

Vanderbilt University School of Medicine

Vanderbilt's wildly successful advising program takes a fun as well as informative approach to the career selection process. In 2007, Vanderbilt initiated the Advisory College system. Every class is divided into four colleges, each led by two Advisory College Directors (ACDs) who are Vanderbilt physicians receiving salary support for their service. The ACDs are trained to conduct student wellness programming and to provide career planning advice; also associated with each college are volunteer faculty advisors and upperclassmen student advisors. This framework of advisors provides each student with faculty and upperclassmen students who are interested in helping individuals find mentors and shadowing experiences. They also provide opportunities for reflection through informal and formal discussions. Each student meets with an ACD individually at least once each semester in addition to seeing the ACDs at each of the many college events throughout the semester.

Timeline

Years 1 - 4: Small Group Reflections with the Advisory College Directors

These one hour sessions provide students with an opportunity to explore the process of choosing a career in small groups. The discussions are led by the ACDs who ask questions angled towards each specific class and their current position in the decision-making process. Self-reflection is an important step in choosing a specialty and these sessions facilitate this goal.

Year 1: Speed Dating

This exercise is meant to introduce students to the wide variety of specialties available to them; having information on specialties early in medical school enhances and improves decision-making later through early exposure to the numerous possibilities of careers within medicine. In this afternoon exercise, senior students and faculty members in our Advisory Colleges coordinate a fun, career-focused speed dating experience for the class. Handouts containing blurbs about each specialty are given beforehand, allowing students to briefly familiarize themselves with the specialties prior to their meeting. Students then rotate through a variety of specialties where they have the opportunity to ask a series of questions in a limited five-minute timeframe. The goal is to facilitate conversation and promote informed questions. If students like the potential date (career), they arrange for a longer meeting with the person representing that specialty later in the session. There is approximately one hour of speed dating followed by one hour of longer dates (meetings) for the students. To make the event more entertaining, there are lighted candles, flowers everywhere, and soft/romantic music in the background.

Year 2: – Specialty Fair

The goal of this exercise is to provide second year students with more in-depth information about each specialty and provide students with an opportunity to meet physicians in their fields of interest. In this afternoon exercise, we set up booths in the University Club. Each specialty staffs a booth with specialists from that field at all levels of training. Past student leaders created an amazing document with summary information on almost every specialty and the students carry this document with them as they walk around the various booths and chat with the experts. We have small groups as well, each of which is led by one of our ACDs. This program lasts approximately two hours. Food and drinks are provided for the students and the event is timed in the spring just before the VMS II class signs up for VMS III rotations.

Year 3: Residency Fair

In this afternoon event, the focus shifts from specialty introduction to specialty selection as this is the time when students must make these big decisions. The event is staged in a similar way to the VMS II event.

Year 4: The Senior Series

Dean Rodgers, the Associate Dean for Medical Student Affairs, coordinates talks on Residency Applications, Preparing for Interviews, Making Rank Order Lists, and Preparing for Internships.

Along with these four major events, we also have all of the following ongoing programming throughout the year:

- **Ask the Experts** – An interactive web site that focuses on one of the major medical/surgical specialties for a period of two weeks and allows students to post questions anonymously to a representative of that specialty who then responds online. All students can view the questions and the responses. New in 2008: each "Ask the Experts" spotlight is enhanced with a short video podcast by the physician answering questions.
- **Backstage Pass to the Wards** – A VMS I/II elective which facilitates shadowing experiences for VMS I/II students and introduces them to specialties through a speaker series. Students sign up for shadowing experiences using an online system.
- **Lunch Talks** – We host at least three major talks per semester. Lunch is provided.

- **Bulletin Board and Newsletter** – The Medical Careers Bulletin Board highlights different specialties every month. The newsletter is a means for fourth year students to provide advice to underclassmen about the process of choosing the right residency.
- **Interest Groups** – Each specialty has an interest group run by fourth year students going into that residency. The interest groups sponsor at least one meeting a semester with faculty, residents, and interns. These meetings provide general information about the specialty and the application process. In addition, the groups facilitate meaningful student contact with physicians in their fields of interest.

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Best thing about the program?

“The best thing about our program is the multi-faceted approach we take to career selection: mentoring, faculty advising, peer advising, self-reflection, shadowing, early exposure to a variety of specialties, informative materials, interest groups, and strong support from our Associate Dean of Students. In addition, our program is a student-led organization with major input and guidance from the Associate Dean for Students, Dr. Scott Rodgers. We currently have a president, vice-president, and five committees, each with a student chair. These committees focus on the following: Website Development, Marketing, the Backstage Pass Elective, Event Planning, and Advising/Mentoring. This organization benefits greatly from the energy, creativity, and organizational skills of the Vanderbilt students. The students understand that what they are doing in the program has the potential to benefit all students and they are therefore very committed and dedicated to ensuring the program’s success at Vanderbilt.” – Student Affairs Office