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# MedPals: Shaping Futures and Enhancing Medical Education Through a One-on-One Mentorship Program

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## Abstract

With an increasing number of aspiring physicians and the desire for medical schools to select well-rounded students due to the goal of providing patient centered care in the future, the medical school application process has become more competitive. Websites and school admissions counselors provide a wealth of knowledge, but first-hand accounts from medical students who have personally been through the process, provide an added benefit and serve as invaluable resources for pre-medical students. Through a pilot mentorship program between Western Kentucky University (WKU) and the University of Kentucky College of Medicine (UKCOM)'s Bowling Green campus, pre-medical students (mentees) were paired with first-, second-, and third- year medical students (mentors) based on common interests. Mentees and mentors met in-person at monthly workshops and remained in constant email communication throughout the Spring and Fall 2024 semesters. Overall, the pilot program was successful. Mentors gained leadership skills, and mentees received access to the medical students' experiences. WKU students' scheduled classes were barriers to mentees attending workshops causing fluctuating attendance percentages. To increase event turnout, the program's leadership will review pre-medical class times prior to scheduling meeting dates and times. Based on end-of-the-year survey comments, participants recommended the program hosts more events to continue to foster the mentor/mentee relationship. Continuing to better the program will accomplish its goal of impacting medical education.

## Introduction

As the number of aspiring physicians continues to climb, medical schools are becoming more selective in their search process. Medical schools are seeking applicants who demonstrate academic excellence, relevant experiences, attributes like empathy, compassion, and resilience, all while showcasing a genuine commitment to medicine with the overarching goal of providing patient-centered care in the future. The combination of these two factors has led to a more competitive application process. Although websites and school admissions counselors provide a wealth of information and knowledge, first-hand accounts from medical students, who have personally and recently been through the process, serve as invaluable resources for pre-medical students. Medical school admissions are among the most selective processes in higher education, with an acceptance rate of roughly 42% in 2023 according to the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC).<sup>1</sup> Aspiring physicians must navigate a complex

landscape of pre-requisite courses, standardized testing, clinical experience, extracurricular activities, research investigations, and volunteering opportunities with minimal near-peer guidance. Near-peer mentorship program emergence offers a promising addition to medical school recruitment efforts all while offering a level of support to prospective applicants that is effective with improved temporal relevance. In a study pairing medical students with residents, medical students saw an increase in the amount of conference presentations and other academic awards, while residents gained leadership and communication skills.<sup>2</sup> This framework can be applied to medical students paired with undergraduate students. Near-peer mentorship is also valuable in recruiting students to a regional medical school as undergraduate students get to see other students who were once in their shoes succeed at a higher level.<sup>3</sup> This paper examines how specifically near-peer mentorship models provide beneficial guidance and a support system that assists

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pre-med students as they navigate the admissions process in hopes of achieving success.

Medical school evaluation is a holistic process evaluating academic performance, Medical College Admission Test (MCAT) scores, clinical experience, leadership, research, volunteering, and extracurricular activities.<sup>4</sup> However, often highly qualified candidates face rejection due to the high volume of applicants. This intense competition underscores the need for comprehensive preparation, strategic application planning, and resilience.

To combat the national physician shortage, especially in the state of Kentucky, the University of Kentucky College of Medicine (UKCOM) opened its first 4-year regional campus in Bowling Green, Kentucky. To make this campus a reality, an educational partnership was established with Western Kentucky University (WKU). Regional campus students are offered the same integration of lectures in clinical sciences and interactive labs as the main UKCOM campus but with the support of other WKU facilities. Regional campuses would not be possible without the assistance of undergraduate universities and other community resources. In a student-led effort, two medical students from the UKCOM Bowling Green campus connected with two pre-medical students from WKU to formulate a mentorship program, MedPals, between WKU and UKCOM's Bowling Green campus. MedPals being at a regional campus leverages the strength of a smaller, community focused campus to expand leadership opportunities to medical students that are not as easily accessible like they are on a main campus while also formulating meaningful mentorship relationships with potential future students.

## Methods

In Fall 2023, MedPals began the organization process with the goal of strengthening the educational partnership, providing leadership opportunities for medical students, and offering support for undergraduate students. Medical students from UKCOM Bowling Green reached out to the WKU chapter presidents of Alpha Epsilon Delta (AED), a National Health Preprofessional Honor Society, and the American Medical Student Association (AMSA).

The connection with the WKU student leadership allowed the UKCOM Bowling Green student leadership to reach a majority of pre-medical students at WKU. UKCOM Bowling Green student leadership sent out a Google Form with basic questions to the chapter presidents in Fall 2023 to distribute to their members. The interest form assessed the pre-medical student population regarding majors of choice and hobbies outside of academics. After receiving the completed forms, the UKCOM Bowling Green student leadership matched pre-medical students (mentees) with first-, second-, and third- year medical students (mentors) based on common interests from the forms. Mentees and mentors met in-person at monthly workshops for a total of 4 meetings and remained in constant email communication throughout the 2024 spring semester. After a successful first semester, the MedPals leadership repeated the Google Form and matching process for the 2024-2025 academic calendar year. If mentors and mentees were both returning to the program, they were repaired together. From September 2024 to March 2025, the program held five meetings. Throughout the organization of MedPals, three goals remained at the forefront of planning. First, impacting medical school recruitment and interest efforts. Second, increasing awareness of regional medical campus opportunities for pre-medical students as well as providing leadership experiences for medical students. Lastly, improve the academic relationship between WKU and UKCOM Bowling Green.

## Results

Thirty-six WKU pre-medical and 36 UKCOM Bowling Green students participated in the program (Table 1). The first workshop acted as a "meet and greet" for mentors and mentees to introduce themselves with a 79% turnout. 63% of participants attended the second meeting, a tour of UKCOM's Bowling Green campus for mentees to see a day-in-the-life of a medical student. A 5-person medical student panel was the third event. 36% of mentees attended to ask questions to learn about medical student experiences. To begin to tackle the application cycle, 42% of mentees attended an American Medical College Application Service (AMCAS) workshop to learn the intricacies of the application (Figure 1).

After implementing the suggestions addressed in the Discussion session, 41 WKU pre-medical and 40 UKCOM Bowling Green students participated during the Fall 2024 semester. Starting a new academic calendar, a new “meet and greet” workshop was initiated which resulted in a 93% turnout. The second meeting resulted in a 30% turnout with the topic of discussion being “Resources and Strategies for the MCAT”. 55% of mentees attended the third and final meeting of the semester to gain insight and information on shadowing and volunteering opportunities in Bowling Green. Mentees started the Spring 2025 semester with a mid-year check-in meeting that resulted in a 33% turnout. 40% of mentees attended a tour of UKCOM’s Bowling Green campus for mentees to see a day-in-the-life of a medical student. To round out the 2024-2025 academic year, MedPals held another AMCAS workshop in April.

Since initiation of MedPals, program leadership has tracked mentorship participation with UKCOM Bowling Green acceptance. Six private tours and seven advising meetings were scheduled by mentees. Three mentees were accepted and are part of the incoming Class of 2029. Four mentees were accepted to the 2025 cycle of the Early Assurance Program. The program will then start its third year in Fall 2025. Table 2 provides quotes from the survey comments of both mentors and mentees regarding aspects they enjoy about the program, supporting the success of the program.

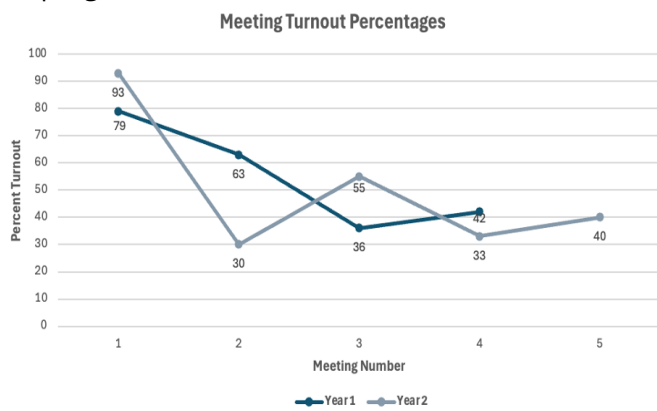


Figure 1: Meeting turnout percentages for Year 1 (Spring 2024) and Year 2 (Fall and Spring 2025)

Total Numbers	Year 1	Year 2
Mentees	36	41
Mentors	36	40

Table 1: Total mentor and mentee numbers for Year 1 (Spring 2024) and Year 2 (Fall and Spring 2025)

Positive Aspects from Mentees
“I liked being able to meet my mentee in person so we could have the time to talk in person. I also liked the med school application PowerPoint that was presented to us because there was a ton of useful information.”
“I liked every activity during the time I was taking part in the program. Specially, visiting UKBG campus and a meeting to learn how to navigate AMCAS system were really helpful for me. It reduces my confusion and lets me know what I should do. All the mentors are extremely nice, kind, and willing to answer every question” “Meet and greet, useful workshops”
“Very laid back and personal”
“I liked the tour, getting more details on program structure and details, making new connections with med students”
“It is a very friendly atmosphere and great learning experience”
Positive Aspects from Mentors
“I think the mission is great and the program has the opportunity to help many people”
“It was very rewarding to watch my mentee mature and become prepared for medical school applications throughout the year”
“This program allowed me to have a leadership role and further my skills in mentoring, while also recruiting for UKCOM-BG”

Table 2: Quotes from end-of-year survey

## Discussion

After completion of the first two semesters of MedPals, the leadership team made headway towards the goal of implementing a support system for pre-medical students as they navigate the medical school admissions process with the long-term intention of combating the national physician shortage. For example as mentioned in the Results section, campus engagements have increased, more students have reached out to UKCOM Bowling Green faculty to schedule individual campus tours, and more students have discussed eligibility criteria for the Early Assurance Program, which is an opportunity for students at selected Kentucky undergraduate institutions to apply their sophomore year to any one of the UKCOM Regional Campuses. Additionally, the academic partnership between UKCOM Bowling Green and WKU continues to be reinforced as three previous program participants are matriculating as part of the Class of 2029.

### **Adaptability**

Formulating a leadership team containing medical students passionate about mentorship, faculty advisors at the medical school and undergraduate university, and students at the undergraduate university will be key to creating a successful program. The medical school and undergraduate faculty work as a support system for the flourishing of the program. The students at the undergraduate university give insight into class schedules and how to reach out to undergraduate students that would be interested in participating in the program. Through a dedicated student leadership team, a program similar to MedPals can be implemented at regional campus medical schools.

### **Limitations**

Due to the nature of undergraduate students changing majors, one of the limitations encountered by MedPals was having students drop out of the program without notifying program leadership. This may have caused a variation in attendance. Additionally, WKU students' scheduled classes were barriers to mentees attending workshops, which caused fluctuating attendance percentages. Lastly, another limitation of program attendance was due to mentees being at different stages of their undergraduate education. For instance, a senior-distinction mentee that has already completed the MCAT did not need to attend the "Resources and Strategies for the MCAT" workshop but did attend the "AMCAS workshop" meeting, which would be the opposite for a sophomore-distinction mentee.

### **Future Direction**

To increase event turnout, the program's leadership will review pre-medical class times prior to scheduling meeting dates and times. Based on end-of-the-year survey comments, participants recommended the program hosts more events to continue to foster the mentor/mentee relationship. Table 3 provides quotes from the survey comments of both mentors and mentees covering pieces of the program that could be improved upon. To reach more students, program leadership plans to reach out to Intro to Biology class and General Chemistry class professors. They plan to reach out to these professors and ask if it would be possible to attend their classes to present the program to the new freshman students and

encourage them to sign up. Additionally, program leadership will attend WKU chapter meetings of AED and AMSA to bring awareness about MedPals. When attending these meetings, program leadership will make the full workshop schedule known and available to all students interested as a request from previous mentees. Lastly, as an effort to integrate suggestions from the areas of improvement survey comments, the program plans to create a virtual version of the program where Zoom workshops will be offered to surrounding undergraduate institutions including Murray State University and Centre College. A one-day "open-house" will be provided for any mentees wanting to visit UK COM Bowling Green. Attending these classes and meetings and expanding the program to a virtual option will allow the program to grow and continue to work toward its ultimate goal of positively impacting medical school recruitment and interest efforts.

**Table 3**

Areas of Improvement from Mentees
"Perhaps a steadier schedule to continue to build relationships between the mentors and mentees"
"Add more events"
Areas of Improvement from Mentors
"I think offering more casual events regularly to build that mentor/mentee relationship would be good."
"As a graduate from Murray State, I think meetings via Zoom with pre-medical students at other universities would be beneficial. I know it would've helped me during my undergraduate years."

Table 3: Areas of improvement from end-of-year survey

### **Conclusions**

Overall, the pilot program was successful. Mentors gained leadership skills, and mentees received knowledge about medical students' experiences and the application process. Due to the continuous need of increasing physicians throughout the Commonwealth of Kentucky, and specifically in rural areas, this mentorship program brings awareness of the local undergraduate university about the regional campus. This is in hopes that those students eventually matriculate to UKCOM BG with even further hopes of remaining in Bowling Green and the surrounding rural counties to continue to service the Commonwealth. Although MedPals experienced

fluctuating attendance numbers, the goal of strengthening the academic relationship between UKCOM Bowling Green and WKU to increase awareness of the regional medical campus opportunity and its mission was achieved. Continuing to improve the program will accomplish its goal of impacting medical education by assisting qualified students understand the application cycle and medical student experience. In total, a mentorship program enhances the understanding of what medical education entails while helping develop well-informed prospective applicants.

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