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Doctors Academy faces unhealthy cuts

FRESNO -- If it were not for the Doctors Academy, Nathan Singh might not be less than a year away from finishing medical school at the University of California, San Francisco, with plans to return to the San Joaquín Valley to practice medicine.

"I don't think I would be in medical school today without the Doctors Academy," said Singh, who graduated from the rigorous health professions preparatory program at Sunnyside High School in 2004. "I don't think I would be here at UCSF without the Doctors Academy."

The program, "really taught me why I'm working so hard to finish medical school and become a doctor," he said. "They really instilled this strong sense of service back to my community."

The academy is intended to prepare Valley youth, most of whom come from minority and disadvantaged backgrounds, to become culturally and linguistically competent health professionals for the medically underserved region.

But the more than 650 students who are currently enrolled in the academy's pipeline programs -- at three middle schools, three high schools, and California State University, Fresno -- might not have the same opportunities that Singh did to achieve academic success and pursue careers in the health field.

As of Sept. 1, the program is expected to lose its main source of funding -- a federal grant of almost \$1 million per year from the Health Resources and Services Administration.

In anticipation of this cut, the program has reduced its staff by half, reduced program enrollment, and eliminated many of the support programs that helped students to excel academically.

"A lot of things that I believe are critical in the progression of the student who comes from a disadvantaged background that we've been able to offer, we will no longer be able to offer, and it's a huge loss," said Dr. Katherine Flores, founder of the academy and director of the the Latino Center for Medical Education and Research at UCSF Fresno. "We're very sad."

Program cuts will impact students and the greater community.

More than 250 students have graduated from the program since 2003, and 98 percent of them have enrolled in four-year colleges and universities, according to the program. In comparison, about 33 percent of high school graduates in Fresno County completed college preparatory classes in 2008, according to KidsData.org.

It will also have ripple effects throughout the region, where an extreme shortage of primary care physicians - and Latino physicians -- will become accentuated as more area residents gain health insurance through implementation of the federal Affordable Care Act.

The Doctors Academy is, "one of the best, if not the best, program in the state for what it does," said Jeff Oxendine, associate dean for public health practice at the UC Berkeley School of Public Health, and co-director of the California Health Workforce Alliance.

Without it, "the shortages are only going to get worse, the access to care and quality of care is also going to suffer and not be sufficient, and at the same time, it's going to hurt opportunities for local youth."

The Doctors Academy, run through the Latino Center for Medical Education and Research at UCSF Fresno, launched in 1999.

Since then, the program has provided ongoing academic support to a diverse group of students, with the

overarching goal of growing a multicultural healthcare workforce for the Valley that understands the languages, cultures, and unique needs of the region's patients.

But with the impending loss of \$960,000 annually -- or almost half its funding -- the program has reduced its staff from six to three, and eliminated many of the academic programs the staff coordinated.

Representatives at the Health Resources and Service Administration did not return requests for comment.

"We already lost half of our staff because of the cuts," Flores said. "What that means is we don't have the staff to provide the services."

At three middle schools -- Kings Canyon, Sequoia and Terrónez -- the Junior Doctors Academy will no longer provide academic interventions for struggling students, field trips to science and technology museums across the state, or a popular summer program that offered students the opportunity to work with Fresno State physics professors and graduate students.

The academy did not recruit for a seventh grade class this year.

At the high school level, program participants at Sunnyside, Caruthers, and Selma high schools will lose academic intervention, field trips to college campuses, standardized test preparation courses, and summer research and internship programs.

Dr. Cynthia Vuttoinnett, who graduated from the Doctors Academy's first class in 2003, said the academic support provided through the program -- especially the SAT courses -- helped her immensely.

"If it wasn't for all that tutoring, I would not have been a competitive applicant," said Vuttoinnett, who graduated this year from an eight-year undergraduate and medical school program at Brown University. "I never felt like I was on the academic journey alone."

Singh, the UCSF medical student, said he was motivated by the college tours offered through the program. He recalled visiting UCSF as a high school student, and being inspired by visits to labs and lecture halls, conversations with admissions officers and a panel discussion with medical students.

"I remember very distinctly going through all these things, wanting to come back here, and wanting to have this be my reality," he said. "Once I started medical school, I was very fortunate and blessed to be in a position to come here."

Students in the Health Careers Opportunity Program at Fresno State will also lose some support services. The freshman class has been reduced from 50 to 30.

All these support services were essential to the success of students, and the communities they live in, Flores said.

The program, she said, helps students and their families recognize that, "if you raise the expectation bar higher, the kids will perform -- and they will perform even more if you provide the support."

"You can't just put a carrot out there and say, 'you can have this, just jump high.' You have to be willing to provide the support network to lift the kid up to the carrot."

Despite the cuts, Flores is striving to remain optimistic about the future of the Doctors Academy.

Though the state's public education system is also in financial turmoil, partners at Fresno Unified School District, Fresno County Office of Education, Fresno State and the University of California have remained supportive of the program, Flores said.

She also continues to actively seek out new grants.

"What we have is heart and soul," she said. "What we have is amazing partners within the community."

"Because of those things, I believe the program will continue at some level. It may not be what it was, but there will be some elements of the program that will continue at our middle schools and at our high schools and at Fresno State."

But as the program scales back, it could prove more difficult to offer young doctors training opportunities that bring them back to the Valley.

"I think if you don't continue that ongoing reaching out to these kids and young adults... they're going to find (professional opportunities) somewhere else," Flores said. "I do have this fear that that opportunity will be lost."

Singh, for one, is determined to return to the Valley to practice medicine. He will be doing a clinical rotation here in September, and is interested in doing his residency at UCSF Fresno.

Without the Doctors Academy, though, he is concerned that other students won't follow in his footsteps.

"The cuts they're doing at the Doctors Academy significantly reduce their ability to do what they're good at -- what their mission is," Singh said. "Overall, the program is the answer to the physician shortage."

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