Describing Failure in a Clinical Clerkship: Implications for Identification, Assessment and Remediation for Struggling Learners

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We thank Dr. Wang and colleagues for their thoughtful reflections on our paper. We agree that many struggling learners appear inefficient compared to their peers as they undertake routine clinical care tasks. In our analysis, the critical deficiency “inefficiency” was present in 8 (19%) of our 43 students who failed the medicine clerkship.¹ The lower frequency of this critical deficiency in our sample as compared to the frequency of difficulties with efficiency/organization noted by residency program directors² may reflect, as they suggest, that efficiency is not yet expected from medical students. It is also possible that behaviors one might interpret as inefficient are actually represented in other domains and coded in our study as deficiencies such as “late,” “failure to complete course work,” or even perhaps “disinterested” or “inadequate documentation.” Perhaps one could even attribute NBME Subject Exam failure to inefficient or disorganized study habits.

Dr. Wang and colleagues suggest that organization and efficiency are the missing link joining together most of the critical deficiencies identified in our study. We would add to that statement that it is important to try and tease out the symptoms from the underlying cause. Disorganization/inefficiency may at times be the actual problem—i.e., the learner does not have a rubric for organizing their tasks. At other times, this may, in fact, be a symptom of a knowledge deficit or difficulty with synthesis or other problems causing them to spend longer on tasks than their peers.

We believe it is best practice for individuals working with learners to observe and record the behaviors seen in the clinical learning environment initially in a nonevaluative manner.³ These observations should be provided as feedback to the learner. Then, in discussion with the learner, we can try to determine a root cause for what may be initially interpreted as simply “inefficiency.” Is it a lack of knowledge? Inability to synthesize? Difficulty with the English language? A learning disability? Or is it, in fact, difficulty with organizing tasks and prioritizing?

As we mention in our conclusion, when trying to help learners who are failing to meet accepted standards for passing, it is important to make a complete assessment of their overall performance and ensure that you are identifying all areas of underperformance. It is then possible to develop a remediation plan, which addresses the root causes and not just the observed symptoms of sub-standard performance.⁴

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