Psychiatry Recruitment Formula Based on Passionate Faculty

Joan Arehart-Treichel

If Bill Clinton didn’t put Arkansas on the map, psychiatrists teaching at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences may. They are very successful at recruiting medical students into psychiatry.

The University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences College of Medicine has been one of the national leaders among medical schools in recruiting medical students into psychiatry during the past four years, according to APA records.

In fact, a whopping 10 percent of seniors in the school have entered a psychiatry residency program—either there or elsewhere—during the past five years, according to John Spollen, M.D., an associate professor of psychiatry and vice chair of education at the school. That compares with a national average of between 4 percent and 5 percent during the past five years, according to National Resident Matching Program figures. “So we are about double the national average over the last five years,” he said.

So what’s the magic?

“We hit them early and hard with our behavioral science course, which is given during the second year of medical school,” Spollen told Psychiatric News. “We’re basically using the same behavioral science course that many other medical schools have. The difference is that ours is primarily, almost solely, taught by practicing psychiatrists. The vast majority of the first two years of medical school is taught by Ph.D.s or M.D.s who usually do research, so our faculty tend to stand out as people who actually see patients for a living. And love it. We also strongly encourage the teachers of the course to weave clinical stories into their presentations. Psychiatry is about stories, and it’s that fascination with the details of individual lives that makes medical students want to enter psychiatry rather than another field of medicine.”

Then, during their third year of medical school, Spollen continued, medical students tend to find their psychiatry rotation “interesting, fulfilling, and fun” and commit to it. And the major reason why they find the rotation captivating, he explained, is because the psychiatrists who teach it are passionate and charismatic. “We recruit faculty on the basis of whether they are great at what they do, are team players, and are fun to have dinner with.”

Can psychiatry educators in other medical schools learn from their successes? “Absolutely,” Spollen replied. “Pay attention to personality when recruiting faculty. Also, one way to lure psychiatrists whose passion is teaching onto your faculty is to offer them a tenure-track faculty appointment. We have a tenure track for clinician educators in our medical school, which most medical schools do not. In fact, our medical school has a long history of being a good place for teachers. Finally, make those first two years of medical school as exciting and clinically oriented as possible for students.”

So will Spollen and his colleagues continue to use similar strategies over the next few years to get medical students to sign on to psychiatry?” You bet,” he chuckled. “We’re on quite a roll.”

Related articles

More People Seeking MH Care Than Ever Before
Psychiatr News September 4, 2009 44:9–29
Full Text