

National Raises GPA Requirement for DC Degree Program

In an unprecedented move to increase academic standards in the chiropractic profession, National University of Health Sciences (NUHS) announced that it is raising the minimum grade point average required for admission to its Doctor of Chiropractic Medicine degree program from 2.50 to 2.75. The new standard will be applied to the Fall 2012 incoming class.

National is the first educational institution offering the DC degree to announce that it will raise its GPA standard to 2.75. Currently, the Council on Chiropractic Education (CCE) requires a 2.50 GPA for students entering accredited DC programs. National's new standard will also apply to students seeking the Doctor of Naturopathic Medicine degree, the university's other first professional doctoral degree program.

A Decision 20 Years in the Making

"The impetus for raising our GPA requirement started back in 1991. At that time, the Foundation for Chiropractic Education and Research (FCER) published a report by the Corporate Health Policies Group analyzing why chiropractic institutions were not receiving federal funding from various government programs," says Dr. James F. Winterstein, president of NUHS. "Their findings pointed to a relative lack of academic achievement markers by most professionals in chiropractic medicine when compared to professionals from other medical specialties."

In 1993, President Winterstein prepared an advisory paper for National's Board of Trustees that recommended specific changes in admissions criteria and academic programming that National and other chiropractic institutions could and should implement in order to bring the profession more in line with the academic standards held to by other medical professions. This included recommendations for requiring candidates for admission to have completed a baccalaureate degree, and ultimately to raise the grade point average requirement from 2.50 to 2.75.

In 1999, National added the requirement for a baccalaureate degree. "We implemented that decision at a time when all chiropractic schools experienced a drop in enrollment. But while other schools saw a drop of around 40% in their enrollment, National lost 50% due to its concurrent implementation of the baccalaureate degree requirement."

Three years ago, Winterstein went back to the board to request that the university conduct a feasibility study on raising its GPA requirement to 2.75. The board agreed, and the university began tracking and assessing performance data on students in respect to a proposed change in the GPA admission requirement.

"What prompted me to come back to the board at that time to request the feasibility study, was a comment from an official with the Higher Learning Commission. During an accreditation site visit to our Florida campus, he said to me, 'National has always taken the lead in quality education. Why don't you take the next step?' By this he was referring to raising our GPA standard."

Feasibility Study Supports NUHS Raising GPA Requirements

The feasibility study tracked the performance of DC and ND students at NUHS over a two-year period. The analysis revealed that over a two-year period 15 to 20% of the incoming class as a whole experienced academic difficulty. (Academic difficulty for the purpose of this study meant that the student had a cumulative GPA below 2.0 at NUHS, a level at which the student is placed on "academic probation.") Breaking down this group into incoming GPA subsets revealed that incoming students were more likely to experience academic difficulty if they came in with an undergraduate GPA of 2.50-2.74. Within this subset, 48% of students experienced academic difficulty in their first trimester.

In the subset of students with a 2.75-2.99 GPA, only 20% experienced academic difficulty, and of students entering with a 3.0 or above, only 6-8% experienced academic difficulty.

Furthermore, after one year of study, 14% of the 2.50-2.74 GPA group was still on academic probation, versus 6% of the 2.75-2.99 group, and less than 1% of the group with an incoming GPA of 3.0 and above. "This demonstrates that the 2.50-2.74 GPA group has a harder time pulling themselves out of academic difficulty as opposed to the other groups. It is an indication that these students may not possess the skill-set to turn things around once they enter into academic difficulty," says Dr. Vincent DeBono, Vice President for Academic Services at NUHS.

"Over the two years in which we tracked performance data against incoming GPA, students with a 2.50-2.74 GPA comprised only 15% of our incoming classes; 85% of the class entered with a 2.75 GPA or above," explains Dr. DeBono. "However, the 15% with the lower GPA consumes up to 80% of our advising time because they are having greater academic difficulty."

A Bold Step Consistent with National's History and Mission

The NUHS board agreed that raising the GPA would be a positive step for the university. Dr. Winterstein advised not to push such a major change too quickly without adequate time to inform the public. The board agreed to implement the change for Fall 2012.

"Until that time, we will work with incoming students who have between a 2.50 and 2.75, but we will strongly encourage such students to opt for our university's 'flex-track' system that provides a reduced course load," says Dr. Winterstein.

The university's move is consistent with its historic commitment to academic excellence. National was the first school in the profession to push for and receive regional accreditation, and the first school to require a 2.50 GPA, which eventually became the standard for CCE accredited schools. Now National, the only educational institution offering the DC degree to require a baccalaureate degree, will be the first to require both a baccalaureate degree and a 2.75 GPA.

President Winterstein explains why NUHS made this bold step in raising admission requirements now, even though the national economy is weak and many schools are reticent to make any changes that might reduce their pool of qualified applicants: "First, as tuitions have gone up, it is vitally important for me that students be able to complete a program before sustaining a huge financial burden. If students come to National unprepared for the rigor of our curriculum, they might drop out or be expelled in the third, fourth or fifth trimester. They then find themselves with a \$60-70,000 debt that they can't get rid of, and no career. It's not fair to them! Secondly, because National is financially strong, this is a reasonable time to proceed."

Dr. Winterstein also points up that in the last few decades there has been an exponential increase in information relevant to the health sciences. Students have to be capable, prepared and educated in a way that they can absorb and utilize this vast amount of information in order to

function as primary care physicians.

National's current average GPA for incoming students is 3.20. Dr. Winterstein remarks that although this is high, "There's an old adage that if you stick one foot in a fire and the other foot in a freezer, you might get an average temperature of 98.6. When a student gets accepted to National, I want to see them graduate. That's why we are doing this. It's fine to want to be a doctor, but it's not fine to recruit students into a program when you know they are not going to make it. They have to be able to 'cut the mustard.' "

Since the announcement was made at NUHS, there has been only positive feedback from National's faculty. In respect to the university's recruitment of new students, Winterstein says: "It is possible we will go through a brief period of adjustment in our numbers as we did when we added the baccalaureate requirement. But in the long run, I see this as a positive step that can only benefit National and the health care professions and, in the final analysis, the patients we serve."

Source: National University of Health Sciences