

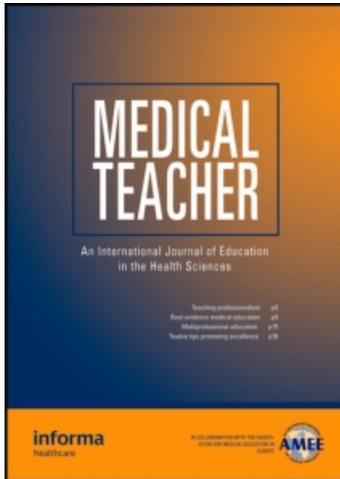
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Rosalyn W. Stewart <sup>a</sup>; Allison R. Barker <sup>a</sup>; Robert B. Shochet <sup>a</sup>; Scott M. Wright <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, USA

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# The new and improved learning community at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine resembles that at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

ROSALYN W. STEWART, ALLISON R. BARKER, ROBERT B. SHOCHET & SCOTT M. WRIGHT

Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, USA

## Abstract

**Background:** In July 2005, a learning community was created at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine (JHUSOM) to foster camaraderie, networking, advising, mentoring, professionalism, clinical skills, and scholarship—The Colleges. The cultural and structural changes that emerged with the creation of this program have resulted in JHUSOM bearing a resemblance to J. K. Rowling's fictional Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

**Aims:** This manuscript will describe the similarities between these two revered schools, and highlight the innovations and improvements made to JHUSOM's learning environment.

**Description:** The intense, stressful, and lengthy professional training required to achieve competency in the practice of medicine and in the practice of witchcraft (albeit fictional) have meaningful parallels.

**Conclusion:** The supportive learning environment at these two schools should afford the next generation of graduates to have an even more enriching experience than those who have come before them.

## Introduction

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry motto: *Draco dormiens nunquam titillandus* (Never tickle a sleeping dragon)

Johns Hopkins University motto: *Veritas vos liberabit* (The truth shall make you free)

Wizardry and medicine are not dissimilar. Their traditions date far back and are steeped in history. In both fields, practitioners are humbled regularly by the limits of their abilities. Top wizards and master clinicians alike are continuously challenged, and cannot solve many of the problems set before them. Through the apprenticeship model, many of the greatest lessons for trainees in wizardry and medicine are learnt by carefully observing the inspiring skills and behaviors of respected role models (Wright 1996; Wright et al. 1997; Wright et al. 1998).

Every professional school, be it Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine (JHUSOM) or the phantasmal Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry (Hogwarts) created by J. K. Rowling (1998), hopes to establish a special environment within which profound personal and professional growth can occur. Beyond knowledge and skill, students learn about the history, expected professional conduct and ethics, and core values and ideals of their profession. The years spent at professional training institutions are usually meaningful and defining periods in the lives of the trainees.

## Practice points

- Changes that optimize the learning community of a medical school are likely to enhance the educational experience of both students and physician–teachers.
- Personal and professional growth of medical students is most likely to occur in supportive and encouraging environments.
- Literature, beyond just medical literature, can be a valuable source of information that promotes reflection on our medical practices.

Medical students spend much of their time studying intensely (Rosenthal & Okie 2005). Because the training is so demanding, students need to be supported and nurtured. This support may serve to motivate students in their efforts to expand their medical knowledge, desire to improve their skills related to the art of practicing medicine, and willingness to evaluate their own performance. The learning community to which medical students belong profoundly affects their personal and professional identities (Suchman et al. 2004). Genuine, close personal relationships between faculty mentors and medical students during medical school are believed to be essential for creating a rich learning community

*Correspondence:* Dr Scott M. Wright, Arnold P. Gold Foundation Associate Professor of Medicine, Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, Johns Hopkins Bayview Medical Center, 4940 Eastern Avenue, Baltimore, MD 21224, USA. Tel: 410 550 0817; fax: 410 550 2715; email: smwright@jhmi.edu

(Haidet & Stein 2006). Such relationships, including those with fellow students and other trainees, can prevent feelings of isolation and burnout while promoting growth (Kern et al. 2001; Haidet & Stein 2006; Levine et al. 2006; Wright et al. 2006).

Surveys of graduates of many medical schools, including JHUSOM, have suggested that there is a need to improve the advising process for medical students (Eckenfels et al. 1984; Calkins et al. 1987). A team at JHUSOM (made up of key stakeholders including medical students, a core group of 24 committed faculty physician–teachers, Deans, and administrators) that was committed to improving the learning community established a new program aimed at accomplishing seven goals: (1) fostering a welcoming and supportive community for students honoring diversity and unique interests; (2) promoting faculty advising and mentoring relationships with all students; (3) fostering social and cooperative connections between students; (4) assisting students in building networks of connections within JHUSOM to meet their personal goals and ambitions; (5) assembling clinician role models that transparently exemplify excellence in humanism, professionalism, and the clinical skills of medicine; (6) encouraging scholarship and inquiry; and (7) providing explicit career counseling.

The cultural and structural changes that emerged with the creation of the Colleges Program has resulted in JHUSOM bearing a resemblance to the Hogwarts of Rowling's Harry Potter series of books (Rowling 1998; Rowling 1999a, 1999b; Rowling 2000; Rowling 2003; Rowling 2005). The rest of this manuscript will describe the similarities between these two revered schools, between their respective learners, and between their teachers.

## Joining the ranks

When students of Hogwarts receive their admission letters, it is a time of celebration. The new students feel a great sense of awe and respect for the magical community that they have been chosen to join. From that point forward, they will belong to an entirely different world. Students are eager to learn a skill set that will allow them to accomplish great feats. They will have their own language and they will be dressed in a new wardrobe that includes wizarding robes. The students are required to procure special equipment that will be necessary in their study and experiential training—for example, magic wands for casting spells and cauldrons and herbs for making potions.

Likewise, it is a dream come true when medical-school applicants receive their medical-school admission letter. Chosen to enter the grand and mysterious world of medicine, they join a profession steeped in tradition that commands widespread respect. As the journey begins, students are immersed in a new language teeming with acronyms and influenced by many languages. Students are presented with white coats, a symbol of their responsibility to uphold the values of the profession. They are trained in the proper use of special diagnostic instruments, such as stethoscopes, ophthalmoscopes, and sphygmomanometers.

## Dividing the whole into four

The four Houses of Hogwarts are named after the school's founders, "the four greatest witches and wizards of the age" (Rowling 1999a). Each student is carefully sorted into a House by a magical hat that is able to match each student's own personal traits and characteristics to what the House namesakes exemplified and desired in their students. Helga Hufflepuff is remembered for her loyalty and justice, Godric Gryffindor for his daring, nerve, and chivalry, Rowena Ravenclaw for her wit and desire to learn, and Salazar Slytherin for his cunning (Rowling 1998, 1999a).

With the inception of JHUSOM's Colleges Program in the 2005–2006 academic year, the student body was divided into four Colleges. The namesakes of the Colleges of JHUSOM are four extraordinary professionals, physicians, and scientists, who have all played important roles in the history of medicine at JHUSOM. Dr Florence Sabin was among the first women to attend JHUSOM, and as a faculty member became the school's first woman to rise to the rank of Professor. She was also the first woman to become a member of the National Academy of Sciences. Honorary Dr Vivien Thomas, a supreme surgical technician and scientist, made significant contributions to the Blalock–Taussig shunt to treat 'blue baby' syndrome as chief assistant to Dr Alfred Blalock. Thomas also mentored scores of Hopkins surgeons in performing delicate cardiac surgical techniques. Dr Daniel Nathans won the Nobel Prize in Medicine for his discoveries in genetics and molecular biology. Dr Helen Taussig, a pediatric cardiologist and Professor at JHUSOM, was instrumental in developing the Blalock–Taussig shunt, and excelled clinically despite losing her hearing. These four heroes in the history of JHUSOM are outstanding role models who exemplify the very best in medicine.

Despite the symbolic division of the student body, there is much attention and energy devoted to collaboration and sharing of ideas (as opposed to competition) between the Colleges, so as to ensure that the whole is now better than before, and genuinely greater than the sum of its parts.

## The physical setting and surroundings

Hogwarts' castle is unique in its massive size, its expansiveness, and its long hallways, lined with portraits of famous witches and wizards of the past. It is difficult for new students to find their way around the school, especially with staircases that change positions, dark dungeons, and many secret rooms and passages.

At JHUSOM, students must learn to navigate their way around the sprawling hospital campus. It may take years to learn the shortcuts and to know whether it is quicker to cut through a courtyard or use bridges and tunnels. Although the hall bearing portraits of famous doctors from Hopkins' past do not talk to you like those in the aforementioned castle, the messages that these portraits deliver about professionalism and dedication are heard loud and clear.

## Valuing diversity

Despite being assigned to Houses based on specific strengths and attributes, the students within each House at Hogwarts are diverse in background. Some, like Hermione Granger, come from Muggle (non-magic) families; others, like the Weasley children, come from well-established wizarding families; and some have a mixed heritage. Diverse racial backgrounds are well represented and embraced. Like the student body, the faculty is well diversified in terms of age, sex, ethnicity, and teaching experience. A half-giant and a centaur are members of faculty, and they teach and share their distinct perspectives with the students. The school's headmaster, a brilliant leader and thinker, is responsible for recruiting and valuing the diverse composition of the staff.

The College system also values the diversity of its students and faculty—their varied backgrounds and academic interests. Students are assigned to Colleges randomly, but there is an eye toward upholding balance in diversity within each College. The faculty has been chosen to bring both personal and career diversity to each College, as well. Building a sense of community among the faculty of all Colleges has posed certain challenges, perhaps due to this diversity, but the community is growing stronger all the time. This diversity within the Colleges allows students to intimately interact with and learn from a broad range of people, thereby promoting cultural competency and enhancing their education through interactions with a variety of fellow students and physicians.

## Learning together

During the first 2 years at Hogwarts, students in the same House and year take all of their classes together. Groups of students from the same House are often seen studying together either in the library or in their common room. Learning with the same group of people fosters a sense of academic community and teamwork. In his fifth year, Harry Potter and several fellow Gryffindors formed a group called Dumbledore's Army, which practiced and trained together to gain extra skill in the subject 'Defense Against the Dark Arts' (Rowling 2003).

At JHUSOM, students take the 'Clinical Skills Course', the foundation course for medical interviewing and the physical exam, together with other students from their College. In this course, students first learn and practice history-taking and physical exam skills with each other. As the faculty work with students, individually or in small groups, an emphasis on meticulous observation and role modeling is made transparent. This small-group, longitudinal experience fosters a comfortable cooperative environment—a learning community. Close relationships built on trust and openness have developed among students working together in these small groups. Team-building principles, so important in medicine, are also elucidated in this setting.

## Grading system, coursework structure, and reprimands

Hogwarts' students are awarded grades of Outstanding, Exceeds Expectations, Acceptable, Poor, Dreadful, and Troll.

They learn a standard curriculum until their third year, when they have the opportunity to choose elective courses. Only if students achieve top grades in their OWL (Ordinary Wizarding Level) exams in the fifth year can they progress to NEWT (Nastily Exhausting Wizarding Test) coursework in the subjects in which they excelled. Students are forbidden to perform various higher order skills (e.g. apparation) until competency has been determined objectively through testing, wherein licenses are bestowed. Any teacher may give detention or take away House points for offenses committed in their presence. Time spent in detention can involve a wide range of activities, from unpleasant chores to forms of physical torture, all at the discretion of the faculty member.

The grades at JHUSOM are Honors, High Pass, Pass, and Fail. Students who fail courses must work with the course directors to come up with an appropriate ways to learn the material and pass—a more liberal and forgiving process than that of Hogwarts. Detailed narrative evaluations, particularly for clinical rotations, are written by faculty and are recorded in each student's personal file. Feedback to students is constructive and formative—not punitive. Unpleasant incidents are dealt with via dialogues between students and faculty or the Deans of Student Affairs. In the Colleges program, where faculty serve as teachers and longitudinal advisors, complexities and threats to the advising relationship can arise when the 'teacher' renders a course evaluation of the student that is poor.

## Social events and competition

Competition between Houses is a very important part of the school year at Hogwarts. Academic and athletic successes earn points for the Houses and bad behavior can result in a loss of points. A constantly updated scoreboard in the dining hall means the results are readily apparent at all times. Each House fields a Quidditch team to compete in this traditional wizarding sport, played on broomsticks. The matches are widely attended and present an opportunity for students to demonstrate their House pride with magical banners, painted faces, and boisterous cheering (Rowling 1998, 1999b).

In the spirit of friendly competition, the Colleges are planning to hold a yearly athletic event for all students wishing to participate. Other non-competitive social events and dinners are held routinely so that members of particular Colleges can be together, thereby encouraging meaningful dialogue with faculty and between students across years. The socialization serves to confront and dispel harmful messages embedded within the hidden curriculum, and mobilized community support at times of transition for the students.

## The roles of the faculty

There is a head faculty member for each of the four Houses at Hogwarts: Professors McGonagall; Flitwick; Sprout; and Snape. These veteran professors are all experienced and teach one of the four core courses: 'Transfiguration', 'Charms', 'Herbology', and 'Potions', respectively. They offer career guidance and help in course selections. In contrast to the more casual advising that is offered throughout their first 4 years of training,

career-advice sessions are scheduled for all fifth-year students with their Head of House. The faculty members also serve as mentors and help with networking. Horace Slughorn, former head of Slytherin House, formed a club of his favorite students, which was unfortunately very exclusive. However, he was good at “making introductions, forging useful contacts between members” and recommending people to positions at the Ministry of Magic (Rowling 2005). The Heads of House also make additional efforts to help students with their academic weaknesses or difficulties.

At JHUSOM, the Colleges’ 24 core faculty members were hand-selected based on student nominations and interviews with a selection committee that comprised students and faculty. The faculty members were chosen based on the strength of their desire to be a part of the program and on the wisdom and core values they hoped to impart to the students. They are recompensed financially so that 20% of their time may be spent teaching and advising for the Colleges. Each advisor has a group of five students from each of the four years. The advisors meet their new charges during the students’ first month at school. They instruct these same five students in ‘Clinical Skills’, a core second-year course, and continue advising them throughout their 4 years of medical school. The faculty members offer students personal and career mentorship and advice. For students interested in fields outside their advisor’s expertise, the advisor has a network of contacts both within and outside the College system that they can arrange for the student to meet with—a well-conceived referral system. Faculty development and training programs are ongoing, to ensure that the Colleges’ faculty members are equipped to meet the diverse support needs of the student body during their education.

## Interaction between older and younger students

At Hogwarts, there are four common rooms exclusively for students of each House, where students from different years have an opportunity to socialize, interact, and give or receive advice. This is often the place where Quidditch victories are celebrated. Celebrations for individual House member or group accomplishments are also commemorated here. For example, a big party was held for Harry when he outsmarted a ferocious dragon in the ‘Triwizard Tournament’ (Rowling 2000).

At JHUSOM, construction is underway for a new education building, which features an entire floor devoted to the learning environment of the Colleges. The commons area in new building will have an atrium with natural lighting and spatial attention to social integration with peers and stress reduction. Each College will have a communal space for studying, socializing, and advisor–student meetings. This space will be a place for students to call home amidst changing rotations, teams, and schedules. It will be the setting wherein students in different years get to know each other. College social events present regular opportunities for interactions among students from the different years. There are also peer-advice programs that aim to foster sharing and helping across the years. Panel-style advising sessions focus on, for example, how to plan

one’s schedule for the clinical years or how to match into certain residency programs. One College hosts guided tours of the hospital to help orient students new to the wards. Another offers a shadowing program pairing pre-clinical students with those more senior on their clinical rotations. This kind of interaction between the different years explicitly builds community and a sense of family at JHUSOM.

## Conclusion

In this paper, we have highlighted many of the similarities between JHUSOM and Hogwarts. Both involve prolonged professional training at schools that are committed to the growth and development of their students. The new Colleges program at JHUSOM represents a substantial investment that is changing the learning environment for the students and faculty members alike. The ‘house model’ of the Colleges program at JHUSOM appears to be more wide-ranging than other medical-school formats that have been previously described, in that faculty members are called upon to be advisors, mentors, teachers, evaluators, role models, social-event planners, and community anchors or pillars for the student body (Murr et al. 2002; Goldstein et al. 2005).

Meaningful relationships between faculty mentors and medical students can enhance the development of humanism and compassion during medical training, and can sustain a favorable learning community (Haidet & Stein 2006). The educational community in medicine has potent effects on students’ personal and professional identities (Gordon et al. 2000; Suchman et al. 2004). As medical-education researchers and national organizations attempt to identify ways to characterize learning environments and measure their impact (Cooke et al. 2006; Association of American Medical Colleges 2006), looking to exemplary settings, whether real or fictional, may be useful and instructive.

The new organizational structure at our medical school, which resembles other institutions of learning that have taken on the ‘houses format’, including Hogwarts, is a structure that allows each medical student to receive individualized attention from a faculty advisor who will be with them for the duration of their training experience. Future research will determine how this progressive attention influences the growth and development of medical students and affects their careers in medicine.

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## Notes on contributors

ROSALYN W. STEWART, MD, MS, is an Assistant Professor of Medicine at The Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine.

ALLISON R. BARKER is a medical student at The Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine.

ROBERT B. SHOCHET, MD, is an Assistant Professor of Medicine at The Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine.

SCOTT M. WRIGHT, MD, is an Associate Professor of Medicine at The Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. He receives support as a Miller–Coulson Family Scholar through the Johns Hopkins Center for Innovative Medicine.

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