

# **4/30 Webinar Tutoring Best Practices Notes**

## **USMLE Goals: Schools vs Students**

- In soccer, just a couple weak players can sink the team. Having 1 good player isn't usually good enough to win a game.
  - Schools tend to think of USMLE/COMLEX prep in terms of getting their whole "team" or, class, to victory by working on these weak players and having everyone ultimately pass their exam.
- In basketball, one player can usually carry the team. Having 1 good player is usually good enough to win games.
  - Students tend to think of USMLE/COMLEX prep in terms of basketball, where they want to be the star player and they are less concerned with the rest of their "team" i.e. class' performance.

## **SAT to USMLE: Experiences with Tutoring**

- Often the "obvious" candidates to be hired as tutors are often high performing individuals with high scores.
  - However, being a content expert, does not mean that individual necessarily knows the mechanics of the test (question structure, content distribution, etc.) and how to help other students prepare.
- In order to achieve the highest level of tutoring for students, you need to have individuals who are both content AND test experts
- Tutors need to be able to translate their proficiency to someone else. If tutors can't articulate what they know in a simple way that makes sense to students, then their student won't get very far.

## **1-on-1 Tutoring Best Practices**

- When hiring tutors, it's very important to have a detailed consultation with the candidate to evaluate if they have basic and developable skills in BOTH content and test knowledge.
- Following this initial vetting, it is absolutely necessary to have tutor training for a successful tutoring program (See slide for tutor training breakdown).

- Anki (flashcard) and calendar review is so important that we have a special meeting only dedicated to this. A great tutor and successful program should be able to set students up for success beyond just the tutoring sessions.
- It is rare for a tutor to come in already being content experts, test experts, AND perfect at explaining and making someone understand complex questions or concepts.
  - The important thing is that during the vetting process you see basic skills and the potential for development. It is then critical that you work with the tutor to develop their skills.
- A great way to develop tutoring skills of new tutors is to keep good relationships with your “veteran” tutors and ask them to help train the next generation.
  - Have a new hire sit in on a session conducted by a senior tutor. This allows them to observe how a great tutoring session is conducted, ask questions afterward, and mimic the teaching style.
- Training time should be compensated to provide encouragement for the new tutor to develop their skills and take the sessions seriously.
- For less experienced tutors, keep in mind that 1 tutor does not always fit all students. Identify both tutor AND student learning styles, time constraints, strengths, and weaknesses so that you can pair tutors with a similar student.
  - Once you “match” a student and a tutor, it’s important to conduct a “trial” session and then immediately get feedback from the student. If the student isn’t happy with how the session went, ask them why specifically and think about pairing them with another tutor.

## **Tracking is Important**

- Having your tutors send 1 follow up email to both their student and supervisor after each tutoring session is crucial.
  - The email should include exactly what happened during the session, how long was the session, what were the assignments given, what plans to be covered the next session, what is the student’s test date, what date is their next NBME, etc.
  - (Students like to avoid practice exams because they want to do well. If identifying their weak points means a poor score, they don’t want it. Having it planned and structured in the emails forces students to take the practice exams and then helps tutors focus on red flag content gaps.)
- Tutors should also be putting their student’s worksheets, notes, and scores on a secure shared Google drive. This helps with specific progress tracking and record keeping.

- Always include the student's "vitals" at the top of these documents. Vitals are student contact info, relevant logins, test dates, etc. (See slide for example)

### **So, what do we actually use to tutor students?**

- We have developed our own internal practice question sets that have a lot of different components to them.
- They are challenging enough to start a discussion, but not so challenging that they put students in a panic. Good questions are multi-systematic so students can learn to "weave the whole story together."
  - These types of questions allow tutors to lead the discussion in the direction that the student needs without being confined to a single system.

-1-on-1 tutoring is most effective.

-An optimal session should be 1.5-2 hours. More than 2.5 hours and you will encounter natural fatigue. 30/45 minute sessions more frequently are ineffective because it doesn't give enough time for students and tutors to really delve into the topics.

### **Small Group Based Medical Education**

- Small group tutoring is harder than 1-on-1 tutoring.
  - Start your new tutors in a 1-on-1 setting, then move them to small group.
- Engagement with students in a small group must be equal. Structured materials are critically important here so that some students aren't dominating while others are getting left behind.
- Optimal group size is 3-5.
  - Pairs can work but aren't the best. The difference between 1-on-1 to pairs is significant. You lose 50% of engagement.
  - Pairs tend to end up wanting to work individually. However, the difference between 3 and 5 students is less significant comparatively.
- Allow a little more time for group sessions than 1-on-1 sessions. 2.5-3 hours is ideal.
- It is better to use small group tutoring before dedicated study starts.
  - Get the group up to speed so that they can split off into study paces during dedicated. Small group *during* dedicated risks limiting strong student's growth and possibly being too much for weak students.

- Doing small group tutoring before dedicated either helps get all your students to at least passing level then allows them to spread their wings during dedicated, or it identifies problem students that are going to need further assistance in order to pass.

## Q&A

### **Q: How much do you pay tutors? You have 10 hours of pre-tutoring and then the tutoring.**

- We have a structured approach for paying tutors. For medical student tutors between 3rd and 4th (we don't hire tutors until after 2nd year) we start at \$65/hr and give raises every year. When we work with fellow and attending tutors, they start off higher, up to \$150/hr. Our tutors have different rates that we pay for them helping with training, webinars, etc. this is \$35/hr for med students.
  - This isn't inexpensive, but to make it worth everyone's time, payment is important.

### **Q: How do you promote tutee self-directed learning and goal setting within this model.**

- We don't make any guarantees. We believe it's dishonest to make specific score or growth guarantees. Students are responsible for following through with what's been assigned to them. When students sign up with us, they sign a statement of commitment.
- Tutoring is not designed to be totally comprehensive. Part of tutoring is developing a schedule and plan with your tutor, but then using it independently. Tutoring should not dominate the student's week. Students should rise to the expectations of the tutors and then the tutor will raise the bar more.
  - Sometimes students don't rise to the occasion, and from the email tracking, we are then able to step in and have the hard conversations with the students while preserving the student/tutor relationship.
- The importance of training students to ultimately be independent learners and "break free" from their tutor can not be understated.
  - We always tell students (and train tutors) that you are far more likely to be successful as a tutor if your goal is to teach students HOW to learn, how to be independent, rather than striving to walk them through every medical topic that will ever be tested.
  - Some students expect that the whole tutoring session will be reviewing questions or content. However, teaching them how to make great schedules, how to work

through questions, how to make and review flashcards—these are arguably even more important skills and take time to teach material.

**Q: How much time do the tutors spend on this record-keeping and do you pay them the same rate for this?**

- Tutors are not paid for their record keeping. Their rate is designed to cover this time and over time they will get faster.

**Q: What is the role of Elite Medical Prep's learning advisor?**

- Having someone who isn't an MD that has specific training in social work/student success/ compassionate problem solving can be critical for student success.
- Students often have greater problems with test prep outside of just content knowledge and sticking to a study schedule. It's important to have someone to work on life/ stress coping skills and the learning process with attention to the person as a whole-- not just a medical student.
  - Nina does personal check-ins with students to provide personal support. She sometimes also facilitates communication between Elite Medical Prep and a student's school learning advisor to increase communication and set the student up for success.

**Q: In the course format, what percentage of the class comes for tutoring?**

- A very small percentage. It's not our goal to convert everyone to tutoring. Rather, students who display signs of needing early intervention during the course sometimes come back for 1-on-1 because they need it.
- Other students who were particularly impressed during the course choose to come back for 1-on-1 tutoring-- but the goal of our courses are absolutely not to push everyone to do tutoring. Not all students need it.

**Q: What descriptions of tutors do you give the students?**

- We give a bulleted list of information that may be relevant. Information includes scores, schools, rate, major accomplishments, etc. It's important to give students a choice for their tutor but to guide them.

- Just because a student comes to us with a tutor in mind does not mean we abdicate matching responsibilities.
- You can also send past student reviews about each tutor to prospective students if you would like.
  - It's important to collect *feedback* from students to share with prospective students, not score increase averages.
  - Each student is an individual with individual needs, goals, and work ethic. Saying that a tutor is able to help their students increase their score by X amount of points on average can be misleading and lead to disappointment.

Example of a bio sent to prospective students:

**Amy Petty, PhD, MD Candidate; \$235/hr**

- Phi Beta Kappa from Winthrop University, B.S. with Honors, Chemistry and Biology Double-Major, 2012
- Matriculated in Duke Medical Scientist Training Program 2012; Recently defended PhD in molecular cancer biology/immunology
- Scored: **264 on USMLE Step 1**
- Achieved honors in all clinical rotations
- Years of experience as TA, mentor, and tutor in premedical and medical settings
- [Published academic author](#)

**Q: What if all the students want to work with 1 specific tutor?**

- Have other tutors sit in and observe what the “popular” tutor is doing so that they can learn and mimic the style.
- This helps take the stress off a singular tutor without compromising tutoring quality for the students.
  - If one tutor is expected to have too many students, they may get overwhelmed. Additionally, if they ever stop tutoring, the program gets set back since you lost your star tutor.

**Q: What is a good length of time for tutors to be working with students?**

- Some of our students come to us 2 weeks before their test date or in emergency situations and then we need to scramble to tutor them.

- Some students want to go into a more competitive residency and need to start earlier for a higher score.
- We always advocate for early intervention instead of using tutoring as a last resort then scrambling because a student is at major risk of failure.
- The ideal for 1-on-1 tutoring for a typical student: ~3 months, less intense up front and more intense towards the end.

**Q: Do you have ongoing groups in course-specific tutoring going on all years?**

- At this time we don't, and we also don't have "join in" online small group tutoring because we find that students from different schools come from different backgrounds.
  - Our small group tutoring programs are in partnership with specific schools-- similar to our courses.