

Burrell College of Osteopathic Medicine takes action to increase physician diversity

Written by By Jessica Salopek Guest Submission
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When the founders of the Burrell College of Osteopathic Medicine first contemplated positioning a medical school in Southern New Mexico, they hired nationally recognized consulting firm Tripp

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Umbach to conduct a feasibility study.

The study found that this region not only has a critical shortage in health-care providers, but that the current physician workforce “does not represent the regional population ethnicity and is less able to deliver culturally competent care.”

Plans to change that were immediately put into BCOM’s mission.

According to Founding Dean and Chief Academic Officer George Mychaskiw II, DO, part of the solution is tailoring the curriculum with language courses and topics relevant to the border region’s populations.

“Our students will learn medical Spanish,” he said. “Our students will learn about Native American healing practices. All of our students will be given the opportunity to train at health clinics serving a Native Nation or Pueblo. They’ll be more comfortable and better prepared to live and work in the area.”

Another part of the solution involves admitting students who already understand those cultures.

The school’s Burrell Expedited Admission Review Pathway program encourages students from New Mexico, El Paso, southern Arizona, all American Indian and Alaskan Native Tribal Nations, and Chihuahua, Mexico, to apply directly to BCOM for admission and by-pass the American Association of Colleges of Osteopathic Medicine’s application process.

Adrian Alba, BCOM’s director of admissions, said recruitment efforts also focus on other races and ethnicities that are underrepresented in the physician workforce as a whole, like African Americans.

Antonia Novello, MD, gave the keynote address at BCOM’s recent White Coat Ceremony, a rite of passage during which the new students receive the traditional physician’s white coat and are

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officially welcomed into the medical profession.

Novello, the 14th U.S. surgeon general, is also the first woman and the first Hispanic to hold this prestigious position. Her attendance seemed fated — not just because she traveled all night and somehow caught the only red-eye flight not cancelled out of Dallas to make it to the ceremony on time — but because she represents BCOM's focus on increasing diversity in the physician workforce and providing “culturally humble” care.

Novello spoke to that in her address, giving the new students insight she's picked up over her 46 years in the medical field on communicating effectively with minority patients, and reminding the newest members of the health care community that “your patients will not care how much you know until they know how much you care.”

Novello also gave praise to BCOM for admitting more Native Americans than any other osteopathic school in the United States.

“God will help you in your vision of diversification in the medical field because you have shown that you can walk the walk and not just talk the talk,” she said.

The Native American students identify as members of Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo located north of Santa Fe and the Cherokee Nation in Oklahoma. Although this may seem small, at two percent of the entering class, this is 10 times the number admitted to an average U.S. medical school.

The class of 2020 is also 46 percent female, 19 percent Hispanic, and six percent African American. There are students of Japanese, Chinese, Middle Eastern, Filipino, Tanzanian, and Nigerian descent, making BCOM's class one of the most diverse of any osteopathic medical school. In addition to the Native Americans, BCOM has admitted more than four times the number of Hispanic students and double the number of African American students, relative to an average U.S. medical school.

At the ceremony, BCOM President John Hummer noted in his welcome speech that tolerance for other cultures and lifestyles is one of the greatest strengths in this region of the country.

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“My family and I have lived all over and it’s truly like none other we’ve ever experienced,” he said.

To welcome this diverse group of newcomers to the community, the invocations at the ceremony were offered by Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo, Christian, and Islamic spiritual leaders. A Jewish rabbi conveyed remarks of support, but was unable to attend due to the Sabbath.

BCOM also made history as the very first medical school to have students swear the Osteopathic Oath in not one, but three languages.

President Russell Begaye of the Navajo Nation led the students in reciting the oath in Navajo, solidifying BCOM’s commitment to addressing the health needs of Native American populations.

Dr. Jesus Guadalupe Benavides Olivera, director of the Universidad Autónoma de Chihuahua’s medical school, led the oath in Spanish, and Adrienne White-Faines, CEO of the American Osteopathic Association, led it in English.

Following this trailblazing ceremony, the new physicians-in-training are now hitting the books. Classes are now officially underway at BCOM.

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