The first year of medical school represents a new start for your learning, and new beginnings usually come with a number of unknowns.

To shed some light on what that first year will be like, Jesse Cochran, a medical student at the University of Virginia (UVA) School of Medicine who just completed his first year, offered some insight on his experiences for incoming students. Here are some of his thoughts on what your expectations should be as an incoming first-year medical student.

Find your passion projects early

Cochran, an AMA member, recalled his first weeks on campus as an “acclimation period.” At UVA, the curriculum starts with metabolism and some of the more basic biochemistry concepts, which are frequently covered in pre-medical coursework. As such, he used this time to identify his extracurricular interests. As an MD-PhD student, Cochran sought out research opportunities.

“I contacted several mentors to discuss possible projects and expectations,” he said. “Most of them are happy to accommodate, so I’ve been able to do some research during didactic.”

Cochran also serves as the co-president of UVA’s AMA-Medical Society of Virginia (MSV) student chapter, representing UVA as an alternate delegate for the AMA’s biannual meeting in fall of 2021.

“It was incredibly impactful to learn about the interplay of legislation and advocacy though engaging in AMA/MSV,” he said.

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Memorization is part of the process

After that initial breaking-in period, the pace and the demands of the curriculum pick up in a big way. Cochran said the infectious disease coursework, in the fall, required a lot of information retention.

“Med school is a lot of memorization,” he said. “It’s knowing that a patient is presenting with symptoms X, Y and Z, and that presentation corresponds to this disease.”

Finding the right resources to help you retain the disease information is key. Nowadays, that can come in the form of online resources that tap into visual and other learning styles.

Get tips for using Anki flashcards to make medical school learning easier.

Develop good study habits early

When Cochran sits down to study, he sets goals and deadlines. He says that he is more directed with his studying than he was in college. He recommended that incoming students approach their studies with a similar mindset from their earliest days.

“When you have those first few months where you have less material, try to be regular and structured about your studying,” he said. “It is key to build those habits before you take the plunge and begin memorizing large quantities of material. It'll makes things significantly easier.”

Classroom time might be sparse

Even as the country starts moving beyond the pandemic, the way schools teach students likely has changed more permanently. Cochran had a hybrid of in-person and virtual classes. During his first year of learning, roughly one-quarter of his classes required in-person attendance, with others featuring options such as recorded lectures. He believes that could be the case for the next class of incoming UVA medical students and found it personally advantageous.

“A lot of people learn very differently,” Cochran said. “I prefer to be able to sit down by myself. I don’t need to have a bunch of other people with me to talk through things. I find I can go at a faster pace when I am by myself.”
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