

Turning a ‘gap’ into a bridge

Alumnus offers practical clinical experience for students transitioning from pre-med to medical school

In increasing numbers, pre-medical graduates are taking one or two years off between college and medical school. The big question: How to make the best use of that time?

Nationally, more than 50 percent of pre-medical students take what is known as a “gap year,” explained Michael Penkoske, MD, a physician who also works as an adviser at Washington University’s Career Center. The reasons for taking a break vary, but one thing is certain — pre-meds need experiences that will help them get into medical school.

A popular gap year option among such students is medical research. For those interested in clinical experiences, School of Medicine alumnus and Boston dermatologist Louis Kuchnir, MD, PhD, is offering another choice. He invites students to gain exposure to medicine by working in his Massachusetts-based practice as patient care coordinators.

The position, which combines the roles of medical assistant and receptionist, brings students into the day-to-day operations of Kuchnir’s four-office practice. In addition to scheduling patients and answering phones, pre-meds assist the practice’s nine physicians and one nurse practitioner with minor procedures. Participants also attend medical lectures, accompany physicians to conferences and are expected to complete independent reading about dermatology.

What his protégés are saying

Jimmy Mao, AB ’12, said the experience strengthened his clinical skills and helped him gain acceptance to medical school. Mao is now in his second year at the University of Southern California.

After earning a bachelor’s degree from Washington University, Mao returned to his hometown to work as a research assistant. Although he had good grades and a solid MCAT score, he was not accepted in his first round of medical school applications because he lacked sufficient clinical and interpersonal experiences with patients and care providers. Penkoske, who was advising Mao at the time, thought Kuchnir’s internship could fill that gap. Following an interview, Kuchnir hired Mao, who remained in the position until he entered medical school two years later.

“It was a very good maturation process for me,” Mao said. “It gave me time to really understand medicine.”

Alec Zhu, AB ’14, agrees. Zhu, now a first-year medical student at Northwestern University in Chicago, worked for Kuchnir in 2014 and 2015.

“It’s totally worthwhile. I wouldn’t have traded it for any other experience,” he said. “I was actually involved in patient care.” Zhu appreciated the willingness of care providers to share their knowledge.

As a dermatology instructor at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, Kuchnir finds the role of educator a natural fit.

The idea for the program came by chance when, in 2011, he hired a college graduate (now a fourth-year medical student) whom he met through a local hospital’s volunteer office. Kuchnir was impressed with the student’s dedication and work ethic. “When he left to go to medical school, it hit me how much he appreciated the job,” Kuchnir said.

The following year, three students, including Mao, came aboard. Kuchnir then began the annual tradition of recruiting students from Washington University and six other college campuses.

In both 2014 and 2015, he hired 12 pre-meds for his practice, and referred eight more to other physicians. About one-third of the program’s participants are Washington University alumni.

Kuchnir hopes other alumni physicians will access what he sees as an untapped opportunity and create their own programs.

Experiencing the ‘nitty-gritty’

Jim Beirne, director of external relations at the Washington University Career Center, is working with several physicians across the country to assist in this endeavor. Beirne also helped Kuchnir by vetting the program and developing a job description to make it more relevant and appealing to pre-meds.

“This is a chance for the students to be involved in the nitty-gritty administration of a private medical office and also interact with patients,” Beirne said. “They’ve got a year’s worth of knowledge that they can talk about in their medical school interviews.”

Over the years, Kuchnir has demonstrated exceptional service and dedication to his alma mater. Since 2012, he has served on the School of Medicine committee for *Leading Together: The Campaign for Washington University*. In appreciation for the full-tuition Distinguished Alumni Scholarship he received as a medical student, Kuchnir gives annually to support today’s recipients.

In 2014, Kuchnir took on another role: that of a Washington University parent. His son, Kenneth, is a sophomore chemical engineering major.

Kuchnir and wife, Karen, also have three daughters. They live in Southborough, Massachusetts.



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William Zhu, BS ’14, observes as dermatologist Louis Kuchnir, MD ’97, PhD, treats a patient.