

Job Description and Role of the Clerkship Administrator

Introduction

The clerkship administrator is fundamental to the success of the clinical clerkship. *The Guidebook for Clerkship Directors*, published by the Alliance for Clinical Education, identifies the role of the clerkship administrator as an essential element for the clerkship director (1, 2).

The clerkship administrators of the Clerkship Directors in Internal Medicine (CDIM) have defined a position description for the clerkship administrator. This chapter will build on this position description (**Appendix**).

Role of the Administrator

The role of the clerkship administrator is multi-faceted and requires flexibility, insight, maturity, patience, and the ability to deal with demands from a variety of sources, from student to medical school administration. The foremost role of the administrator is to assist and advise the clerkship director in managing all aspects of the clerkship. The clerkship administrator acts as student advisor, advocate, and policy expert for the clerkship. While titles, salaries, and degree of responsibilities vary across the country, clerkship administrators still have common tasks to complete.

Collaborative Approach

Managing a clerkship requires collaboration. The clerkship team may consist of the clerkship director, associate clerkship director, faculty site coordinators, administrator, and office staff. The “success” of a clerkship depends, in many ways, on the clerkship team collaborating with faculty, administrators, academic departments, and the school as well as acting dynamically, interdependently, and adaptively to achieve specific goals and objectives.

The clerkship director and clerkship administrator should build a positive, collaborative environment so that the shared educational mission of the clerkship and medical school can be achieved. Communication between the administrator and clerkship director should be open, honest, and as

frequent as necessary; both must be readily available (by email, phone, or pager). The administrator should have a solid understanding of the director’s vision as well as the program’s goals to manage the day-to-day operations of the clerkship. The clerkship administrator is usually the first person the student will contact when an issue arises and it is important that the clerkship administrator has the support of the clerkship director, especially when dealing with sensitive student issues. The success of the clerkship also depends on building successful relationships with the other team members, including site directors. As the success of the program increases and the relationship develops into a dynamic and trusting association, the expectations and responsibilities of the administrator may change.

It takes time to build rapport; the more open the lines of communication are, the easier it will be to build these trusting relationships. There are several ways to develop these relationships. Ideally, the clerkship director and clerkship administrator should set time aside weekly to meet and discuss immediate issues in the clerkship. At times this may not be possible, therefore it is critical that the clerkship administrator contact the director for immediate concerns. The two should meet mid-year to review the goals and expectations of the clerkship and to ensure these goals are being achieved. Another meeting should occur near the end of the academic year to review the curriculum, decide if changes are necessary, outline goals, set next year’s expectations, develop implementation plans, and plan faculty development, if needed.

Table 1 represents various ways the clerkship responsibilities can be managed collaboratively between the director and administrator.

What the Clerkship Director Is Looking for in a Clerkship Administrator

The clerkship administrator plays an immeasurable role in the organization and day-to-day management of the medicine clerkship, both for the students and clerkship director. Although specific responsibilities vary from site to site and from institution to institution, there are certain attributes of a clerkship administrator that are highly valued and sought after

Table 1: Examples of Responsibilities of Clerkship Director and Clerkship Administrator for Assigned Tasks.

Tasks	Clerkship Director Responsibilities (1)	Clerkship Administrator Responsibilities
Core Curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a written set of education goals and objectives for the clerkship with a plan for periodic review. • Develop learning objectives and goals for faculty and residents in compliance with Liaison Committee on Medical Education (LCME) and Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education standards. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Update goals and learning objectives. • Recommend curricula changes. • Be aware of LCME requirements and maintain the appropriate databases to fulfill these requirements.
Assessment of Students (Evaluation and Grading)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use examinations that address core goals and that are current, valid, and reliable. • Written final grades for each student, with a narrative noting goals met, strengths, and areas for continued work. • For each clerkship cycle, document students with academic difficulties and develop a clear strategy for remediation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assist in the preparation of department sponsored quizzes, develop objective structured clinical examination questions, proctor National Board of Medical Examiners Subject Examination, and prepare schedule for evidence-based learning exercises. • Assist director in setting grading policies and reinforcing policies with students and administration when issues arise. • Prepare evaluation summary for each student and participate in final grade process. • Maintain grading database. • Notify students and school of medicine of final grades. • Act as liaison between the director and school.
Development of Faculty and Residents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be able to motivate colleagues to teach and recruit new faculty into teaching roles. • Set aside sufficient time for evaluation and feedback to teachers. • Participate in yearly departmental retreats for faculty and residents. • Visit teaching sites. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assist in recruiting faculty to teach. • Advise affiliated faculty and staff on clerkship policy. • Coordinate agenda, prepare materials and participate in yearly retreats. • Prepare yearly performance reports, awards and thank you notes for faculty and residents. • Visit teaching sites.
Integrate Technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with school and department to fund and develop web-based systems for teaching and management tools, such as patient encounter logs and comprehensive evaluation. • Develop curriculum for medicine clerkship website. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assist director in working with the school to develop online programs. • Develop and maintain department’s student website and online course directory. • Research and make recommendations for new technologies, e.g., distance learning courseware. • Use software and web-based tools to manage the clerkship.

Advise/ Counsel/ Mentor Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be skilled in formative evaluation and feedback for individual students; be able to advise and supervise remediation for students with academic problems. • Mentor and counseling students about career choice. • Write letters of recommendation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be aware of students who appear to be experiencing difficulty (poor attitude, lack of commitment, frequent absences) and notify the clerkship director of concerns. • Have an open-door policy or office hours and be available to meet with students. • Maintain documentation on student difficulties and advise site on procedures • Meet with and advise students who are applying to internal medicine residency programs and coordinate letters of recommendation.
Professional Growth and Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allocate the resources to participate in educational innovation and research as evidenced by presentations at national meetings; published abstracts and exhibited posters at academic meetings; and peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, monographs, and books. • Serve on a relevant education or evaluation committees in his or her own medical school and in national organizations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attend national meetings. • Allocate time and resources to publish abstracts, book chapters and articles. • Network with other clerkship directors and administrators across the country. • Meet with other clerkship directors and administrators at your institution on a monthly/quarterly basis. • Seek opportunities provided by institution for professional development.

by clerkship directors. Clerkship administrators must have a general knowledge of medical education, which should include understanding of training stages and the level of responsibility commensurate with those stages; the department in which they are working; and the medical school as a whole. They need to be organized and detail-oriented given their job of coordinating a student’s clinical assignments, didactic schedules, evaluations, and clerkship reports. It is very important that clerkship administrators demonstrate professionalism and be hard-working, responsible, and accountable. Given their multiple assigned tasks, they must have outstanding prioritization and time-management skills. They must have outstanding “people skills” so that they can help the students as well as interact with residents and faculty. They must be attentive listeners and good communicators, which includes written communication skills. They should be able to work independently and have skills in decision-making while closely collaborating with the clerkship director. In addition, they also should be proactive problem solvers who are engaged in improving the quality of the clerkship experience for students.

Organizational Skills

Once the depth and breadth of responsibilities are

understood, the administrator should organize and prioritize those duties. The clerkship administrator should be adaptive to changing circumstances. First, consider how to track each element of the clerkship.

Time management and multi-tasking skills are essential for success in the role of the clerkship administrator. The clerkship administrator must find a system that works to keep track of dates and coordinates orientations, exams, and lectures. Please see Chapter 2, “Tips for Organizing a Clerkship” for a full discussion of time management.

Multi-tasking can be quite a challenge, especially when there are numerous interruptions. It is easy to become distracted. It is useful to find an individualized system that works: some people use a daily “to do” list and cross off items as they go while others use MS Outlook®- or Palm® -based programs while still others use a paper calendar. Eventually, performing multiple tasks will become second nature.

Technical Skills

Technology use in medical education is now commonplace. The computer programs used in the clerkship will depend on the institution’s preference. At a minimum, clerkship administrators must possess

excellent computer skills in basic programs for word processing, spreadsheets, and email. Familiarity with presentation software, database tools, and web design software are desirable. Such skills allow for more streamlined functioning as well as a paperless office. Clerkship administrators should be willing to learn new software programs.

Websites, personal digital assistants (PDAs), electronic medical records, scheduling software, and evaluation programs are widely used to streamline data sharing and compliance with hospital, school, and government regulations. Computer programs may be developed locally or licensed software may be purchased. Some examples of software include: New Innovations® (evaluations/scheduling), MyEvaluations® (evaluations), AmION® (scheduling), or BlackBoard® (E-Education). We recommend that clerkship administrators network with colleagues to research new technologies for evaluation and data management including programs to track student encounters with patients (patient logs), online case scenarios, and portfolios. Pressure to increase medical school class size coupled with fewer faculty available to teach will require more reliance on distance learning course software, technical support for web-based instruction, and up-to-date grade reporting and management systems. The administrator should work with the clerkship director, department chair, and medical school administration to recommend innovations and funding for these initiatives.

Behavioral / Interpersonal Skills

To be successful, the clerkship administrator must be self-directed and able to work independently. Often there is only one student clerkship administrator in each department. This type of work requires one to think and act quickly to deal with a multitude of situations, many of which occur simultaneously.

To ultimately find job success and satisfaction, it is important to network with the other clerkship administrators within the institution. Clerkship administrators often feel isolated and alone. By networking with other administrators, it becomes possible to share resources and solutions to common problems while building mentoring relationships. The position of clerkship administrator may seem overwhelming to a new employee. Possible

questions that may arise are:

- How am I going to remember to do all the tasks required of me?
- How should I organize my files?
- What goals should I set for myself each week and for each teaching block?
- What systems should I use to remember to send out evaluations?
- How should I prioritize my tasks?

One recommended solution is to contact a departmental clerkship administrator and arrange to shadow. Most administrators will be very receptive to visits and questions. Every clerkship administrator will provide pearls of wisdom that can be incorporated into the clerkship. Monthly clerkship administrator lunch meetings are a great way to get together and network. The medical school's academic programs office may even coordinate these lunches with the clerkships or offer training sessions. Additionally, serving on university committees provides for a useful exchange of information and ideas. It is also possible to network on a national scale at meetings. It is always informative to learn how other institutions across the country operate. Even though a clerkship administrator may be new to the position, there are always opportunities to volunteer on various national committees, which are great learning experiences.

Possessing a degree of assertiveness is essential to maintain a degree of calm on a daily basis. This assertiveness covers many areas, from setting boundaries with students, housestaff, and program directors to being proactive in terms of problem solving and time management.

One way to set boundaries with the students is to have predetermined "office hours" when the clerkship administrator will assist students. This scheduling allows the clerkship administrator to have concentrated time during the day to focus on other duties, such as evaluation collection and preparation of orientation materials. During these time periods, coworkers can take messages and try to field questions. This scenario is for only one clerkship administrator with no other undergraduate support personnel. Multiple staff on the undergraduate side can distribute duties evenly on a routine basis. Flexibility and good judgment must be employed to help a student with extenuating circumstances.

The importance of well-developed interpersonal skills cannot be stressed enough. As a clerkship administrator, patience will often be put to the test. One coping strategy is to try and empathize with the students. They may be younger, far from their families and comfort zones, and dealing with the stress, high expectations, and expense of medical school. On top of these challenges, they are trying to navigate the maze of departments, scheduling, drop/adds to their rotation schedules, rules and regulations, significant patient care responsibility, and worry over evaluations, grades, and exams.

Empathizing with a student, does not, however, excuse inappropriate behavior. Clerkship administrators deserve to be treated with respect. Understanding the context of being a medical student can help put student behavior in perspective but it does not give a student (or anyone else) the right to treat the administrator with anything other than respect. In fact, the clerkship director should be informed of any student who has treated the administrator poorly. It is key to maintain a professional demeanor, and keep emotions in check—distressed students respond more positively to a calm, soft-spoken manner. Clerkship administrators serve as advocates for the students and representatives of the department and medical school. The clerkship administrator is the one to set the tone. The skills mentioned also carry over to dealing with other departments and personnel at various levels of the organization. There will be times of frustration but keep in mind that communicating calmly and with a professional demeanor will help to be taken seriously and could effect positive change in the organization.

Often, in large organizations training and development programs are available within the human resources department. These programs offer free seminars for employees on a variety of topics, such as dealing with difficult people, conflict resolution, time management, how to organize the work area, and negotiation skills. As a clerkship administrator, it would be a good strategy to take advantage of as many of these types of offerings as possible. They will not only make work lives easier, but will help in career development.

Conclusion

Do not lose sight of the fact that the clerkship administrator is a valued, unique, and key figure in the department. The clerkship administrator has a huge impact upon how the department is viewed by the students. Remember that the junior student rotating this teaching block may be a future intern or resident in a program at that institution. The relationships formed with the students can be long lasting, so make them worthwhile.

References

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Appendix: Position Description for the Clerkship Administrator

Introduction

A professional and productive clerkship administrator should play a major role in the day-to-day administration of a successful medicine clerkship. As Louis N. Pangaro, MD, suggests:

The clerkship director must have:

- 1) An assistant to be a “first contact” liaison with students. This assistant should be approachable and sensitive to a student’s distress.
- 2) Secretarial/clerkship support for the administration of the clerkship appropriate for the number of students, the number of clerkship sites, and the number of grades and reports to be produced. (1)

The administrator should report directly to the clerkship director and be highly knowledgeable about the student program.

The CDIM Administrators Advisory Committee prepared the following position description as a standard for clerkship administrators. The spectrum of responsibilities outlined illustrates the diversity of this position; it cannot be a complete description of the position. The delegation of specific curricular assignments varies widely among schools as well as among departments of internal medicine. However, clerkship directors should expect and require a capable clerkship administrator as a necessity for a successful medicine clerkship.

Qualifications for the Clerkship Administrator

- Undergraduate degree or equivalent experience.
- At least three years of administrative experience with continually increasing management responsibility.

Essential Skills

The clerkship administrator must be knowledgeable about the medicine clerkship and other student programs offered by the department of internal medicine; they must demonstrate the following skills:

- Well-developed interpersonal skills, including the ability to deal effectively with all levels of personnel, both within and beyond the university.
- Excellent written communication skills.
- Time management and organizational skills; must demonstrate the ability to prioritize and accurately complete tasks independently.
- Proficient in basic bookkeeping, record maintenance, and report development.
- Excellent technical skills (computers and other office machines).
- Excellent problem-solving and decision-making skills.
- Conflict resolution and negotiating skills.
- Professionalism, discretion, and confidentiality.
- Basic understanding of medical and adult education.

Primary Responsibilities

Responsibilities of the clerkship administrator should include, but are not limited to:

- Function as the first-contact liaison to students, faculty, residents, community faculty, sites, and school administration for any issues or questions relating to the clerkship.
- Provide primary support for the clerkship director in matters relating to the clerkship, and function as his/her representative if requested.
- Manage daily operations of the student office and the clerkship, organize and prioritize necessary tasks, initiate changes and resolve issues as they arise.

- Understand thoroughly the curricular goals, policies, and standards of the medicine clerkship, department, and medical school.
- Participate in the grading process and prepare final grades for submission.
- Recruit faculty for clerkship teaching and ensure retention.
- Monitor the student evaluation process and maintain complete and accurate student files.
- Prepare data analysis reports.
- Understand the major responsibilities of other interacting departments (i.e., student affairs, medical education, registrar, area health education center, bursar, or purchasing).
- Know the medical school calendar and courses offered.
- Participate in institutional, departmental, community, or national meetings as ongoing professional development and to remain informed about current academic trends.
- Assist in development of annual reports.

Secondary Responsibilities

Responsibilities may also include:

- Prepare department letters of recommendation.
- Oversee or support the internal medicine interest group.
- Maintain the student library in the department of internal medicine.
- Prepare clerkship materials.
- Participate in or conduct the clerkship orientation.
- Administer NBME or other required examinations.
- Participate in the preparation of LCME accreditation materials.
- Plan and attend faculty retreats, faculty development sessions, and other meetings and functions.
- Supervise staff members completing work for the medicine clerkship.
- Provide administrative support for other pre-clinical and clinical courses.
- Understand institutional policies and procedures.
- Assist in manuscript development and grant application.
- Schedule and coordinate meetings and conference calls.

Summary

The CDIM Administrators Advisory Committee recommends clerkship directors use this position description to strengthen support for existing clerkship administrators or to aid in establishing such positions in their program. An effective and productive clerkship director must have a competent administrator to facilitate a successful medicine clerkship.

References

1. Pangaro LN. Expectations of and for the Medicine Clerkship Director. *AJM*. 1998;105(5):363-365.