Medical students may not have all the answers in a classroom or clinical setting. That knowledge comes over time. Still, what students may lack in know-how, they tend to make up for in passion.

Channeling that passion can take on many forms. One of them is advocating for changes to the modern health care industry that can better serve physicians and patients.

For those looking to get started as a student advocate, the AMA Medical Student Section (AMA-MSS) Committee on Legislation & Advocacy (COLA) strives to be the medical students' leading voice for improving medical education and advocating for the future of medicine. Here’s a look at the advice and insight from AMA-MSS members.

Who can be a student advocate?

Anyone can be an advocate. To do it effectively, members of the COLA say one should demonstrate creativity and resourcefulness to take ambitious motivation and channel it into something that truly makes an impact.

“To me the idea of grassroots advocacy is following up your words with action and making an impact on the community around you. Walking the walk,” said Matthew J. Christensen, a second-year medical student at Chicago Medical School at Rosalind Franklin University who is also a member of the AMA-MSS Committee on Legislation & Advocacy.

“Anyone can share an article on social media or be an armchair politician, but grassroots advocacy is about making a deliberate and tangible effort to truly do something,” Christensen said.

What are students advocating for?
That is going to depend on your own interests. Some topics of interest to AMA-MSS members include: student and physician burnout, gender equity in medical specialties, medical student-loan debt and loan repayment, drug pricing and drug shortages. There are plenty of resources to stay informed on advocacy issues. If you’re an AMA member, you’re going to want to keep tabs on the AMA-MSS website.

As an advocate, your primary goal is to engage your audience and rally support for your cause. To do that, members of COLA advise that you first understand who your audience is and what your audience cares about. Typically, people want to support a cause that personally affects them in either a direct, tangible way—student-loan debt is a common cause that medical students work on—or an indirect, emotional way (veterans affairs, for example).

“I learn a great deal from my peers that are in more focused, single-issue groups on our campus,” said Drayton Harvey, a second-year medical student at the University of Southern California Keck School of Medicine and member of COLA. “We have had a lot of success in forming a social justice coalition on campus to utilize everyone’s expertise in various issues, from gun control to LGBTQ protections, to lead larger advocacy events with broader reach in terms of audience and resources.”

How does student advocacy take form?

There are a number of methods to spread your message and gain support. As a medical student, one common and effective avenue to do this is on campus-events. These events may include guest lecturers, charity fundraisers for a nonprofit or a letter-writing campaign to your elected representatives.

If you are going to start your advocacy efforts on campus, it is best to engage members or a student organization, but you can certainly scale beyond your campus. As you do, you’re going to want to reach out to state and national advocacy organizations. Your medical school’s AMA-MSS student delegate will be a valuable point of contact in these efforts.

Even when advocacy efforts start on campus, such projects can have far-reaching messaging. Harvey highlights one such effort.
“#ProtectOurPatients has been a phenomenal student-driven, national campaign to protect the Affordable Care Act,” Harvey said of the legislation often referred to as the ACA for short. “During 2017, they implemented a coordinated social media campaign, teach-ins, and a letter-writing and phone-call campaign to persuade lawmakers to vote against the multiple bills put forward to eliminate or greatly reduce the ACA. As we all know, their efforts were largely successful with the continued existence of the ACA.”

For more information on student advocacy, the AMA-MSS provides useful resources for its members, including informational issue briefs and presentations that provide summaries of issues of importance to student members.