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Grads attest to health of Doctors Academy

10-year checkup finds hopeful prognosis for program that started at Sunnyside High.

BY TRACY CORREA / THE FRESNO BEE

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In the decade since the Doctors Academy began at Sunnyside High School, about 9% of its graduates have enrolled in or completed health-related college studies -- including four students now in medical school.

It's a number that even some of those involved in the program would like to see boosted, but its success is measured by more than the number of doctors, nurses or pharmacists the program produces, said Dr. Katherine Flores, who helped start the program. A key question, Flores said, is: "Are students graduating, getting into universities?" They are, she said.

The program boasts a 100% graduation rate, and all who have gone through the program have been accepted to four-year colleges. By comparison, the graduation rate for Sunnyside was 81% in the 2007-08 school year. So far, 195 students have gone directly into four-year universities; 31 entered two-year college programs and one has postponed college for a year of missionary work.

It may be too soon to know for sure how many of its graduates will end up in medical fields, since more than half of the program's 227 graduates are still college undergraduates.

But those involved with the program say the number of students enrolling in health-related college programs could be higher.

"It's certainly not as robust as we'd like to see it," said Dr. Joan Voris, associate dean for the University of California at San Francisco-Fresno Medical Education Program, part of the partnership that created the Doctors Academy.

Voris said officials may need to look a little closer at why some students don't choose health-care studies.

The program at the southeast Fresno high school is part of a partnership that includes local school agencies, hospitals and UCSF-Fresno Medical Education. It is designed to get students interested in health careers -- and especially in becoming doctors, because the Valley has 30% fewer doctors per capita than California as a whole. The goal is to encourage local students to go to medical school and return home to practice.

School officials say just less than 120 students from the first three classes could be eligible for medical school by now. So far, four students from the classes of 2003, 2004 and 2005 are in medical school.

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They include Nathan Singh, a 2004 Doctors Academy graduate and a second-year med student at UCSF.

For Singh, raised by a single mother in southeast Fresno after his cabdriver father was murdered, the Doctors Academy helped him stay focused and on track toward his dream of becoming a doctor.

Singh, 24, said his mother struggled to raise four children after his father's death. His older brother got involved in gangs and drugs and his sister became pregnant as a teen. But another brother became a teacher and Singh was determined to go to medical school.

While he credits the support of his mother, Singh said the academy gave him the confidence and academic tools necessary to succeed. At other high schools, "I wouldn't have had the grounding and resources I had at the Doctors Academy," he said.

Doctors Academy is designed to give graduates the foundation for academic success they might otherwise lack, said Flores, assistant clinical professor and director of UCSF-Fresno's Latino Center for Medical Education and Research.

Raised by farmworker grandparents, Flores graduated from Fresno's Roosevelt High School. When she entered Stanford, she didn't feel like she was prepared. "I was competing with people who went to prep schools and had advanced placement courses."

She struggled to stay competitive with her college classmates and told herself that when she finally made it as a doctor, she would do something to help other local students succeed.

It took three years from pitching the idea in the mid-1990s to securing support needed to launch the program. UCSF -- which has a medical residency program in Fresno -- partnered with Fresno Unified School District and the Fresno County Office of Education to start the program. Fresno State, Fresno City College, local hospitals and community health centers also joined. Funding for the program also comes from UCSF, the California Endowment, Kaiser Foundation and several other health-related agencies.

The program began when Fresno Unified opened Sunnyside High in 1999. Principal Sheryl Weaver said the academy originally began as an after-school program, but "the kids didn't bond, it was fragmented."

The program was eventually incorporated into the school day. Two teachers -- Tash Aquino and Brittany Johns -- oversee students enrolled in the program at Sunnyside. UCSF also has an academic coordinator assigned to the academy, which limits enrollment for each incoming class to 50.

Students are encouraged to take courses such as chemistry, physiology and anatomy and are provided tutoring. They are enrolled in AVID -- Advancement Via Individual Determination program -- which prepares them for college and encourages advanced courses. Students are taught about interacting with people from different cultures, part of the cultural sensitivity component of the program, and all must maintain a minimum 2.8 grade-point average to remain in the academy program.

Two years ago, the program was expanded to Selma and Caruthers high schools and a Junior Doctors Academy has since been added at Kings Canyon, Sequoia and Terronez middle schools in Fresno. There are similar programs in place at other high schools -- including the Health Institute at Washington Union High School south of Fresno -- but the academy at Sunnyside is billed as unique because of its broad base of support, ranging from local hospitals to universities.

About one-third of the students at the Sunnyside program come from rural Fresno County -- part of the agreement with the Fresno County Office of Education, which helps pay for transportation so that students from towns such as Parlier and Sanger can participate.

In the beginning, two vans brought rural students to Sunnyside for Doctors Academy. Today, two 40-plus-passenger buses are needed. Fresno Unified also helps pay for the buses.

Jim Yovino, deputy superintendent of educational services with the county Office of Education, said the community should be proud of the program. "If we continue to promote and get kids interested in the field of medicine and they come back to the community, that meets the goals of the program," he said.



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Voris, the associate dean for the UCSF-Fresno Medical Education Program, said even if students who complete the program don't return to work in the Valley, they will have added to the diversity of doctors in the field.

Singh -- whose ethnic background includes East Indian, Mexican and Swedish -- is the type of student the Doctors Academy program tries to attract. The program aims for a diverse student population and reaches out to students from economically disadvantaged families.

More than half the program's students are Hispanic and 17% are Southeast Asian. The hope is these students come back to work in the Valley -- which has a shortage of doctors, especially ethnic doctors -- once they have completed their education.

Singh, who said he plans to specialize in orthopedics, wants to return home to practice. "Fresno is a wonderful place and I have a lot of passion to serve the community," he said.

The reporter can be reached at tcorra@fresnobee.com or (559) 441-6378.



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