

What's different about Human Biology?

In the 1980s, many Human Biology graduates left Stanford planning to enter medicine. At times, it seemed unclear if Human Biology was just a slightly different path into medical school, or if Human Biology graduates were, in some way, uniquely influenced by their educational experiences in the Stanford Quadrangle.

Human Biology was founded with the intent of creating a unique analytical approach to the extraordinarily complex interchange between biological and social systems. The founders intended Human Biology graduates to wrestle with intractable human problems and to devise scientifically astute and organizationally practical solutions. Less clear at the time was whether Human Biology's unusual mix of experiential learning, team-based writing, interdisciplinary science, and capstone personal projects would yield a truly different sort of scientist. Based on my own professional encounters with Human Biology alumni, I think the formula worked.

At Oregon Health & Science University, where I teach and practice neurological surgery, I recently began a two-year term co-directing our academic health center's Quality and Safety Oversight Committee ('QSOC'). Quality improvement and safety science are highly interdisciplinary undertakings that function on the borders of traditional medicine with organizational design, social science, and business. This area sounds perfect for practicing 'human biologists' with just the type of training we received at Stanford in the 1980s.

It is no coincidence then that my two closest QSOC collaborators are OHSU's Director of Quality and Safety, Troy Schmit, MHA (Stanford Human Biology, Class of 1983) and our Chief Health Information Officer, Michael Lieberman, MD (Stanford Human Biology, Class of 1984). Mike is a practicing internist who also directs the informatics component of all physicians' and surgeons' practices at OHSU, helping us collect, analyze and use the 'big data' that drives health care for hundreds of thousands of patients. Troy is a hospital administrator who has devoted his career to the specific area of health care safety and quality. His team of specialists track all quality and safety related data and guide all our medical teams as we intervene to streamline processes, improve experience, and enhance safety across OHSU's clinical enterprise.

I am fortunate to work with Troy every week, and Mike almost as frequently, applying the same team based skills and interdisciplinary approaches we learned on the Farm back in the 1980s. When I travel around the United States as a visiting professor at other neurosurgical programs and medical schools, I almost always run across a Stanford Human Biology alumnus working at the intersection of biology and social science, leading teams, and making their institutions noticeably better. Start asking around; you will find quite a few Hum Bio alums out there!

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Photo Caption:

(L to R) Nate Selden, MD, PhD (Hum Bio '86), Troy Schmidt, MHA (Hum Bio '83), and Mike Lieberman, MD (Hum Bio '84) prepare for a meeting of the Quality and Safety Oversight Committee at Oregon Health & Science University, in Portland, Oregon.