TITLE: Developing Student-Directed Learning Plans in Medical School

INTRODUCTION:

Self-directed, lifelong learning is important for the professional development of medical trainees and practicing physicians. Developing the skills to set meaningful learning goals and using individualized learning plans (ILP) to track and achieve these goals are strategies that can aide physicians with reflection, self-assessment, and the promotion of lifelong learning. Documentation of ILP is a requirement for pediatric resident physicians in the United States, and ILP are also gaining attention in medical student education, yet few programs/schools have created or implemented methods to promote the successful use of ILP by medical trainees. Studies have shown that learners often lack skills in developing and attaining personal learning goals and that they can benefit from learning goal education and experience.

By introducing ILP, via the curriculum, to the inaugural class of the Dell Medical School, our project aims to develop the skills of students, and their mentors, in successfully employing ILP in their practice. The study seeks to describe how medical students develop and attain personal learning goals when ILP are introduced early in medical school as part of a mentored program.

METHODS

Medical students utilize ILP as part of the new curriculum at Dell Medical School. The DOCS (Developing Outstanding Clinical Skills) Course is a mentored, longitudinal course that has embedded ILP for student learning and professional development. DOCS was designed to place the 50 first-year medical students into groups of five, along with one of 10 faculty members that have been selected as mentors for these small groups. The students and mentors meet weekly, throughout the academic year, to learn and practice important skills for clinical medicine. ILP have been incorporated into the DOCS curriculum as a tool for the students, and their faculty mentors, to use for self-assessment, reflection, feedback, and for personal & professional development.
Faculty- and student-development sessions were given to prepare participants for the ILP process. ILP are created and tracked by each student, and their faculty-mentor, using the I-SMART framework for developing learning goals (Goals are Important, Specific, Measurable, Accountable, Realistic, and Timely), which is well described in the literature. The student ILP is documented and monitored in the e-Portfolio section of Canvas, our school’s course management software. Students and faculty-mentors meet at assigned intervals (about every-other month, on average) to develop, review, revise, and track progress on the ILP.

The study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board of The University of Texas at Austin. This is a mixed-methods study, in which written data is being analyzed using a theory-driven approach. The ILP goals are also being scored using a validated rubric from the medical education literature. In addition to the students’ ILP documentation, the study will seek to obtain data through surveys, focus-groups, and/or brief semi-structured interviews with students and faculty in the Spring semester. ILP portfolio data, as well as interview and focus-group transcripts, are coded independently by two or more investigators, then discussed and reconciled as a group, and major themes are being identified to guide further analysis of the data.

RESULTS

The research team has just begun the process of gathering and analyzing ILP data from the students’ e-portfolios, having obtained singed consents from the students with permission to access their ILP electronically. We plan on presenting some preliminary data at the Healthcare Symposium and discussing some lessons-learned from our first semester of using ILP in the new medical school’s curriculum. We will review the process of qualitative analysis, which is currently in the iterative phase, and will share emerging themes from the analysis along with examples from the students’ ILP.

DISCUSSION

Individualized learning plans have been used in medical education as tools for the practice of self-directed, lifelong learning. As learners develop their skills in utilizing ILP for personal and professional development, mentorship can play an important role in the experience. Faculty mentors can help students overcome the limitations of self-assessment through guided-reflection and direct feedback.
At the Healthcare Symposium, we are excited to share our efforts in introducing ILP into the Dell Medical School’s curriculum as part of a longitudinal, faculty mentored learning experience. We hope to share some of the current literature and best-practice use of ILP from the medical education community and to report some early results from our own analysis of Dell Medical students’ ILP data. This forum will invite discussion from educators in other disciplines who may have experience with ILP or learning goal development within their own fields.

KEYWORDS: Medical Students, Goals, Reflection, Mentors, Portfolios

SELECTED REFERENCES:


