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By Mike Martin, special to the Reporter

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This July in Florida, a group of newly minted medical students embarked on their training. But instead of heading to gross anatomy lab or a biochemistry lecture, these students spent five days learning about empathy, cultural competence, and self-awareness.

The unusual training is part of a new approach to selecting medical students, one that evaluates applicants based on “emotional intelligence,” as well as academic credentials and aptitude. The program, titled Scholarly Excellence, Leadership Experiences, and Collaborative Training (SELECT), is a joint effort between the University of South Florida College of Medicine (USF) in Tampa and Lehigh Valley Health Network in Pennsylvania. SELECT seeks to combine several personality-focused disciplines—from ethnic diversity training to physician-patient communication—into a seamless educational track that emphasizes empathic leadership and emotional resilience.

The opportunity for medical students to get personal motivated USF Dean Stephen Klasko, M.D., to develop and promote SELECT for several years.

“We see a higher rate of leadership failure in medicine because leadership selection doesn’t as strongly consider qualities that business embraces, like emotional intelligence,” he explained. “Business recognizes that traditional methods of picking leaders—according to accomplishment in their fields, for instance—don’t always work. So my partners and I asked: What if we took leadership training ideas from business and applied them to medicine? The answer was SELECT.”

SELECT represents one attempt to evaluate medical students for their overall readiness for medicine, their commitment to service, and other traits in addition to intellectual capacity. This new focus generally is known as holistic review.

After the usual quantitative metrics—GPA and MCAT® exam scores, for example—narrow the field to only the most academically deserving candidates, finalists undergo qualitative “behavioral event interviews” designed to seek indications of emotional intelligence: stability, flexibility, adaptability, and even warmth.

“We are beginning to address some of the educational challenges we’ve identified,” said Alicia Monroe, M.D., USF medical school’s vice dean for educational affairs. “We teach students the technical and academic side of medicine, but we don’t necessarily help them cultivate mindfulness, self-awareness, empathy, and other personality traits equally critical to their success as physicians.”

Emotional intelligence in interpersonal and communication skills are two of six core competencies the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education identified in 2008 as essential for medical school graduates.

According to Daisy Grewal, Ph.D., and Heather Davidson, Ph.D., of the Stanford School of Medicine’s department of graduate medical education and co-authors of a 2008 study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association, emotional intelligence (sometimes known as EQ) is defined as the ability to perceive, use, understand, and manage emotions. EQ “may allow students and residents to develop competence” and could help medical education progress by creating better learning, working, and caring environments, the authors stated.

The idea that medical schools need to nurture personal as well as academic competencies has become a leading educational issue, said Henry Sondheimer, M.D., the AAMC’s senior director of admissions. SELECT, he added, is “right out in front with the leaders in this area.”

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Interpersonal skills training helps address some of the biggest complaints about medical practice, such as poor bedside manner and physician burnout, Sondheimer said.

“We believe the SELECT program will help physicians work at the top of their license by encouraging teamwork and improving workplace satisfaction,” said Lehigh CEO Ronald Swinfard, M.D. “We can’t burden students with more didactic learning, so our goal is to model behaviors and show them how to be collaborative and proactive.”

With 19 members of USF’s 120-student class participating in this year’s inaugural outing, SELECT ultimately will “reach a steady state of 56 students,” USF’s Monroe said.

More intense and greater in number than standard applicant interviews, the multiple, short meetings associated with assessing EQ can gauge non-cognitive parameters far better than written tests, said Sondheimer. “Most psychometricians say that anytime you ask for written responses, you are actually getting people’s cognitive abilities,” he said. “If you want to get new information, you have to get it in a non-written format.”

In use at just 15 U.S. medical schools, behavioral event interviews are relatively new in medicine. But corporations have used the tool for 20 years.

The goal is straightforward, said Suzanne Rotondo, executive director of Pennsylvania-based Teleos Leadership Institute, which helped design SELECT. Emotionally intelligent leaders tap into positive emotions like optimism, and as such, often are better managers than emotionally dissonant leaders, who drive others through negative emotions such as fear and shame.

“We adapted the business methodology for medical student interviews, asking applicants to discuss real situations they have experienced in great detail, with continuous probing,” Rotondo said. “These interviews get underneath applicants’ ‘plug-and-play’ responses—they can’t fake their answers, and we can find behavioral indicators that demonstrate emotional intelligence.”

Some USF students admitted to SELECT noted the differences between the two admissions processes.

“The SELECT interview was challenging in a different way,” said student Kanchi Batra. “It forced me to step out of my comfort zone and recall details from past events I hadn’t necessarily considered previously. It was a test of your ability to handle a different type of stress.”

Asked to discuss “landmark events” in his life, fellow SELECT student Kirk Chassey said the interview was longer than most, with “shorter, more personalized questions that allowed the candidate to reflect on what makes them do what they do and analyze why. It was my opportunity to show the interviewers who I am.”