

By Pamela Schumacher, MS, CCMP, Prosci

Medical assisting students face a wide range of complex and evolving needs—some of which they can clearly express, while others may be harder to articulate or even recognize. While many learn to speak up and advocate for themselves, students may need someone to step in on their behalf. Educators are uniquely positioned to recognize when students need help and actively advocate for the resources they require to succeed.

Faculty Foundations

Educational advocacy involves both educators and students working to ensure they both receive appropriate support and resources.

“For educators, advocacy often means speaking up for students, ensuring they receive equitable opportunities, and removing barriers to success,” says Shannon Richardson, CMA (AAMA), who works at Klickitat Valley Health Family Medicine in Goldendale, Washington.

“For students, advocacy is the ability to express their needs, seek resources, and take responsibility for their learning and professional development. In health care education, where students are preparing to enter a demanding and patient-centered profession, advocacy is not only valuable but essential.”

Richardson says students may encounter several situations in which their educators may need to step in and assist:

- **Institutional barriers, policies, or procedures:** For example, a rigid attendance policy might fail to consider the needs of students with chronic health conditions or family responsibilities.
- **Access to resources:** Not all students begin their education with the same

level of financial, technological, or social support. Educators may need to connect students with resources such as tutoring, counseling, financial aid, or disability services.

- **Clinical placement challenges:** Sometimes students encounter unfair scheduling, inappropriate expectations, or even unsafe work environments.
- **Equity and inclusion:** Students from marginalized groups may face bias, microaggressions, or inequities in grading, evaluation, or access to opportunities.

“Advocacy can take many forms—offering tailored learning resources, motivating students, helping them overcome challenges, and creating environments that nurture academic and personal growth. It’s about empowering students to realize their potential and ensuring they have the tools and

support necessary to succeed,” adds Amanda Beaman, AAS, CMA (AAMA), AHI(AMT), department chair of medical assisting and phlebotomy at Montgomery Community College in North Carolina.

“Student needs always come first,” says Jeff Przybylo, MA, a professor of speech at Harper College in Palatine, Illinois. “It’s our job as teachers to educate administrators about student needs by bringing evidence and research to the table and persisting until students get what they need.”

Przybylo teaches two sections of intercultural communication to allied health students, and he advocates regularly for his students: “For example,

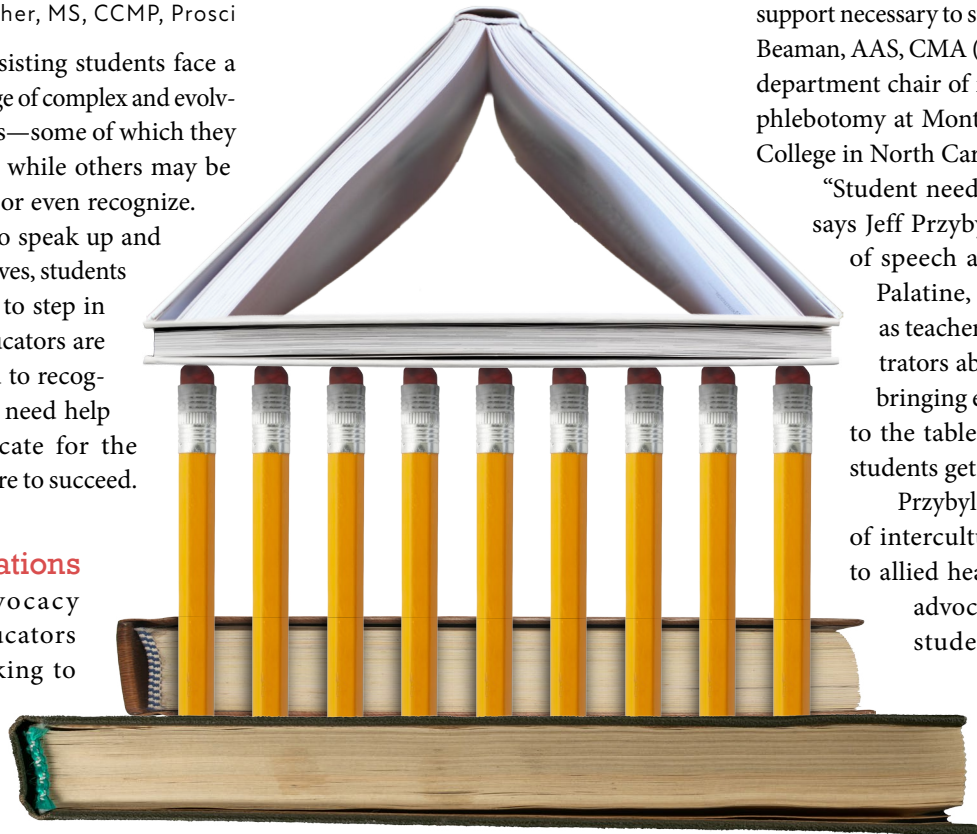
I advocated for finding alternate ways to fund a software program when it became too expensive for individual students. Secondly, I pushed to change the communication requirement for health care

students from public speaking to intercultural communication after a nursing student pointed out that bedside manner skills were more relevant than a public speaking class. Persistence is key. We were successful in both cases because I didn’t take no as the final answer. Instead, when faced with pushback, I analyzed the obstacles and came up with alternatives to which the administration could agree.”

Breaking New Ground

Research suggests that most educators view advocacy as an essential part of their job, but they often struggle to implement it effectively. Early-career educators might feel as though they are overstepping boundaries if they advocate for a student to peers or superiors,¹ particularly if they have never had these kinds of conversations in real life.

All educators can become advocates, says Beaman: “I believe it’s essential to get



PILLARS OF SUPPORT

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to know students on a personal level. The more familiar you are with their personalities, habits, and strengths, the easier it becomes to recognize when they're facing difficulties. This insight allows educators to step in with timely support and encouragement, giving students the extra push they may need to stay on track and succeed."

Beaman notes that self-reflection is crucial for both students and educators aiming to be advocates. "It increases your self-awareness of not only student needs but your own, allowing you to align student needs with your teaching and to advocate for systemic improvements, as well as personal ones," she says. "Some methods of self-reflection may include daily journaling, reflection activities with students to end each class session, ... and asking critical questions about school practices and how they impact others."

Seasoned educators can help less experienced colleagues by sharing their professional or general knowledge, providing examples of what has worked for them, or sharing helpful research.¹

"Don't do it alone," recommends Przybylo. "Find a veteran teacher who has fought battles for students and ask them to help you navigate the system and get your foot in the door."

Laying the Groundwork

Educators can help students become their own advocates by setting examples in class and encouraging them to serve on student-faculty governing committees, through which staff, faculty, and administrators discuss policies and issues affecting the entire campus. Faculty members should support students who ask questions and speak up during these meetings.²

"Advocating for students begins with

THE POWER TO SPEAK UP

Teaching self-advocacy empowers students not only during their education but also throughout their careers, says Shannon Richardson, CMA (AAMA). She offers this advice for educators:

- **Encourage questions.** When students learn that it is safe—and even encouraged—to ask for clarification, they develop the confidence to speak up in clinical and professional settings.
- **Role-play.** Have students practice addressing a supervisor about scheduling conflicts, requesting clarification about an unclear assignment, or raising concerns about unsafe practices in a clinical setting. Role-playing provides a safe environment to experiment with tone, language, and confidence.
- **Celebrate advocacy efforts.** When students take steps to advocate for themselves, acknowledge and celebrate those efforts. Positive reinforcement not only boosts confidence but also reinforces advocacy as a valued professional skill.

fostering open and trusting communication between educators and learners. When students feel safe and supported, they're more likely to express when they're struggling or overwhelmed. This transparency enables educators to better understand and respond to individual needs, positioning them to be effective advocates," says Beaman.

"We want students to develop skills for self-advocacy, patient advocacy, and working effectively with colleagues," says La Vonne Downey, PhD, professor of health services and public administration at Roosevelt University in Chicago, Illinois. "So, it's not so much that educators should advocate for students, but we must teach them the skills to advocate for themselves. We do this with a two-pronged approach.

"First, we help students understand the entire health care ecosystem by using detailed case studies. Students are assigned different roles, such as insurance payers, hospital workers, government agency employees, or health care providers. Secondly, we apply ethical principles to various situations, from medical errors to layoffs to cultural misunderstandings. The students must understand and play each role. The peer discussions help to build their skill set," says Dr. Downey, who is also program director of health science administration

at Roosevelt University. "When students are assigned a role in a case study, it forces them to understand that person's point of view, and it makes them a better advocate."

Uplifting Each Other

Some students also participate in Dr. Downey's advocacy work on a global stage. "I've been a Global Goals ambassador for the United Nations' [third] sustainable development

goal ..., 'Good Health and Well-Being,' since 2015. When I testify or meet with senators and legislators, I bring some of my health students along, and they get to see what advocating on a big stage feels like.

"Students feel empowered when they advocate for others," says Dr. Downey. "When representatives, senators, or patients acknowledge that students care enough to help people they may never meet, it gives students a sense of efficacy in their profession. It helps them feel they're part of the solution rather than becoming overwhelmed by the system. We teach that those who have more privilege need to advocate more for people without a voice." ♦

References

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