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## Institutional Strategies to Improve Medical Student Well-being: Literature Review (2019-2025)

### *Author Information & Affiliations:*

*Kristen Daly (Rocky Vista University, College of Osteopathic Medicine, Englewood, CO),*  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6583-3597>

*Krista Fruehauf (Rocky Vista University, College of Osteopathic Medicine, Englewood, CO)*

*Mary Wilde (Rocky Vista University, Office of Simulation in Medicine and Surgery, Ivins, UT)*

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# Institutional Strategies to Improve Medical Student Well-being Literature Review (2019-2025)

Kristen Daly PhD, MPH<sup>1</sup>; Krista Fruehauf PhD<sup>1</sup>; Mary Wilde MD<sup>2</sup>

(1) College of Medicine, Rocky Vista University, Parker, CO

(2) Medical Humanities, Rocky Vista University, Ivins, UT

## OBJECTIVE

As part of a larger project of the Kern National Network for Flourishing in Medicine Student Chapter to assess barriers to flourishing for medical students, we sought to synthesize existing literature on medical school reforms in the areas of:

- Assessment (Step 1 / COMLEX pass-fail)
- Wellness initiatives
- Curriculum restructuring
- Equity-focused approaches

to elucidate what institutions are doing to address medical student well-being and what the evidence is regarding success or challenges of these reforms.

## INTRODUCTION

In response to increasing rates of burnout, declining wellbeing, and rising mental health issues among medical students, a number of institutional interventions have been proposed, piloted, and implemented. These range from changes in assessment methods such as the USMLE Step 1 / COMLEX Level 1 pass/fail transition, to curriculum restructuring and formal wellness initiatives both optional and mandatory. This review synthesizes relevant recent literature on grading reform, wellness curricula and interventions, and equity-focused considerations.

## METHOD

We identified 23 articles for inclusion in a narrative literature review based on search conducted using Google Scholar for journal articles from 2019 to the present using keywords including *medical student well-being, burnout, USMLE Step 1 and COMLEX Level 1 scoring change, curriculum changes for well-being, medical student wellness interventions, and DEI in medical student well-being*. References from relevant articles were also reviewed to identify additional sources.

ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2025) was used as a secondary search method to identify potentially relevant articles and assist in summarizing findings. AI-assisted literature discovery was used to supplement manual searches; all final sources were reviewed for accuracy, relevance, and peer-reviewed status before inclusion.

This approach is consistent with methods used in narrative reviews where the goal is to provide a broad synthesis rather than a systematic meta-analysis.

## ANALYSIS

### Assessment Reform (Pass/Fail)

- Goals to reduce stress, close racial gaps, prevent parallel curriculums.
- Outcomes may have shifted stress to Step/Level 2, research productivity, connections, and extracurricular activities.
- Residency program selection becomes less objective and potentially less equitable.

### Wellness Interventions

- Variety of programs including mindfulness, reflection, compassion programs had positive reception among participating students.
- Programs perceived as fragmented or as interfering with academics without addressing systemic stressors showed limited benefit.
- Integration into the curriculum and student involvement improved satisfaction.
- Outcome measures were inconsistent and lacked standardization.

### Equity Considerations

- Under represented in medicine (URiM) students face unique obstacles to well-being.
- "Minority tax": invisible labor for the institution of representing various subgroups goes unacknowledged.
- Interventions were not designed to be culturally responsive nor was subgroup data collected.

Evidence shows that sustainable improvements require coordinated, equity-centered reforms that embed student well-being into institutional culture, clarify evaluation measures, and meaningfully involve students.

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