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PERSONAL CHOICE

THROUGH THE SELECTIVES PROGRAM, STUDENTS CHOOSE AND PROPOSE TOPICS OF STUDY THAT INTEREST AND EXCITE THEM

STUDYING TO BECOME a successful dentist is rigorous and time-consuming, but throughout the process there should always be room for self-discovery and personal growth. That's the philosophy behind Penn Dental Medicine's Selectives — required courses, taken for credit, that are chosen by students based on personal or professional interests.

"The Selectives Program is a part of the dental school curriculum that students can control," says Dr. Faizan Alawi, Associate Dean for Academic Affairs. "Our students have a long and rigorous day, often from 7:30 in the morning to 6 in the evening. It's important that they have time for activities that support their own emotional well-being and interests."

Running the gamut from seminars that expose students to professional areas outside of mainstream practice, such as veterinary or forensic dentistry, to subjects that have nothing to do with dentistry, such as music or painting, Selectives ensure that each student's

DMD degree program will be unique, with some options that reflect his or her personal interests and goals. While some students choose to use the credits to delve further into research or community service to enhance their dental resume, others use the time to escape from all things dental by relaxing and tapping into their physical or creative sides.

Each Penn Dental Medicine DMD student must complete 4.5 credits of Selectives in order to graduate, with specific requirements in the second and third year. Although there is no requirement for first- and fourth-year students, they are invited to take Selectives as well. Selectives are not graded: regular attendance is all that is necessary to pass. Registration is online on a first-come, first-served basis, with class times designed to work around academic schedules.

In the 2016–2017 academic year, more than 40 Selectives were offered, and to keep the Selectives experience timely and relevant, new Selectives are introduced each academic year. New course proposals are reviewed by Dr. Alawi; if the proposed course shows a clear benefit to students, is taught by qualified instructors, and is appropriate for its intended audience, it is usually approved.

STUDENTS TAKE THE LEAD IN COURSE DEVELOPMENT

While all members of the Penn Dental Medicine community, including faculty, staff, alumni, and students, are invited to propose new Selectives, students have recently taken the lead in introducing new courses: of the ten new offerings in the past two years, seven were proposed by individual students or student organizations (For a list of these student-proposed Selectives, see the sidebar on page 31). Students must develop a proposal for a Selectives course in conjunction with a faculty advisor.

The American Association of Public Health Dentistry (AAPHD) and the Penn Dental Medicine Multidisciplinary Initiative (PDMMI) Executive Board, both student organizations at Penn Dental Medicine, each proposed a popular Selectives course that was introduced last academic year and offered again this year.

The AAPHD's proposed course, titled "Access to Health Care," included four lectures on various issues of public health, including Native American public health, public health abroad, mental health, and homeless health. The lecturers include Penn

LEFT: Dr. Faizan Alawi, Associate Dean for Academic Affairs, meets with students presenting ideas for Selectives courses.

Dental Medicine faculty and a health care advocate for the homeless in Philadelphia. Members of the AAPHD worked with Dr. Joan Gluch, Division Chief of Community Oral Health, to propose the course, which drew more than 50 participants.

“The students were drawn to this Selective because the topics correlate directly to many of our personal interests and career goals,” says Mohammad Mousavian (D’19), the AAPHD’s Journal and Education Chair. “It was empowering to hear about public health opportunities domestically and internationally, how small efforts make large impacts, and how we can contribute as health care providers.”



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— MOHAMMAD MOUSAVIAN (D’19)

The PDMMI’s proposal was a seminar series called “An Integrative Approach to Health Care,” and featured Penn Dental Medicine faculty sharing their perspectives on the impact that a medical approach to dentistry can have on quality of care, success of treatment, and overall patient satisfaction. Lecture topics included dentistry in a hospital setting and dental care for HIV patients. The course was proposed by Belle Chen (D’17) and the other members of the PDMMI Executive Board.

“A handful of my classmates and I felt very strongly about the idea that dentists are an integral part of the modern health care team, and we wanted to create a learning environment where this idea could be explored further,” says Belle. “The lecture series gave us, as students, the ability to direct and guide our own education and pursue an area of interest we felt was important to us personally, as well as to network with like-minded colleagues and faculty.”

Belle’s advisor for the course was Dr. Thomas Sollecito (D’89, GD’91), Chair and Professor of Oral Medicine. “Belle and her team sought out my department because we interface with physician and nurse colleagues on a regular basis,” says Dr. Sollecito. “We worked with her and her team to refine the concept for the course and to give the students a broader perspective of how and what we do in dental medicine fits into overall patient health.”

Dr. Sollecito adds that for the last few years he has also offered a one-on-one Oral Medicine Clerkship as a Selectives option. This one-day experience gives students the opportunity to observe how he diagnoses and medically manages patients, whose concerns may be very different from those students address regularly in clinic.

“My patients have non-tooth-related problems, like oral cancers or salivary gland diseases, that most students read about in textbooks but never get to see,” he says. “This experience gives them a chance to connect what is going on in the mouth with the



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patient’s health overall. My hope is that when students get into practices of their own, they remember something they saw during the clerkship that might help them better treat their patients, or in fact, save their lives.”

AN EMPHASIS ON PERSONAL WELL-BEING

While Mohammad and Belle proposed Selectives that allowed students to dive deeper into specific facets of professional dentistry, Daniel Shimansky (D’17), took a very different approach when he proposed “Mindful-based Stress Reduction (MBSR) for Dental Students” last year. Mindfulness is a state of enhanced awareness that arises by training oneself to live more consciously, vibrantly, and purposefully in the present moment.

Taught by Aurora Casta, PhD, and Marilia Marien, PhD, of Penn’s Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) program, the course, which consisted of eight weekly sessions and a six-hour silent retreat, focused on using techniques of MBSR, such as breath awareness, mindful movement meditation, walking meditation, and sitting meditation to help reduce the anxiety that is common in the lives of dental students.

"We live in a very distracted and chaotic time, and integrating a mindful way of being is an opportunity to bring more choice and freedom to everyday life," says Daniel. "I wanted to offer dental students a training that would help them deal with academic pressures while in school and simultaneously equip them with the important life skill of remaining calm and resilient in the face of outside pressures."

The registration for the MBSR course filled almost immediately, despite the fact that it is one of the most time-consuming Selectives, with two-and-a-half hour weekly sessions and practice required outside of class. "The course's popularity reflects the need and desire among students to manage their stress," says Daniel. While the course is not offered at the dental school as a Selective this year, a similar version is available University-wide through CAPS, and can be taken by dental students for Selectives credit.

With its emphasis on personal well-being, Daniel's course proposal fit in perfectly with an increasing School-wide focus on



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wellness. As part of orientation for first-year students this academic year, the School introduced sessions dedicated to coping with stress, nutrition, counseling and psychological services at Penn, sexual violence prevention and support services, and fitness. In addition, counseling services are now available at the School through CAPS, and students have also launched a wellness club; its members take part in stress-busting activities, such as meditation, mindfulness, yoga, and other exercises, and address issues related to work-life balance, nutrition, health, and safety.

VALUABLE PERSPECTIVES ON DENTAL CAREERS

Selectives can also be proposed and taught by Penn Dental Medicine alumni, a dynamic that benefits students by providing a glimpse of the real world of dentistry after graduation and introducing professional networking opportunities.

For example, this year, Dr. Evan Eisler (D'15), who practices in Philadelphia and northern New Jersey, introduced AcciDental: Dental Trauma 101, for the first time. Dr. Eisler wishes he had had more exposure to dental trauma cases when he was a student, and felt that current students could benefit from an in-depth exploration of this important topic. In his Selectives course, students learn how to diagnose and treat emergent cases of dental trauma, and how to follow up on them as the patient heals. Students in his course absorb a valuable blend of Dr. Eisler's extensive knowledge and personal experience as a recent graduate.

Whether students choose Selectives to expand their professional horizons, conquer stress, or something in between, the benefits behind this flexible part of the Penn Dental Medicine curriculum are the same: freedom to choose a course of study that is personally meaningful, and "me time" that satisfies students' curiosity and thirst for knowledge.

"Our goal is for our students to be engaged in and enriched by their Selectives courses," says Dr. Alawi, "and to leave with smiles on their faces." ■

— By Juliana Delany

WITH STUDENT INPUT, SELECTIVES ARE ALWAYS TIMELY AND RELEVANT

The Selectives program is continually evolving, with proposals from students on the rise. In the past two years, seven new student-proposed courses have been approved. They include:

Access to Health Care Seminar Series

Proposed by: The student chapter of the AAPHD (American Association of Public Health Dentistry)

Integrative Health Care Seminar Series

Proposed by: The students of the PDMMI (Penn Dental Medicine Multidisciplinary Initiative) Executive Board

Implant Dentistry and

Osseointegration Science

Proposed by: The Academy of Osseointegration Study Club

Implant Study Club

Proposed by and open to: Implant Study Club members

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Course for Dental Students

Proposed by: Daniel Shimansky, D'17

Self Care and Patient Care through Interprofessional Collaboration

Proposed by: The Penn Dental Women's Network

Treating Patients with Mental Health Disorders

Proposed by: Gerry Schwartz, D'19, and Biana Gotlibovsky, D'19