

## **INSTITUTIONAL ORGANIZATION OF INTERNATIONAL HEALTH PROGRAMS**

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Institutional support for international health programs has a number of advantages. A well-organized institutional office or enthusiastic faculty advisor can help strengthen the quality of the program.

### **Box 1: Potential Administrative Functions of International Health Programs:**

- Assure the educational quality of international rotations
- Help students and residents prepare for the experience
- Assure that health and safety precautions have been considered
- Lend legitimacy for scholarly projects and grants
- Maximize opportunities for collaboration within and outside the institution

Medical schools tend to support international electives for medical students in a variety of ways:

- Student initiated programs
- Student Affairs offices
- Departmental programs
- Multi-departmental programs
- International health program offices
- Charitable foundations or organizations
- Combinations of the above

The following examples illustrate the different types of support offered by several types of administrative structures.

### **Student Affairs Office**

Many schools do not have a formal office or contact person for international electives. Instead, they are handled through Student Affairs, or another similar office, which chiefly provides administrative support. In these models, the students often do most of the legwork of finding the international programs, although the office may provide some resources.

The University of California - Los Angeles (UCLA), for example, coordinates its international electives through the Office of Student Affairs. There is no one particular contact person; instead, any one of several people can help students. Student Affairs collects and makes available information from students and faculty who have participated in international programs. Generally, students must find their own program and limited funding is available for students doing international electives.

### **Departmental Support**

Individual departmental support is a common administrative structure for supporting international health activities. This is especially true for residency programs (e.g., Family Medicine, University of Cincinnati or Pediatrics, Case Western Reserve). Other departments have strong grant support for collaborative projects in education or research and are able to provide opportunities for students and residents (e.g., Indiana University, Department of Internal Medicine). One disadvantage of departmentally supported international health programs is that they are often dependent on the energy and success of one or two faculty. This may leave the program at risk if those individuals leave or develop other interests.

## **International Health Programs Offices**

Schools coordinating international electives out of an International Health Programs Office have a high level of commitment to supporting international experiences for students. The offices provide assistance in finding an international experience, maintain contacts with programs in other countries, and frequently offer financial support.

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At Harvard, for example, international electives are organized out of the Office of Enrichment Programs (OEP). To maximize administrative efficiency, this office coordinates programs other than international health, including exchange programs, honors programs, and various community outreach and public service programs. The OEP maintains contacts in approximately 40 countries and assists students in finding international experiences. Funding is available through the office and covers travel, tuition and other expenses. A faculty committee on international health helps find international opportunities for students. In addition, students run the Harvard International Health Organization.

There are many different ways to structure support for international programs for students. The strongest programs have the following key features:

1. Experienced, enthusiastic, faculty advisors
2. An organized process for orientation, site selection, health and safety advice and evaluation
3. A centralized office or person where resources and information are housed

4. Funding sources or assistance in finding financial support
5. Institutionally supported international sites or structured experience

The goal of these programs is to provide easily accessible support to students who want to study internationally, helping them work through the myriad of opportunities to find the one that is best for them. Several articles have summarized these administrative structures at medical schools committed to international health programs.<sup>1,2</sup>

## **References**

1. Heck J., Wedemeyer D. A Survey of American Medical Schools to Assess their Preparation of Students for Overseas Practice. *Academic Medicine*, Vol. 66, No. 2, Feb. 1991.
2. Heck J., Wedemeyer D. Second Survey of American Medical Schools to Assess Preparation of Students for Overseas Practice.