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John C. Burkhardt, MD, PhD: Opening minds

Path of Excellence gives students opportunity to impact source of medical profession



John C. Burkhardt, MD, PhD is an Assistant Professor in Emergency Medicine and Learning Health Sciences. In addition to Dr. Burkhardt's clinical work in Emergency Medicine, he has earned both a Master's and PhD in Higher Education. His research focuses on critically reevaluating medical education policy to increase fairness, equity and ultimately address health care disparities.

Dr. Burkhardt is one of several Michigan Medicine faculty who lead our [Paths of Excellence](https://medicine.umich.edu/medschool/education/md-program/curriculum/impact-curriculum/paths-excellence) (<https://medicine.umich.edu/medschool/education/md-program/curriculum/impact-curriculum/paths-excellence>), co-curricular opportunities that offer med students a deeper dive into eight different specialized areas of health care. Approximately 80-90 percent of our M1 students join a Path of Excellence each year. Dr. Burkhardt is a co-director of the Scholarship of Learning & Teaching Path of Excellence. Here, he answers nine questions about his Path and how med students can benefit from joining one that interests them.

How did you first become involved with the Scholarship of Learning & Teaching Path of Excellence?

I have been involved in medical education scholarship since my emergency medicine residency training at U-M. As the Path of Excellence programs were developed and rolled out based on student interests, a Path focused on medical education was proposed to be added in 2016. Initially, I was one of the medical school faculty members asked to contribute to the

creation of the new Path's curriculum. After the Path was scheduled to start operations that next fall, the original director left Michigan and I was asked to step into a leadership position. I have been honored to serve as one of its co-directors ever since.

What is your role as co-director of the SoLT Path?

As a co-director I have the opportunity to act in several roles with our Path learners. I designed and lead many of the small group learning sessions that explore the scholarly basis of medical education; facilitate and sponsor our students in finding faculty mentors and research colleagues; and in some cases, act as the primary research and career mentor for some of our students. In this last role, I have had the opportunity to collaborate on several new lines of inquiry based entirely on the interests of the Path student leading the studies.

What appealed to you in taking on this role?

Acting as co-director for our Path is one of my major career satisfiers. I get to work with some of the most passionate and smart medical students in the country. Students who want to think about professional education in new and creative ways. Having the chance to sit down and learn about what each student wants to achieve in their careers is an incredible gift when many other activities are about more mundane administration. If I can have the smallest role in facilitating our students achieving their goals, that is what being an educator is all about.

How does your background in emergency medicine and medical education inform the direction of this Path?

I think my combined professional identity as an emergency physician and an educational scholar has given me a relatively unique background that is well suited to being involved with the Scholarship of Learning & Teaching Path. Emergency medicine provides me with connections to almost all other medical specialties and health professionals in the health care environment. I think that gives me a generalist perspective, both as a clinician and as a member of the academic community, that is of use in working with students with very diverse career interests, both with regard to medical and academic pursuits.

In general, I have always taken a somewhat unusual approach to my career by seeking out study in whatever interests me most. As a college student I chose History as a major while completing the pre-med work as an elective (back in those dark days when we non-science majors were a little more unusual in medical schools).

Practicing academic emergency medicine has allowed me to continue to explore passions that complement my clinical work. In the case of my medical education interests, it means being able to compartmentalize my clinical duties, allowing me in-depth time to pursue dedicated postgraduate studies in education.

During my residency, I had the opportunity to complete a Master's degree, and more recently I completed my PhD in higher education. As one of a very few MD/PhDs (in Education) faculty in the country, I can bring both a clinician-educator and an education-scientist perspective to my work with the Path and its students. I think combining interests in the humanities, social science and medical sciences helps me to support our students in developing their own scholarly activities, whatever they might be.

Why is it important to include Scholarship of Learning & Teaching as a Path of Excellence option?

Medical education is the often-underappreciated scaffold on which all of health care in this country is based. Educators, in large part, choose who gets to be a physician, what students and residents learn, how they are assessed, what medical fields they chose to enter, and what constitutes the standards necessary to remain component as a practicing physician. All of these educational policy choices in turn impact who gets care, the skill of that care, and the overall health of the US population.

Almost every aspect of the health care system is impacted by medical education. Scholarship of Learning & Teaching recognizes this cross-disciplinary nature of professional education and supports students who wish to think big when it comes to their academic futures. As co-director of SoLT, I ask how could we not include medical education as a Path of Excellence for our students?

How would characterize the med students who gravitate to the SoLT Path?

The medical students who choose SoLT vary greatly in their educational interests as well as their future medical specialty plans. One thing that links them is their interest in making a positive impact to the environment around them. Our students choose to act at all levels of medicine and society using an educational lens to guide them. This includes interests in undergraduate medical education, graduate medical education, continuing medical education and patient education.

What do you like about working with med students?

I find spending time with medical students to be a powerful bulwark against physician burnout. Medical students often bring an enthusiasm and passion for the practice of medicine that can be infectious. An unfortunate side effect of the professionalism process can be the development of cynicism in our learners (an important topic for research in medical education!). Working with students early in their careers can be restorative for faculty like myself. It can reconnect us with our own compassion and joy for helping others. Those are almost always the reasons that made us choose medicine in the first place.

What do you like to do outside of the med school?

I have the good fortune to have two precocious, loving children named Emily and Jack as well as an incredibly forgiving and intelligent wife, Kate. Between the three, I find much of my free time spent in Ann Arbor with my family playing sports like basketball and soccer as well as a plethora of board games and other competitive pursuits.

When not hanging out with my immediate family, as a native Michigander, I have several lifelong friends in the area as well as both of my parents. As a multi-degree Michigan alumnus, I am a longtime season ticket holder for Michigan Football and Basketball, something I love sharing with my father, wife and children (My mother is convinced she is bad luck and won't attend). Finally, when not otherwise engaged and a quiet moment can be found, I have a strong love for reading and writing.

What is your advice to a student who is considering whether or not to pursue a Path of Excellence in med school?

I would strongly encourage any student considering a Path of Excellence to take the plunge and sign up. I believe that whatever Path of Excellence a student might choose is likely to provide the foundation for a lifelong love of knowledge and a unique set of skills that will serve them in their future careers.

I, for one, believe that expanding our knowledge, interests and perspectives outside of the standard medical training environment can provide an incredible richness both professionally and personally. We all come to medical school with different backgrounds and experiences, engaging in the Path of Excellence programs reward and enrich the unique differences that brought us together here at Michigan.

