

## Evaluation 102

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This article address the essentials of providing an accurate evaluation, the methods by which we can evaluate the student's performance and potential errors in evaluation that must be avoided.

The essentials of evaluation are those critical items that should be a part of every learner's appraisal. They are important for learners who exceed established standards as well as for those who may be struggling to meet requirements. The essentials of evaluation are:

1. **Formal** – When a student rotates with you in your practice, you should have written, explicit standards and procedures for his/her evaluation. The medical school should provide these to you; if they do not, ask the clerkship coordinator for this written document. You should review the evaluation form with the student, and come to agreement on how he/she will be evaluated. Also, review with him/her what you would consider an "honors," a "high-pass" or "pass," and a "fail" performance. The students should clearly understand what it takes to excel on your rotation, and what constitutes a failure.

2. **Communication** – There must be an open dialogue between you and the student. This requires frequent informal sessions in which you provide feedback to the student on how he/she is doing, and regularly scheduled sessions (mid-rotation and end-of-rotation) that are more formal. No student should ever fail a rotation without having been warned on several occasions. This warning should come early enough so that he/she may make the necessary corrective actions, and should be in writing.

3. **Documentation** – These formal evaluations should be written, discussed with the student, and signed by both you and the student. This is just as important for the outstanding students as it is for those who are at risk of failing the rotation.

4. **Due Process** – This allows for fairness in the evaluation. Standards should be written and understood, the evaluation process should be frank and fair, and any deficiencies should be noted in writing, along with a plan to assist the student who is in danger of failing.

The credibility and reliability of the evaluation are a function of the number of observations. In addition to your own observations, use other sources such as comments from your colleagues, nurses, administrative staff and patients. Nurses and other members of the staff are often in a better position than physicians to evaluate such standards as patient-physician interactions, interactions with staff and efficiency. They often will hear remarks from patients such as, "that student was rude to me." Allow your patients to participate in the evaluation by giving them a patient satisfaction survey geared toward their interaction with the medical student. The inter- and intra-observer reliability increases the likelihood that your evaluation will truly reflect the student's performance and assures that standards are met.

Finally, there are potential pitfalls that must be avoided in the evaluation process. Evaluations may be **stringent** (overly critical), or more commonly, **lenient** (overly charitable). Remember the obligation that we have to society. If we continue to pass along a student who should fail,

he/she may one day be our colleague. Another potential error is that of **bias/contrast**, rating against an individual rather than the standard. For example, last month you may have had a medical student who was a superstar, and this month your medical student is average. It would be easy to evaluate the student against last month's student, in which the evaluation would be suboptimal. Evaluate against the established standards, not against prior students.

Another potential error is **logical error**, which permits the rating in one area to influence another area. A student may do a superb job at obtaining a medical history, but a mediocre job at performing a physical exam. These two areas are often close together on the evaluation form, and it would be easy to rate both areas the same, as opposed to looking at each section separately. A **halo effect** may also affect your evaluation. Your global impression that your student is a superstar may color your evaluation of his/her performance in an area (e.g., efficiency) in which he/she may be average. Finally, a common error is that of **central tendency** in which one "sits on the fence" and circles all of the ratings on the evaluation form the same way.

Performing proper evaluations of your students is just as important as the effort you put into teaching them. Do not take this responsibility lightly. By closely following the essentials and avoiding the errors noted above, your evaluation will more likely be representative of the student's performance.