



Finding Students Who Will Serve the Underserved: A Success Story

BY SHIRLEY J. MCGLINN, MS

Decreasing health disparities by improving health care for underserved populations is one of the nation's leading health issues. Once again, experts are predicting physician shortages, especially in underserved rural and inner city areas. In addition, the need for increased cultural competency in physicians is widely recognized. New medical schools are opening and some existing schools are expanding class size to meet the demands of growing populations. It is essential that newly trained doctors serve in areas of medical care deficit. Selecting qualified medical school applicants who will graduate and practice in underserved areas continues to be a challenge. Post-baccalaureate programs can be a rich resource of students who will meet the medical needs in the future.

History of Commitment

For 35 years the Medical/Dental Education Preparatory Program (MEDPREP) has not wavered in its vision to improve health care for disadvantaged and underserved populations by increasing the pool of qualified applicants from such populations. MEDPREP is a post-baccalaureate program in the Southern Illinois University School of Medicine, conceived in an era of physician shortage of the early 1970s and at a time when the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) declared a need to increase the number of underrepresented minority students in medical schools. From its inception, MEDPREP, supported by a combination of federal grants and state allocations, has worked to assist students from groups underrepresented in medicine as well as those from disadvantaged backgrounds to prepare for admission and success in medical school. Through times of changing political environment, of court decisions on affirmative action, and recent withdrawal of federal funding, MEDPREP has continued its role in assisting students to become successful medical school appli-

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cants by expanding its student population, advancing its curriculum, improving its facilities and increasing its services.

Population Served

Over the history of the program, the 1196 MEDPREP students have included blacks (74%), Mexican Americans (5%), mainland Puerto Ricans (2%), Native Americans (1%), women (57%), as well as those with low income/rural backgrounds and/or veterans with medical training, at times when each of these groups was underrepresented in medicine. Initially, most accepted students were Illinois residents. More than half were minority students and the others were from rural or disadvantaged groups. For the past 20 years, the program has welcomed out-of-state applicants, and the percentage of students from underrepresented ethnic groups has increased.

Admissions

The MEDPREP admissions process parallels that of medical schools in many ways. Applicants submit a comprehensive application form, forward all transcripts, provide letters of recommendation, and attend an admissions day for further testing and interviews. Applications are reviewed by the admissions coordinator, a screening committee, two interviewers, and the admissions committee.

A minimum 2.0 GPA, significant coursework in sciences, and evidence for commitment to medicine are the initial eligibility criteria. MEDPREP accepts some high-risk students in terms of quantitative data, but extensive review and screening results in selection of those students who show poten-

tial for developing strong cognitive and personal traits for medical school. Consideration is given to educational and economic background and goals in determining if the applicant meets the mission of MEDPREP. While some students learn about the program from advisors and internet searches, an increasing number of applicants have been referred by former MEDPREP students who are students or faculty in medical school or in practice.

Curriculum

MEDPREP is a two-year program that provides an environment in which students can hone their test-taking skills and enhance their academic record before matriculating in a health professional school. During the first academic year most students enroll in courses focusing on problem solving and basic concepts in chemistry, physics, and biology in preparation for the MCAT. The second year consists of advanced science courses offered on the SIU campus to assist students in attaining success in medical school. Students are also challenged to confront behaviors that impeded their past academic development while being helped to improve reading, writing, and test-taking skills. Performing self-assessments and making plans for improvements are essential steps in the MEDPREP experience. Limited class size, low student-to-faculty ratio, and small group activities provide opportunities for students to receive personalized attention during their first year in the program.

The curriculum extends beyond academic courses. Students are expected to exhibit professional behaviors and attitudes at all times. They participate in a ceremony similar to a medical school white coat ceremony, where they receive a pin and pledge to uphold the tenets of professionalism. Expectations are high. Students have the opportunity to demonstrate honor, respect, and social and personal responsibility, and

strive for excellence in all that they do. In addition, they are provided with information on how to apply to medical school, interview, and write a personal statement. Visiting speakers from different medical schools provide insights about medical school application from their school's perspective.

Measures of Success

By all measures, MEDPREP is a success. Seventy-one percent of MEDPREP alumni were accepted to a health professions school; most of those (93%) went to medical school. Currently 70% of those who went to professional school have graduated, 18% are currently enrolled, and 12% withdrew or were dismissed from school. Remember that these are statistics on students who, prior to MEDPREP, were considered "at risk" in terms of their academic records.

Former MEDPREP students are currently licensed in 40 states. Of the 333 physicians identified on the American Medical Association Web site,¹ the highest percentage (36%) are practicing in Illinois. While these MEDPREP students have listed 44 different specialties, the majority (62%) are primary care physicians (24% family medicine, 16% internal medicine, 12% obstetrics, and 10% pediatrics).

During the 2007 LCME site visit, MEDPREP was cited as an exemplary program of the SIU School of Medicine.

The frequency of notes and calls from program alumni extending their appreciation for the opportunity, challenge, and support that MEDPREP provided them is increasing. Messages come from medical students, residents, academic physicians, surgeons, family practitioners, internists, and clinical

researchers across the country who have had the MEDPREP experience. Many recommended the program to students they are mentoring. There is a new network growing as former MEDPREP students enter practice.

I am in a combined primary care program so that I could work with the underserved in an academic institution. I traveled to Kenya recently to serve with a medical mission and that was wonderful. I never thought in a million years I would be doing half the things I have been allowed. MEDPREP was a special experience that taught me to stand on my own and I would not change that experience for the world.

Melanie Rose Gordon, MD

St. Louis University School of Medicine 2005
MEDPREP 1999-2001

I am so grateful to MEDPREP. If I had not been given that opportunity, I am not sure where I would be today. My success as a physician is largely due to the foundation I received at MEDPREP.

Kelli V. Burroughs

Medical University of South Carolina 2005
MEDPREP 1999-2001

MedPrep program is continuing in its mission of providing students with the opportunity to matriculate into medical schools the work is exceptional. Please let me know if there is anything that I may do to aid in this mission. The advisement was critical for me as I was applying and I would revel in the opportunity to help any future MEDPREP-ers as they brave the process.

Kibwie McKinney

University of Pennsylvania School of
Medicine 2008
MEDPREP 2001-2003

When I came to MEDPREP I had applied for medical school admission unsuccessfully. I was holding fast to my dream of becoming a physician but needed to better prepare myself academically for a medical school curriculum. Frankly, I had to better prepare myself to meet this dream.

Conclusion

Eliminating the health disparities of the nation will take a multifaceted approach. Turning to and supporting post-baccalaureate programs may facilitate the process. The applicant pool is enriched by a program that selects individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds and from groups underrepresented in medicine, and then invests in their academic development and grooms them to be successful in medical school. MEDPREP is a model for such a program. ♦

Reference

1. <http://webapps.ama-assn.org/doctorfinder/home.html>.

Additional References

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