

EQUITY THROUGH EDUCATION

BY NICOLE MLYNARYK



← Austin Marshall, MD, (center) and his PRIME-HEq classmates celebrated Match Day 2022.

↓ Native American medical students and faculty participate in an annual American Indian Blessing Ceremony and Blanket Presentation.



To support diversity and address disparities in health care, change starts with medical training.

WHEN AUSTIN MARSHALL, MD, MPH, REFLECTS ON HEALTH CARE ISSUES FACING THE LGBTQ COMMUNITY, he says many begin in the doctor’s office. They’re in the questions asked or not asked, the information shared or kept to oneself. Stereotypes and stigmas still affect queer people seeking medical care — something Marshall has experienced firsthand as a gay man. It wasn’t until he volunteered at an LGBTQ clinic during college that he finally saw what equitable health care for this community could really look like.

“When you have providers who understand you, that bond makes you feel so much more comfortable sharing information about your life and health,” Marshall said. “It’s those details that often make the difference between a generic recommendation and an effective health solution.”

Personal experience drew Marshall to UC San Diego School of Medicine’s Program in Medical Education (PRIME), which focuses on health equity (HEq). PRIME-HEq is one of several growing programs at UC San Diego aimed at addressing health disparities and supporting diversity within the medical profession.

with the San Diego LGBT Community Center in Hillcrest to assess local health care needs. Through these hands-on experiences, he learned more about hormone therapy, HIV testing and care, and how mental illness and homelessness affect health in the queer community.

Another hallmark of the program is that students complete a master’s degree in addition to their four years of medical school. Like many of his peers, Marshall chose to pursue his degree in public health. This allowed him to complete a thesis on the mental health care needs of older LGBTQ adults, many of whom have experienced significant discrimination and loneliness since the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s. To Marshall, this public health education has been invaluable in preparing him to lead change in and out of the clinic.

“It’s really useful to understand the larger structures that we practice in,” he said. “When I’m trying to get my patient medication for HIV, for example, it’s important for me to know what issues might come up on the backend and how I can help address them.”

PRIME-HEq previously funded master’s studies, but thanks to persistent advocacy from faculty and students, the 2021 California state budget included a major increase in support for PRIME programs, whose students now receive a \$20,000 scholarship for each of their five years of coursework, totaling \$100,000 in financial support.

“One of our goals for the additional funding is to reduce the debt burden students incur from pursuing a medical degree,” said Luis Castellanos, MD, MPH, director of PRIME-HEq at UC San Diego School of Medicine, who noted that many PRIME students pursue primary care specialties that do not pay as much as other medical subspecialties, making it especially important to reduce their debt load.

Most PRIME students are also from backgrounds underrepresented in the medical fields. As Marshall pointed out, “If you want to recruit more underserved individuals into medical school, you need to create the social and financial support necessary for them to thrive.”



↑ PRIME-TIDE has welcomed its inaugural class of medical students training to provide health care to Native populations.

After all, he said, many of the most valuable parts of his education came from his PRIME-HEq peers.

“The students are really one of the program’s biggest strengths,” Marshall said. “Everyone has experience and expertise in serving different communities, so we’re constantly learning from and inspiring each other.”

PRIME students often take on leadership roles within the student community, where they further supervise their peers. As the president of LGBTQ-PhaM, Marshall oversaw several student programs, including National Coming Out Day and Transgender Week of Visibility.

“Medical school is really challenging, and it’s easy to lose sight of why you started in the first place. But to be supported by peers who can relate to your experiences and who care about the same issues really amplifies your drive and reminds you what you’re fighting for.”

Changing tides

ALONG WITH THE EXPANSION OF PRIME-HEq the state budget also funded two new PRIME programs focused on the needs of Native American and Black communities. UC San Diego School of Medicine was selected to host the new program, called

Transforming Indigenous Doctor Education (PRIME-TIDE), in partnership with UC Davis. The initiative will help address the relative shortage in physicians providing health care to Native American populations.

“As a land-grant institution, we have an obligation to promote greater inclusion of American Indian students in medicine, and support the health care of our local tribes,” said **Michelle Daniel, MD**, vice dean for medical education at UC San Diego School of Medicine.

UC San Diego welcomed its first class of PRIME-TIDE students in the fall of 2022. In addition to the standard medical school curriculum, these students participate in research, outreach and advocacy programs that interface with local Native American organizations. They also focus their clinical rotations on health issues that disproportionately affect these communities, including obesity, diabetes, heart disease, mental illness and substance abuse.

PRIME-TIDE is also developing mentorship programs so that each incoming student is paired with a Native American faculty member and a student further along in the program to provide social support during their medical training.

“It’s just so fun and rewarding to work with these students,” said **Matthew Allison, MD, MPH**, director of the PRIME-TIDE program and member of the Chickasaw Nation. “We’re really excited to build more opportunities for them to grow as physicians and better serve these communities. I can’t wait to see how this program evolves over time.”

Paving the way

WHILE PRIME SUPPORTS STUDENTS ALREADY admitted to medical school, additional structures are needed to help disadvantaged students even earlier in the academic pipeline. Through the new California Medicine Scholars Program (CMSP), UC San Diego is helping community college students from underserved regions pursue medical education.

“We know a higher proportion of Latino,

Black and Native American students use the community college pathways, and have a higher intent to serve minority communities through their careers,” said **Ramón Hernández, DrPH, MPH**, member of the CMSP Founding Advisory Board. “By helping these students pursue medical school, we can simultaneously diversify the physician workforce and increase access to culturally appropriate care in our state’s underserved regions.”

Hernández has been leading similar local initiatives for years, but CMSP will help expand and cement these efforts across the state. Through the program, pre-med community college students will undergo academic and professional development to help them transfer to a four-year university and then apply to medical school. Support will include focused mentoring, opportunities to network with potential clinical and research advisors, and guidance in applying for financial scholarships.

Thanks to the ongoing work of Hernan-

dez and his team, UC San Diego School of Medicine was selected to lead one of the four regional hubs of the CMSP. UC San Diego faculty will serve as mentors to students from San Diego and Imperial counties, and CMSP students will later be admitted to the medical school.

“We are so excited to welcome our first cohort of community college students to the program, and look forward to seeing many of them join our medical school and PRIME programs in the coming years,” Hernández said.

Branching out

MARSHALL HAS SINCE GRADUATED FROM UC San Diego School of Medicine and is now a psychiatry resident at UCLA. Shaped by his experiences in PRIME-HEq, he is working to improve mental health care in the LGBTQ community. Looking back, Marshall sees the growth of these medical edu-



↑ The California Medicine Scholars Program launched in 2022 with the help of Ramón Hernández, DrPH (far right), and the California Medicine Task Force.

The Student-Run Free Clinic Project Celebrates 25 Years

Since its inception in 1997, the UC San Diego Student-Run Free Clinic Project has provided respectful, empowering, high-quality health care to San Diego’s underserved communities, all while inspiring the next generation of health professionals.

A staple of medical education at UC San Diego, the free clinic provides students with hands-on experience caring for patients from diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. Operating multiple nights a week at locations across the county, the clinics offer a variety of specialty services, including but not limited to cardiology, dermatology, ophthalmology, psychiatry, dentistry, nutrition, acupuncture and social services.

“The clinic is such an empowering place for medical students and really gives us the chance to make a meaningful difference in patients’ lives,” said recent School of Medicine and PRIME-HEq alumnus Austin Marshall, MD, MPH, who previously served as the clinic’s Psychiatry Clinic manager. In this role, he helped coordinate Spanish-speaking counseling groups and organized a psychiatrist panel on mental health care in underserved communities. Marshall calls UC San Diego’s free clinic system “one of the best in the country.”

LEADERSHIP

Ellen Beck, MD
Founding Director

Michelle Johnson, MD
Director

Natalie Rodriguez, MD
Associate Director

LOCATIONS

- Pacific Beach
- Downtown San Diego
- Lemon Grove
- Normal Heights
- Veterans Village of San Diego

ANNUAL SERVICES

Medical visits: 4,000+
Dental visits: 750+
Free prescriptions: 32,000+
Hours of psychotherapy: 570+
COVID-19 vaccinations: 500+

ation programs as a testament to the hard work of students and faculty who have long appreciated this holistic approach to health care. Looking forward, he hopes the recognition from administrative and legislative leaders will help spread the mission of health equity even further.

“It’s important to support underrepresented students as they study and serve these diverse communities, but they’re not the only ones who will engage with the social determinants of health during their medical careers,” Marshall said. “Every medical student should be prepared to understand and serve patients who face structural discrimination from the healthcare system.”

Marshall envisions a future in which students in these programs can increasingly focus on community outreach and policy work, while courses on health disparities are reoriented towards the general medical school class. He also suggests the responsibility to engage in advocacy be shared

among all students, and he is so far encouraged by the progress in this direction.

During his time at UC San Diego, Marshall helped design an introductory course in health equity that all incoming classes now complete during their orientation. Other new coursework and clinic programs in health disparities are increasingly attended by non-PRIME students. In fact, the growing community of medical students interested in incorporating these topics into their training has received an informal name: “PRIME Plus.”

These shifts are just some of the many ways that Marshall, his peers, and their faculty mentors continue to shape medical education and care in San Diego and beyond.

“These programs have tangible effects on equity and diversity in health care,” said Marshall, “and I’m glad to be part of an institution that cares enough about these causes to fund them.” ●

↓ UC San Diego medical students help clinical teams provide quality care to underserved communities through the Student-Run Free Clinic Project.

