Background: Medical schools and their undergraduate components are often only related at the administrative levels of a university. In an effort to open communication between the two entities and encourage the brightest local students to consider medical education at the same institution, a course was designed for the Undergraduate Honors College. Students in the Honors College with a sophomore standing, and who had completed a General Biology course were eligible for the course.

Objectives: The primary objective of the new course, Biomedicine: Past, Present & Future, was for students to develop a broad appreciation of what constitutes the revolution in biomedicine over the past five centuries and how it applies to today’s concepts of health. A secondary objective was to instill in the students a sense of responsibility to educate themselves as new aspects of biomedicine emerge. Upon completing the course, students gained the ability to critically evaluate such topics as the war on cancer, transplantation, healthcare economics, drug development, genomics and medical ethics. Finally, the course was designed to expose undergraduates to a host of diverse medical school faculty. Award winning teachers, department chairs, top researchers, clinical faculty, and medical school administrators all contributed to the instruction of the course.

Methods: The course was designed to expose students to medical concepts from their origins, to their current application and implications. Twelve major biomedical themes were each examined in two 1-½ hour sessions. On each theme, the first session explored the historical, social and scientific elements that advanced as well as impeded the theme. The second session jumped to the forefront of modern medicine to illustrate current developments of the theme. As this was an Honors College course, the class preparation requirements were considerable. For each theme students read pertinent historical references, primary source material and selected state-of-the-art material, usually amounting to 30-40 pages. The class was limited to a small group where discussion was an integral part. Essay examinations were an extrapolation of those discussions; students were given a choice to complete 5 essays of 8, realizing that different students may connect with different issues. To develop an awareness of the broad range of medical science at the school, students were also required to attend and write a review of one seminar of the plethora offered that semester at the School of Medicine. A 10-12 page research paper completed the formal course requirements.

Results: Student and faculty enthusiasm for this course was enormous. Many faculty had never considered the historical perspective of their specialty before. There were more offers to participate in the teaching than there was class time! Student response, after the first year, has led to three decisions to apply to the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine. As a spin off of this course, a new undergraduate certificate in the History of Medicine has been created. The three required courses all emanate from the School of Medicine; secondary course offerings are from the undergraduate arena as well as from two neighboring universities. This new Certificate in the History of Medicine is the first multi-university certificate program in Pittsburgh.