

Part 1. Roles of the Student Affairs Officer

The roles and responsibilities of the Student Affairs officer in a medical school vary from institution to institution. While each medical school's administrative organization is unique, the Student Affairs officer is typically involved with student advocacy; creating, disseminating, and implementing institutional policies and procedures; representing the institution and the medical profession to students; advising and counseling students; and serving as a role model for students, among a variety of other institutional responsibilities. Not surprisingly, there is frequently some tension among these competing roles as the Student Affairs officer finds him or herself playing the role of an intermediary between institutional administrators and enrolled students and, not infrequently, between the faculty and enrolled students. In addition, there are inevitable conflicts of interest that stem from these various roles, and the Student Affairs officer should be careful to manage these conflicts of interest proactively and responsibly. Managing these conflicts will involve ensuring that students are fully aware of the specific role being played by the Student Affairs officer in any individual situation and, at other times, the Student Affairs officer's recusing him or herself from some meetings and activities to avoid even the suggestion of impropriety.

Examples of the multiple roles and duties of the Student Affairs officer are noted below. This list is not an exhaustive one, nor is it intended to represent a minimum standard. The position description at each individual medical school is the final statement of responsibilities for each administrative position holder.

Practice Tip: People to meet during your first month in Student Affairs (in no specific order):

- University Campus Security staff
- University General Counsel
- Other members of the Dean's Office staff
- Medical student leadership – student government and class officers and representatives of various student organizations
- Chair(s) of relevant institutional committees (e.g., Student Promotions Committee)
- Student Health Services staff
- Student Mental Health Services staff and/or other mental health providers
- Minority Affairs Office staff

- Financial Aid Office staff
- Registrar's Office staff
- Course and clerkship directors
- Academic Advising/Support Office staff
- Disabled Student Services staff

Advocate for Students

The Student Affairs officer serves as an advocate for students' needs and interests, although, as noted above, this role may be complicated by any additional responsibilities he or she has for student assessment, evaluation, and/or discipline. Opportunities for advocacy range from informal to very formal situations. One informal advocacy role would be that of mediator of a conflict between a student and a faculty member. A formal advocacy role would involve the Student Affairs officer's representation to an institutional committee of a request by a student with a documented disability for an accommodation or modification within the medical school curriculum. Another formal advocacy role would involve the Student Affairs officer's serving as a mediator between faculty members and students on general academic issues related to individual courses and clerkships (e.g., absences related to residency interviews). The Student Affairs officer may also be expected to advocate with university or medical school administrators for special programs to serve the needs of medical students and/or to represent the special interests of individual students or groups of students (e.g., in the area of health services and medical insurance for medical students). Overall, the Student Affairs officer and his or her staff members are expected to be aware of, understand, appreciate, and, at times, validate students' perspectives on issues.

Advisor for Individual Students and Groups of Students

The Student Affairs officer and related office staff are typically responsible, either directly or in an oversight role, for advising and counseling students. This role not infrequently starts with a "triage" situation after a student presents with a problem or a faculty member presents a student problem. In this situation, the Student Affairs officer may be responsible for initiating an action plan after collecting appropriate data and arriving at a conclusion about the appropriateness of the request and the validity of the complaint. While, in general, students with significant personal difficulties should be referred to appropriate

professional counseling services, the Student Affairs officer may provide short-term support for students with some less serious concerns. Similarly, while students in academic difficulty should be referred to appropriate academic counselors or tutors for assistance, the Student Affairs officer should be able to describe the available resources, initiate contact with relevant referral sources, offer encouragement and support, and ensure that help has been made available.

Practice Tip: Things to keep on hand in the Student Affairs office:

- Box of tissues
- Copy of the academic bulletin and student handbook, as well as printed copies of institutional "due process" procedures to distribute in response to questions
- Contact information – Student Health and Student Mental Health providers
- Tylenol, Motrin (for you! You'll need it!)
- Bowl of candy
- Water
- Academic advisor contact information

Practice Tip: Common crises facing Student Affairs officers (in no specific order):

- Financial aid/financial crisis
- Family illness or death
- Relationship issues (e.g., significant other, roommate)
- Substance abuse
- Mental health problem
- Unintended pregnancy
- Academic problems/failure
- USMLE problems
- Medical concerns/crisis
- Self-confidence issues

Practice Tip: Develop and use a "Student Encounter Form" when meeting with all students. Jot down notes and document conversations. Provide the student with a copy at meeting's end and keep one for your personal records. While never perfect, this type of documentation ensures that both the Student Affairs officer and the student share a record of the conversation and diminishes the chances that differing versions of the same conversation will be reported at a later time.

Career Counselor

The Student Affairs officer and staff members generally have some relationship with the AAMC Careers in Medicine (CiM) Web-based career planning program, as well as with school-specific programs, as they supervise student career planning activities, beginning with matriculation into medical school and ending with specialty selection and Match preparation and implementation. Personnel in the Student Affairs office are also usually responsible for assisting students with their residency applications, their preparation for interviews, and their participation in various residency matching services.

Student Evaluator and Assessor

The Student Affairs officer may also serve as staff to the school's student promotions or academic progress committee. In some instances, the Student Affairs officer has an assigned role on this committee as an advocate for students on issues pertaining to academic progress. In addition, the Student Affairs officer may compose, or coordinate the composition of, the Medical Student Performance Evaluation (MSPE) to accompany students' residency applications. The Student Affairs officer may be responsible for advising students following their violation of school policies and procedures. The Student Affairs officer may be required to confront students exhibiting problems associated with substance abuse, loss of emotional control, entitlement, and other personality-related issues when they become apparent to members of the faculty or staff or to fellow students. Various other problems may be referred to the Student Affairs officer by members of the faculty and staff, including personal hygiene issues, dress code violations, financial concerns, family matters, and professionalism-related difficulties.

Financial Aid Administrator

The reporting relationships between the financial aid office and the Student Affairs office vary widely at medical schools. They range from a direct supervisory role by the Student Affairs officer over financial aid office staff to an informal supervisory or solely collegial relationship. Student Affairs offices at some institutions have oversight over the awarding of institutional scholarships and grants, particularly if their administration is assigned to a different office than the financial aid office.

Practice Tip: Access to a short-term Student Emergency Loan Fund is extremely helpful and has proven to be a lifesaver to many Student Affairs officers. This type of fund can provide students in a financial crisis with a small, short-term loan (e.g., between \$200 and \$500) to tide them over until other resources are identified.

Institutional Planning Consultant

The Student Affairs officer frequently represents student issues and points of view at the institutional planning level, including such areas as changes in academic schedules, in curricular structures, and/or in affiliated sites for students' clinical education.

Institutional Representative

The Student Affairs officer has responsibility for oversight and implementation of institutional policies and procedures as they relate to student life. In some cases, the Student Affairs officer may serve as a representative for student interests on school committees as policies and procedures are developed and codified. The Student Affairs officer generally serves as a conduit of information between the administration and the student body as policies and procedures are considered, approved, and implemented. He or she frequently is the institution administrator who informs students of the limits of institutional budgets (e.g., for student travel to professional meetings); provides support to student leaders related to budget planning for, and management of, their student organizations; monitors compliance with institutional regulations in these areas; and implements disciplinary decisions made by faculty committees.

Since building effective support networks is necessary for student success, Student Affairs officers work with students to help them achieve a sense of belonging, build a sense of community, ensure that students actively support each other, and build an allegiance to the institution.

Planner and Convener

Student Affairs officers at many institutions are responsible for planning and/or convening formal and informal programs for the institution. These can include initial matriculation ceremonies, commencement ceremonies, honors convocations, white coat programs, Match Day celebrations, and other events. The time commitment necessary to complete these tasks successfully ranges from minor to major, depending on the size of the institution and the number of annual functions.

Role Model

Good Student Affairs practice provides significant opportunities for students, faculty, staff, and other educators to demonstrate their values and professional attributes. According to the American College Personnel Association, “Effective learning communities are committed to justice, honesty, equality, civility, freedom, dignity and responsible citizenship.” Student Affairs officers attempt to follow this model, knowing that the modeling of professional and ethical behavior is a powerful way to influence the development and maintenance of high professional standards in the academic community.

Advisor to Student Organizations

As an advisor to medical student organizations, the Student Affairs officer provides an administrative home for student government and other student organizations and interest groups that have received formal recognition from the institution. In this role, the Student Affairs officer is responsible for advising and supporting the elected (or selected) Organization of Student Representatives (OSR) representative(s) for the school. The Student Affairs officer may also monitor the process by which the OSR representative is selected annually. The Student Affairs officer may also work with other student groups (e.g., the Medical Student Section of the American Medical Association [AMA-MSS, www.ama-assn.org/ama/pub/category/14.html]; the Student National Medical Association [SNMA, www.snma.org]; the American Medical Student Association [AMSA, www.amsa.org]) and community organizations affiliated with student-administered community service activities.

Advisor to Organizations for Spouses and Significant Others

The Student Affairs officer is also frequently responsible for advising and supporting, either formally or informally, various organizations that support the spouses, significant others, and other family members of enrolled medical students. Ensuring the ongoing effectiveness of such organizations can assist the Student Affairs officer in fulfilling his or her goals of supporting the students themselves.

Part 2. Understanding the Mission of the Institution

Structure of Student Affairs Offices

The fact that the structure and functions of Student Affairs offices vary significantly from school to school results from the influence of many variables, including the administrative history of the school; the requirements of the educational program; new or evolving Liaison Committee on Medical Education (LCME, www.lcme.org) accreditation standards; the relationship of the medical school administration with the administration of the parent university, if present; the number and level of training of staff members; and the extent of integration or separation of the various medical school administrative functions.

Other offices or functions may be covered under the umbrella of Student Affairs: financial aid, student records, minority affairs/diversity, academic standing and student promotions, academic counseling, admissions, clerkship and elective scheduling, visiting students, and student conduct and discipline, among others. Additionally, Student Affairs offices may have responsibility for components of the formal and informal curriculum, including professional development, career planning and advisement, and aspects of basic science and clinical education. Within the administrative structure of the medical school, the Student Affairs officer may report directly to the Dean, although, more recently, the Student Affairs officer may report instead to a vice-dean or senior associate dean for academic or educational affairs, in parallel with offices of medical education/curriculum, graduate medical education, and other offices. Depending on the institution, the administrative rank of the senior administrator in charge of Student Affairs functions may be that of senior associate dean, associate dean, assistant dean, or director.

Staffing levels and responsibilities in Student Affairs offices also show substantial variation, affected by available resources, the level of training and interests of individual staff members, and the nature of the work performed in the office. Some offices assign “generalist” staff to serve as the primary liaison for a large group or class of students, while others assign staff to one or more specific functional areas, e.g., student records, student events, and student personal and professional conduct. The significant variability among the structures and responsibilities of Student Affairs offices at individual schools makes meaningful comparisons of staff to student ratios difficult to determine and interpret.