For many years Downstate has been among the top U.S. medical schools in numbers of its graduates who enter full-time academic medicine. Contributing to this record, Downstate has long sponsored a school-wide Summer Research Fellowship Program for First-Year medical students following completion of classes. Though most students have participated in biomedical research before entering medical school, the Downstate Program is unique in simulating a student’s first exposure to the competitive review process that is characteristic of NIH grants.

The process starts in January with orientation sessions at a time when students get seriously interested in research experience for the coming summer. The Prime website for Downstate students contains a separate site with extensive information about the Alumni Fund Summer Research Fellowship Program, including linked accesses to potential faculty sponsors. A list of recent research fellowships guides students to prior faculty sponsors and award recipients for direct discussions on a one-to-one basis.

A student prepares a fellowship application which is centered on the proposed research project, with close assistance of the research sponsor. Applications are evaluated by a faculty review committee, with primary and secondary reviewers in study-section style. This committee recommends approval, revision, or rejection of each application. After meeting with a committee member about criticisms and suggested improvements, students can submit revised proposals in a second review cycle.

This Program has become increasingly popular in recent years. It is supported by both the Alumni Association and the Office of the Dean of the College of Medicine. In 2008 and 2009, about 45 First-Year students submitted applications, and 35 fellowships were awarded. We are now in the midst of the 2010 application process, with a record number of 65 applications, over one-third of the First-Year Class.

Each fellowship provides a stipend of $3,200 for full-time research during eight weeks between First and Second Year classes. About half of the awards are given for basic science and translational research projects, the other half for clinical research projects. Projects are distributed throughout the basic science and clinical departments at Downstate. Several students each year may receive fellowships for outstanding research projects at other medical schools in the United States and Canada.

The two-month fellowship period is devoted to data collection and bench work. Full analysis of the results may extend through the Fall. Students are expected to submit progress reports on their work. Many use the eight-week fellowship period as a starting point for long-term projects that continue during the Second and Third Years, and in elective work during the Fourth Year. Opportunities are available to present one’s work at Annual Research Day, abstracts and posters at national biomedical meetings, and eventually as published papers.