

University of Miami Miller School of Medicine

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Pathway in Ethics and Humanities Helps Fill Void 12.01.2010

Ashley Lawler is, by her own admission, a literature fiend, so when she arrived at the Miller School in 2009 to pursue her dream of becoming a doctor, she had misgivings about casting aside the analytical skills she developed as an English major for the empirical skills she employs in her basic science courses.

Fortunately, eight Miller School students who felt something missing from their medical school education enabled Lawler to pursue both her passions when they established the Medical Student Pathway in Ethics and the Humanities last year with two faculty advisors, Jeffrey Brosco, M.D., Ph.D., professor of pediatrics and adjunct professor of history, and Kenneth Goodman, Ph.D., professor of medicine and philosophy and founder of the UM Bioethics Program.

Thanks to the pathway, which is now seeking freshman applicants, Lawler can devote her extra-curricular time to exploring the uncanny connection she found between the rhythms of poetry and the rhythms of the heart. As a medical student she doesn't have much spare time, but she's thrilled to be involved in a program that makes her feel more well-rounded, and has the goal of improving communication between doctors, patients and the community.

"I studied poetry in college and when I got to med school and took cardiology I saw a connection between iambic pentameter (the most common meter in English poetry) and the normal sinus rate and rhythm of the heart," Lawler explains. "It's a novel perspective, but through the pathway, I can develop the link. Continuing to pursue my interest in English is important to me, and I believe that ultimately happier students go on to become better doctors."

Hers is not, of course, the typical medical school project. Neither are the poems and stories third-year student Benjamin Lemelman plans to self-publish in a small-circulation "zine" about his clinical experiences, nor the Hindi-language medical glossary second-year student Michael Muench is writing to help other English-speakers navigate patient care in India.

But like Lawler, they and other inaugural pathway students – Emerson Chen, Tynsia Harvey, and Ryan Hudson – believe they can enhance their study of clinical medicine by developing expertise in literature, art, philosophy, history, policy or some other ethics or humanities interest related to the medical profession.

The link between the humanities and medicine obviously resonates with faculty, too. Brosco notes that when he and Goodman introduced the pathway to faculty last spring, more than 30 volunteered to mentor students or participate as "associated" faculty in



The inaugural students in the Medical Student Pathway in Ethics and Humanities are, from left, Michael Muench, Tynsia Harvey, Ryan Hudson, Emerson Chen, Benjamin Lemelman and Ashley Lawler.

some way.

Under the pathway requirements, students must complete an in-depth, faculty-mentored project with a tangible outcome, and participate in at least 15 monthly pathway meetings and at least 15 ongoing experiences in ethics or humanities before graduating.

The meetings are informal gatherings where, under Brosco and Goodman's guidance, students present themes and issues in the practice of medicine through readings, music, case presentations and the like. They have, for example, listened to German composer Robert Shumann's Symphony No. 2 to discuss the relationship between creativity and mental illness.

The ongoing experiences, which students are required to chronicle in a portfolio, could include community service or attendance at clinical ethics committees or departmental Grand Rounds lectures on campus, and plays, concerts, lectures, or museum exhibitions off campus.

Though the pathway formalizes the extensive mentoring Brosco and Goodman, who oversee the medical school's ethics and professionalism curriculum, have long provided students interested in pursuing humanities and ethics projects, both professors credit Aliye Runyan and the other founding students for having the drive to make the pathway a reality.

Now on an NIH fellowship in Bethesda, Runyan said she first encountered the growing discipline of medical humanities during her undergraduate English studies, and was determined to find an academic home for it at the Miller School. Luckily, she connected with seven other students who shared her vision, or yearned to focus more on ethics. Even though they were too far along to take the pathway themselves, she and Michael Kritzer-Cherian, Ghislaine Guez, Joshua Lennon, Toral Parikh, Nima Motamedi, Daniel Cushman, and Matthew Wideroff worked tirelessly to establish the new track.

"While we weren't able to be pathway students, we reaped many benefits – in the process of creating the pathway, in interacting with pathway students at the monthly meetings, and in knowing that the school will benefit," Runyan said. "Clearly, we need science knowledge, but there is a lot to be said for being well-rounded."

For more information on the pathway, please visit [UM's Ethics Programs](#).