Pre-med students are typically considered among the best and brightest — an idea reinforced by parents, teachers and peers as they sit comfortably at the top of their class throughout their schooling. But just a few months after college graduation many of these students enter medical school and are thrust into an unfamiliar world filled with new terminology, performing intrusive procedures, and asking personal questions — basically developing a quick intimacy with strangers.

While some students thrive in this new atmosphere, others are challenged by the change, according to three medical education colleagues who have dedicated their careers to training future doctors at the University of Illinois College of Medicine Rockford. To help these students and the college improve its approach to medical education and faculty development on all three campuses, this trio has contributed over $250,000 to establish the Dr. Georges Bordage Endowed Medical Education Faculty Scholar Fund to finance the development of evidence-based research on how to teach students to become good doctors.

Georges Bordage, MD, for whom the fund is named, is a distinguished emeritus professor in the College of Medicine’s renowned Department of Medical Education and the naming recognizes his long-standing commitment to excellence in health professions education and research as an internationally renowned expert in his field. Dr. Bordage is widely published, has won numerous awards and consults worldwide on educational matters.

Richard Christiansen, MD, a retired nephrologist, Phil Zimmerman, MD, a retired pulmonologist, and Jeanne Wegner, a retired medical education program coordinator, began working together on the Rockford campus in the 1970s, eager to be involved in the launch of a new regional medical school campus. They spent long hours working with students and advanced in their careers there, with Dr. Christiansen eventually being named chair of the Department of Medicine and Medical Specialties and Dr. Zimmerman becoming clerkship director.

They so enjoyed their interactions with each other and medical students that upon their retirement more than two decades ago, they volunteered to teach six day-long interviewing sessions each year to small groups of first-year medical students. But teaching these students was more challenging than they expected.

“Learners are at the heart of the curriculum. It exists for them, so that they may acquire the necessary competencies to assume the roles that the profession and society expect from a competent and effective doctor,”
—Dr. Georges Bordage, Dr. Ilene Harris, Med. Educ. 2011

“Our experience with M1 students during these years gave us insight into how different new students are,” Dr. Christiansen said. “We had vast experience with students
during their clinical years, but surprisingly, we found that we had received no training when dealing with new medical students. This realization created an interest in our drive to fund a professorship designed to research the intricacies of the concept of professional identity formation and the development of curriculum and faculty that would be in the best interest of the profession of medicine."

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—Dr. Richard Christiansen

Initially the group began contributing funds so teachers could attend courses on how to best instruct these students. But when the College ceased admitting students to the Urbana campus, in anticipation of its impending closure in 2022, the group decided to make a larger commitment. Joined by their spouses, Nancy Christiansen, Susan Zimmerman, and Richard Wegner, they donated over $250,000 and are now working to raise money from additional donors to grow the fund to a level that will next support an endowed professorship in this area also in honor of Dr. Bordage.

The holder of the Dr. Georges Bordage Medical Education Faculty Scholar will be a member of the faculty — from either Rockford, Peoria or Chicago — who has expertise and academic abilities within the field of medical professionalism and the development of medical students’ professional identity, and who is directly connected to the professionalism curriculum. It is hoped that their research will bridge critical work between the Department of Medical Education and the Office of Educational Affairs while both fostering more research opportunities for those positioned to directly impact curriculum development and creating a distinct scholarly focus at the College of Medicine in the area of professional identity formation.

“It is exciting for me to be able to contribute to the future of this profession in a meaningful way,” Wegner said. “We’re going through quite a shift in the world, and medicine has to prepare for a world that is changing.”

While some of the students feel comfortable with the more personal aspects of practicing medicine, others struggle. Dr. Zimmerman can identify with students who are good at linear thinking but have difficulty in their interactions with patients. He hopes the research can help in this area.

“It is exciting for me to be able to contribute to the future of this profession in a meaningful way.”

—Jeanne Wegner

“We do not know enough about the ‘aha’ transformative moments when medical students begin to understand,” he said. “Through this fund, research could be conducted on what makes some issues important, how to structure the learning environment, how to build a learner-teacher relationship that leads to such moments, or how to select teachers and students whose personalities make these events likely to happen. We want to provide financial support for a faculty member to investigate these issues for the benefit of students on all three campuses.”

As medicine changes, medical education must also change, these professionals agree.

“We do not know enough about the ‘aha’ transformative moments when medical students begin to understand.”

—Dr. Phil Zimmerman

“New doctors enter a world that no one outside that world really understands,” Wegner said. “In some ways it severs people from the outside. The medical community considers students to be colleagues immediately, and that’s a difficult concept to grasp. In June, these are college students and in August, your teachers are looking to you as colleagues.”

This generous contribution counts toward IGNITE: The Campaign for UIC’s $750M goal. It answers the College of Medicine’s aim to remain at the forefront of discovery. To learn more about how to support the Dr. Georges Bordage Medical Education Faculty Scholar Fund or the future vision to grow this fund to the Dr. Georges Bordage Professor of Medical Education, contact David Eaton, director of development, at (312) 355-0475 or by email djeaton@uic.edu.