**Purpose:** Medical student curricula are packed with essential courses and content that all students must master, yet most students find time to pursue areas of personal interest. A goal of the recent curricular revision was to provide increased opportunities for such exploration and growth. We believe, and students confirm, that pursuing studies beyond the required curriculum helps students understand the connection between their basic science coursework and medical practice, and provides exposure to topics and specialties that cannot readily be included in the core curriculum.

**Methods:** During the 1st and 2nd years students have 2 afternoons per week with no scheduled course activities. These times are reserved for self-directed learning, including preparation for PBL sessions, participation in Areas of Concentration, and work on the scholarly project. A mini-elective structure was developed to provide well-structured, rigorous and high quality experiences in areas not typically available to students (especially students in the pre-clinical years).

Mini-electives are created by a course director in concert with curriculum leaders, and must include the same elements of structure, objectives, requirements and a curriculum as any other course offering. The courses typically involve 4 to 8 two-hour sessions, one day per week, and include out-of-class preparation or assignments. These courses are graded on a pass-fail basis, and students receive a certificate of completion rather than a transcript entry. Students are provided with a detailed course outline and as much curricular detail as possible, so they may make informed selections.

**Results:** Course offerings since 2006 include: Advanced Pediatric Interviewing, Art and Medicine, Concepts in Human Motion, Medical Journalism, Medicine and Literature, Natural History of Medicine, Nutrition & Complementary Medicine, Occupational Medicine for Medical Students, Pandemic Preparedness and Response, and The Healer’s Art. These courses have been heavily subscribed by students, with several courses having to establish a waiting list for enrollment. Course evaluations have revealed that the student assessment of content and quality has equaled and often exceeded the norm. Faculty are continuing to make proposals for new offerings. Unlike the typical course offering, there have been no reports of difficulty in recruiting instructors – likely a result of self-selection and excitement about the opportunity to teach in a domain of a faculty’s special interest or expertise. In some cases, students have made new connections with faculty that have resulted in unique scholarly project undertakings (e.g. investigation of an Egyptian mummy at the Carnegie Museum of Natural History).

**Conclusions:** Mini-electives represent a golden opportunity to use small aliquots of time to help students explore topics that complement their core education. These have been terrifically popular with students, even though these are rigorous courses that demand time and preparation. Faculty welcome the chance to work with keenly interested students who want to reach beyond the core curriculum. The mini-elective program has been a highly successful addition to the curriculum, and is a model that can readily be adopted by other institutions.