Use of Short Essays to Address Core Competencies in Medical School Pathology Education

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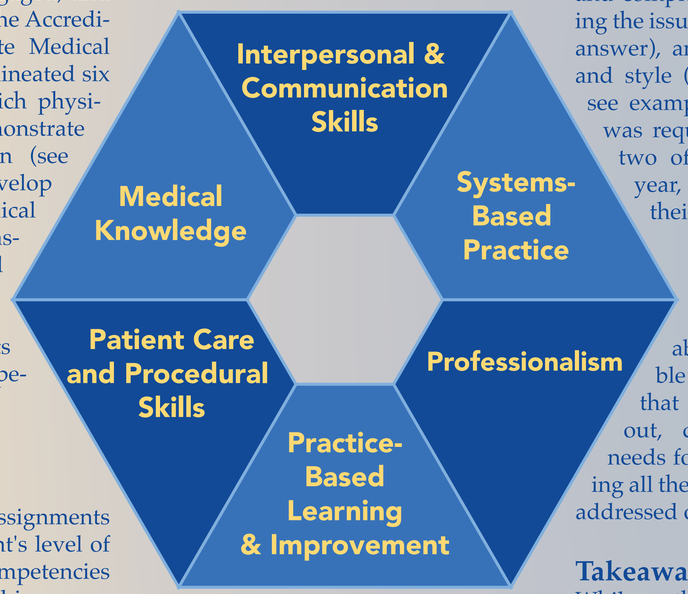
Purpose

The goal of graduate medical education is not just the transference of medical and clinical knowledge, but also the cultivation of successful, engaged, and enlightened professionals. The Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME) has delineated six "core competencies" in which physicians-in-training must demonstrate understanding and acumen (see **Figure**). Our goal was to develop a pathology-based medical school narrative writing assignment series, integrated into the PMD 410C-D team-based learning sessions, with the assignments mapped to one or more competency areas.

Figure: *The six ACGME Core Competencies*



Findings

Extant narrative writing assignments were assessed for the student's level of engagement with the core competencies of the ACGME and analyzed in a comparative matrix. Additional narrative assignments were developed to address competencies that were underrepresented (e.g., practice-based learning). A "modular" essay matrix was developed, which allowed for rotation of essay prompts based on topics covered, core competencies addressed, and course structure needs. While the competencies addressed in each essay were not explicitly shared with the students, the feedback has been positive, with students recognizing (both in their writing assignments and in course evaluations) the intersectionality of pathology-related medical knowledge and other domains of medical education.

Description

Incorporation of the core competencies into an already overfull pathology curriculum is a challenge. Out-of-class short writing assignments have been deployed in team-based learning (TBL) curricula elsewhere, but to our knowledge this is the first such work that has specifically addressed the ACGME Core Competencies in a systematic and comprehensive way. Practice-based learning was one of the core competencies that was under-represented by our short essays. More essays were developed to address this core competency.

Students were asked to complete the writing assignments prior to the associated TBL sessions, and the responses were assessed both for sophistication and complexity of thought in addressing the issues (often with no single right answer), and for clarity of expression and style (grammar, punctuation, etc; see examples at right). Each student was required to respond to at least two of the twelve prompts each year, which accounted for 5% of their final course grade.

By better understanding and mapping competencies to specific prompts, we were able to develop a more flexible "modular" system of essays that could be swapped in and out, depending on the course needs for a given year, while ensuring all the core competencies were still addressed over the course duration.

Takeaways

While pathology education has been typically approached with heavy emphasis on medical knowledge, our work shows that there are opportunities to incorporate all aspects of physician core competencies while increasing student engagement with material and topics. This approach reinforces for students that the traditionally "soft" or "humanistic" parts of medicine are not relegated to special sessions but are instead an integral component to becoming a competent and successful physician, regardless of specialty area. Further, a systematic approach to evaluation of a curricular element can illuminate gaps in learning outcomes and lead to a more adaptable teaching tool.

For sample essay responses, please contact the authors.

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