THE RIGHT TOPICS AT THE RIGHT TIME
An Advanced Clinical Skills Course for Senior Medical Students

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PURPOSE
In medical curricula, both educators and students often express frustration when a topic is presented too early for students to have an adequate context for assimilating the material or too late for students to get the maximal benefit. Senior students can be quite insightful about their personal learning needs, particularly once they have begun to settle on a residency decision and are on their way to becoming life-long self-directed learners. Curriculum leaders, including faculty and students, have identified specific topic areas for which many or all students would benefit from focused instruction: at the midpoint of the clinical years.

METHODS
Based on curriculum committee and focus group recommendations, a one-week course was offered at the breakpoint between the third and fourth year. Using a modular, CME-style format, each half-day of the course addressed an entirely separate topic. All students attended sessions on Diagnostic Imaging, Cardiology Diagnostics, Advanced Clinical Procedures, Dermatology, Medical Informatics, and Medical Devices. During the remaining three half-days, students constructed their own program, selecting from among ten advanced topics: Applied Clinical Pharmacology, Pathology for Generalists, Emergency Sonography, Central Venous Cannulation, Obstetrics Emergencies, Minimally Invasive Surgical Skills, Disaster Medicine Essentials, Clinical Skills Assessment, Musculoskeletal Disorders, and Medical Legal Concerns. Most sessions were conducted in small group and workshop formats, with a minimum of lecture time. Some sessions stressed basic science updates with clinical utility presented as case studies, and some sessions stressed the acquisition of resident-level clinical skills, which were particularly useful for planned acting internships.

RESULTS
Student ratings of the quality and relevance of the course were extremely positive. They specifically rated the ten selectives at a 5, on a 5-point scale—a rare occurrence among any students, but especially so among seniors. Student comments revealed that they valued certain key features of the courses: the timeliness of the subjects presented; the level at which they were addressed; the credibility of the importance of these subjects, based on their own third-year experiences; and the opportunity to set a portion of the agenda for themselves. Students readily accepted the package of seemingly disparate topics in a single course, linked by the common theme of being “subjects that required additional emphasis in the curriculum.” In fact, the determinedly pragmatic focus on discrete issues was seen to be a major strength of the course.

CONCLUSIONS
The beginning of the fourth year provides a unique teachable moment when students can benefit from focused instruction on topics that both faculty and students consider to be important but that may need to be presented more intensely than the third-year curriculum allows. Providing students with a selective curriculum is practical and is a valuable opportunity for students to customize their coursework to meet individual needs. The course occurs in an “ideal teaching window.” At this point in the curriculum, students have had sufficient clinical experience to understand which areas in the general curriculum require further emphasis, and they are able to profit from both residency-level and basic science focused teaching. Enthusiastic evaluations by students support both the content and the placement of this course.

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