process guides individual medical students through the elements of career planning. Increasing self-understanding, exploring a variety of medical

careers, choosing the specialty that best matches the individual student's values, skills, and interests, and making application to appropriate residency programs are the goals of the CiM program. Although CiM is a comprehensive program, it should not be the only career advisement activity at the medical school. CiM should instead be considered a major component of the institution's overall career advisory system.

Opportunities in Academic Medicine and Medical Research

Medical education and research are related pursuits. Academic excellence in research heightens the intellectual atmosphere, develops new knowledge, and transmits current information for the benefit of all. Medical schools provide adequate facilities for trainee and faculty research, including support areas such as the library, animal care facilities, and computer services. Long-term planning and the acquisition of research funds ensure research growth and support medical student participation in research endeavors.

In addition, the variety of research programs that exist in medical schools provide students with interesting opportunities for employment and experience during vacation periods and throughout the school year. The work is stimulating, challenging, and educational; many of these research programs offer stipends during the summer months. The Student Affairs office is often the first source of information for students who have an interest in research.

Learning Disabilities: Assessment and Evaluation

Some students enter medical school with a previously diagnosed learning disability and with a detailed request for accommodation. Other students may demonstrate early or continuing academic difficulty leading to the conclusion that assessment for a learning disability is warranted. A student may self-refer to the Student Affairs office for assistance in implementing existing recommendations for accommodations or a student may be referred by other faculty or staff members to discuss ongoing academic difficulties potentially related to a learning disability. In some institutions, the Student Affairs office serves as a central point for coordination of assessment and evaluation of a learning disability and for assistance with implementing any recommendations for accommodations or modifications. In some institutions, the

primary responsibility for assessment may be outside of the Student Affairs office (e.g., in a separate disability services office). In either case, the Student Affairs office should be knowledgeable about available resources for evaluation and be able to work closely with university staff, academic affairs/medical education office personnel, course directors, and faculty members regarding implementation of appropriate accommodations.

Leaves of Absence and Withdrawals

There are numerous reasons that medical students seek leaves of absence: health problems, family considerations, other educational opportunities, financial difficulties, study for the USMLE, career doubts, and other personal concerns. Prior to recommending approval of any request for a leave of absence, Student Affairs personnel should assist the student to explore the reason(s) for the request, then provide alternate options, if any, and, finally, advise the student regarding the impact of any leave on the student's progression through medical school. Although permanent withdrawal from medical school is a much less frequent consideration, the consequences of that decision are much greater. Advising a student who is considering permanent withdrawal from medical school should also include help in understanding the reason(s) for the request; alternate options, such as means for addressing underlying problems; the possibility of a temporary leave of absence prior to a final decision; and planning for the future if a final decision to withdraw is made. Students considering a permanent withdrawal should understand clearly that this decision would require them to re-apply to medical school as a new applicant if they were to desire to return to medical school in the future, whereas a return to school from a leave of absence does not require re-application as a new student.

Student Employment

In some institutions, the Student Affairs office is responsible for administering school policies regarding student employment. Even when this is not a primary responsibility of the office, it is important that the Student Affairs officer assist students to understand and monitor the impact of employment upon their academic performance. If possible, referring students to work situations relating to clinical medicine, health policy, or research may serve to augment the student's professional growth and skills, while simultaneously providing needed income. Summer employment opportunities should be well publicized and made available to all eligible students.

Mental Health Referrals

The Student Affairs staff may provide personal, short-term support for students with transient or time-limited problems, but a referral to a trained mental health professional should always be considered for any student with signs, symptoms, or complaints that are indicative of a more substantial problem. Students who present with issues of depression, severe or chronic anxiety, alcohol or drug dependence, eating disorders, obsessive-compulsive behavior, mood swings or mood disorders, anger management difficulties, or sociopathic behavior should be referred to professional mental health services staff. Referral to mental health services also may be appropriate for students who are dealing with difficult personal situations such as the death or serious illness of a family member or close friend, abusive relationships, custody conflicts, and marital problems, including separation and/or divorce. The Student Affairs officer should be familiar with available mental health resources and be able to make an initial assessment of the type of services that would best meet the student's needs. Considerations may include the willingness of the student to accept the referral, the student's financial situation and/or insurance coverage, the level of support from family members and friends, and the student's ability to access the service in a timely manner. The Student Affairs officer may be required to describe the service to the student, initiate contact, offer encouragement and support, and provide monitoring and follow-up, as appropriate. Finally, although the need is rare, the Student Affairs officer should also be familiar with the processes for mental health commitment in his or her jurisdiction.

Mental Health Resources

Personnel in the Student Affairs office must be thoroughly familiar, at a minimum, with all available mental health resources on the campus and in the community and the process for accessing each of them. Establishing a mutual understanding and a working relationship with the various mental health resources and providers, prior to the need arising, is advisable. Although mental health resources vary by school and community, the following list should be considered:

- Medical school-based or university-based resources for medical care (e.g., the Student Health Service)

- The Student Counseling Center
- Various campus-based support groups and services (e.g. chaplains)
- Community-based services, including community mental health centers and psychiatrists, psychologists, and other mental health personnel in private practice
- Centers/services for abused spouses
- Chemical dependency services
- Suicide prevention and crisis response lines
- Grief counseling services
- Marriage and divorce counseling services
- Various support groups related to specific disease entities and conditions (e.g., Alcoholics Anonymous, AL-Anon, and Narcotics Anonymous)

Personal and Professional Conduct and Professionalism

In many institutions, the Student Affairs officer shares with faculty members the responsibility for assisting students in the development of skills, behaviors, and attitudes related to professionalism. This responsibility may be fulfilled through role-modeling, direct teaching, advising, counseling, or other interventions. The Student Affairs officer may be called upon to work one-on-one with a student perceived to have professionalism issues or problems. If a student's breach of professionalism constitutes a serious offense (as defined by school policies), the student may face a hearing as required by the school's due process and academic progress procedures. In this situation, the Student Affairs officer may be available to advise the student, work with the student on a short-term or long-term basis, assist the student in understanding and modifying the attitude or behavior of concern, and/or monitor compliance with any requirements or conditions imposed by the faculty.

Disciplinary Procedures

Disciplinary Action

In many institutions, the Student Affairs office plays an important role in disciplinary actions regarding students. Students who have engaged in cheating, unprofessional conduct, or other improper behavior, occurring within or outside of the confines of the educational program, may be dismissed or have other specific disciplinary action taken against them by the institution after a review of the charges has been completed, and a decision made, by an appropriate school committee or official. The specific proce-

dures for handling these issues will vary among schools. Generally, Student Affairs officials will be involved in the process in some way. This involvement could include insuring the confidentiality of the proceedings, the presence of a student representative or advisor (perhaps including legal counsel, if requested), and a follow-up plan for the student involved. Procedures could range from informal to formal hearings, with actions ranging from dismissal of the complaint to censure, suspension, a leave of absence, or dismissal.

Appropriate Treatment in Medicine

Medical schools are dedicated to providing their students, residents, faculty, staff, and patients an environment of respect, dignity, and support. The diverse backgrounds, personalities, and learning needs of individual students must be considered at all times in order to foster appropriate and effective teacher-learner relationships. Honesty, fairness, even-handed treatment, and respect for all students are the foundations of an effective learning environment. Mistreatment and abuse of medical students by faculty, residents, staff, or fellow students are antithetical to the educational objectives of the medical school. Mistreatment and abuse include, but are not limited to: berating, belittling, or humiliation; physical punishment or threats; intimidation; harassment or discrimination based on race or ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, religion, or physical or learning disability; assigning a grade for reasons other than the student's level of performance; assigning tasks for punishment or non-educational purposes; requiring the performance of personal services; or failing to give students credit for work they have performed. Some complaints may be investigated as mandated by federal or state laws. Other complaints may be handled in a less formal manner. In all cases, students should have the right to seek alternatives to decisions that have been made about them and their status in the institution. Student Affairs officers should facilitate the development of appropriate institution-specific policies and procedures in these matters.

Transfer with Advanced Standing

Transfer

Some medical schools have programs whereby medical students enrolled at accredited medical schools within the United States and Canada may be accepted for transfer with advanced standing. Policies related to transfer are institution-specific and can include consideration of various criteria, including:

- State of legal residency
- Current academic standing at the medical school from which the student seeks to transfer
- Number of places that have come available in the class by attrition
- A requirement that the prospective transfer student meet the same qualifications for admission as currently enrolled students
- A requirement that the prospective transfer student meet all requirements for graduation as students currently enrolled in the class the student would be joining
- Depending on the institution, provision by the prospective transfer student of appropriate documents, including:
 - A statement of good academic standing from the dean of the medical school in which the student is currently enrolled
 - A current academic transcript
 - Letters of recommendation from faculty members
 - Documentation of passing scores achieved on USMLE Step examinations

The prospective transfer student may be required to appear for a personal interview. The final decision about transfer is the responsibility of the appropriate faculty committee as determined by institutional policies and procedures.

Advanced Standing and Exemption of Courses

Students who are accepted for transfer may be exempted from required medical school courses. These decisions will generally be facilitated by the Student Affairs officer and typically involve a review of course work completed at the student's current medical school by faculty course directors at the school to which the student seeks transfer. In those instances where one school's curriculum differs substantially in content or timing from the

curriculum at the other school, the potential transfer student may be required to complete remedial course work prior to finalization of the actual transfer process. These conditions should be clearly spelled out to the transfer applicant, in writing, so that he or she is aware of all requirements prior to his or her withdrawal from the school currently attended.

The “AAMC-GSA Guidelines for the Consideration of Applications for Transfer or Advanced Standing” document can be accessed, under “Student Affairs,” on the AAMC Web site at:
www.aamc.org/members/gsa/resources.htm.

Academic Progress

A student who is making satisfactory academic progress will be permitted continued enrollment in the medical school. In most institutions, student promotion committees meet, at a minimum, at the conclusion of each academic semester or year to review the academic progress of each student. A student who has not satisfactorily completed all course requirements may be permitted to remediate individual courses or may be required to repeat an entire academic semester or year of study. Most institutions have established a limit on the number of years allowed for a student to complete the entire medical curriculum.

In addition, each institution should develop policies and procedures to be enacted for students who must remediate an unsatisfactory grade. The options may be exercised at the local institution with remediation of individual or comprehensive examinations. Alternately, students may be required to enroll in and pass make-up courses taken either locally or at another institution. The Student Affairs dean should inform students about remedial options that are acceptable to the institution. The Student Affairs dean is frequently the preferred contact with the other institution, and the AAMC strongly encourages close communication between the home school and the other institution, noting that it is the prerogative of the student’s home institution to accept (or not accept) course credit in fulfillment of educational

requirements for the M.D. degree. Each year, the AAMC Section for Student Affairs and Programs publishes on the GSA Web site (www.aamc.org/members/gsa/resources.htm) a searchable database of summer make-up courses sponsored by accredited medical schools in a variety of academic subjects.

Extended Curriculum

Some medical schools permit students to carry a reduced course load to allow the completion of one academic year over a period of two years. Such an “extended curriculum” is intended to provide support to students who experience personal difficulties, a difficult transition to medical studies, or temporary academic problems, or who have significant family responsibilities or a desire to participate in an ongoing research project. Academic policies differ from school to school regarding the timing and rationale for requests for an extended curriculum. Some schools allow a student to request an extended curriculum at any time, while others may recommend an extended curriculum through administrative routes or by the year-appropriate student promotions committee. Still other schools require that a student request an extended curriculum for specific reasons prior to initial matriculation. A request for an extended curriculum is typically granted by the academic affairs/medical education dean or the student promotions committee, and a deadline for extended curriculum requests is generally established. Students who are granted an extended curriculum are expected to demonstrate satisfactory academic performance in the reduced course load. Failure of courses during the extended curriculum may be considered grounds for dismissal from medical school, although this is clearly variable according to the policies of the individual institution. While a student is enrolled in an extended curriculum, he or she is responsible for all university fees, and tuition may be assessed at a rate proportional to the course load carried by the individual student.

During the period of the extended curriculum, students are often discouraged from holding leadership positions in campus organizations, and are cautioned about employment or other outside activities that may distract them from successfully meeting their educational obligations.