UC RIVERSIDE
School of Medicine



UC RIVERSIDE SCHOOL OF MEDICINE YEAR IN REVIEW

2025-2026

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OUR MISSION

The mission of the UCR School of Medicine is to improve the health of the people of California and, especially, to serve Inland Southern California by training a diverse workforce of physicians, biomedical scientists, and public health professionals and by developing innovative research and health care delivery programs that will improve the health of the medically underserved in the region and become models to be emulated throughout the state and nation.

CREDITS

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ON THE COVER

Members of the Class of 2026 celebrate at their commencement ceremony at the UCR Student Recreation Center on June 5, 2026. From left, Joseph Santino Garcia, MS, Luis Antonio Hernandez, MD, and Eliana Pandian, MPH. **Photo by Carlos Puma.**

MESSAGE FROM THE VICE CHANCELLOR AND DEAN

The 2025–26 academic year was a period of meaningful progress for the UCR School of Medicine as we continued to advance our mission to improve the health of Inland Southern California. Through the collective efforts of our students, faculty, and staff, we strengthened our educational programs, expanded the reach and impact of our research and clinical care, and deepened our connections with the communities we serve.

In my 10 years here at the UC Riverside School of Medicine, I've been honored to be present at many landmark moments in our history. A recent one was on June 5, 2026, when we hosted our annual Commencement and Hippocratic Oath Ceremony.

This year's ceremony was noteworthy in a few ways. First, it celebrated the 10th class of medical students that have graduated from our school. Second, it marked the graduation of the first class of students who matriculated through our two-year Master of Public Health Program. Finally, the ceremony commemorated the first time that students receiving Master of Biomedical Sciences degrees had the opportunity to participate in our commencement. Our Biomedical Sciences PhD students were hooded in the Graduate Division ceremony the following day.

If you have heard me speak in person, you have likely heard me share the African proverb, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." The cover of this publication captures a moment from the commencement ceremony, where individuals from each of the three graduating classes are celebrating together. It fills my heart to see this moment and to know what it represents for everyone at the School of Medicine, and also for the people in our community. It demonstrates how we are working together to realize our mission of improving healthcare across Inland Southern California. These young people, working across disciplines, will be the difference makers for years to come and will help our communities rise and flourish.

Throughout these pages you will find a myriad of stories that highlight the 2025-26 academic year. If you are interested in catching up on the latest happenings, I encourage you to visit our website at medschool.ucr.edu or our newsroom at somnews.ucr.edu. Both sites will keep you updated with the exciting developments within our school.

In closing, I want to thank everyone who has played a role in the continued growth of the UCR School of Medicine and UCR Health and our impact on the community: our students, our staff and faculty, our donors, and our supporters. We could not have reached this point without you. There is still work to be done, and we hope you will continue to support us in years to come.



Deborah Deas, MD, MPH, Vice Chancellor
for Health Sciences and Mark and Pam Rubin Dean

BY THE NUMBERS

2025-26 GRADUATION DATA

78 MD GRADUATES
5 PHD OF BIOMEDICAL SCIENCES GRADUATES
28 MASTER OF BIOMEDICAL SCIENCES GRADUATES
12 MASTER OF PUBLIC HEALTH (MPH) GRADUATES

GRADUATE MEDICAL EDUCATION

98 RESIDENTS
36 FELLOWS
134 TOTAL TRAINEES
49 RESIDENT AND FELLOW GRADUATES IN 2026

CLINICAL SCIENCES

394 CURRENT MD STUDENTS
400 CLINICAL FACULTY
119 LACE TRAINING SITES
80 CLERKSHIP SITES
538 TOTAL GRADUATES SINCE 2017
1,300+ COMMUNITY-BASED FACULTY

ABOUT THE CLASS OF 2029

90 INCOMING STUDENTS
40% FIRST IN FAMILY TO COMPLETE COLLEGE
40% UNDERREPRESENTED IN MEDICINE
90% TIES TO THE INLAND EMPIRE
51% FROM DISADVANTAGED BACKGROUNDS

PATHWAY PROGRAMS

732 PRE-MED STUDENTS WHO PARTICIPATED IN A PATHWAY PROGRAM DURING 2025-26 (INCLUDING K-12 STUDENTS)

16 MEMBERS OF THE INCOMING CLASS OF 2029 WHO PREVIOUSLY PARTICIPATED IN A PATHWAY PROGRAM

213 TOTAL UCR SOM STUDENTS, ALL-TIME, WHO PREVIOUSLY PARTICIPATED IN A PATHWAY PROGRAM (INCLUDING UCR/UCLA PROGRAM)

BIOMEDICAL SCIENCES

36 PHD STUDENTS/CANDIDATES
45 MS STUDENTS
29 CORE BIOMEDICAL SCIENCES FACULTY
60+ TOTAL AFFILIATED FACULTY FROM ACROSS UCR

FUNDRAISING

$5,155,666 PHILANTHROPIC GIFTS

UCR HEALTH CLINICAL CARE

12,698 PATIENTS TREATED (EXCLUDING HOSPITAL PATIENTS)
46,158 CLINICAL VISITS





SMPPH

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL MEDICINE, POPULATION, AND PUBLIC HEALTH

FIRST COHORT COMPLETE: UCR SOM NEW MPH PROGRAM

When Jorge Delos Santos entered the new Master of Public Health (MPH) program at the UC Riverside School of Medicine, he was focused on community health and nonprofits. Over the course of the two-year program, he developed a new goal: working in public health at the government level. Now, the 2026 graduate is starting a new role at the San Bernardino Public Health Department, where he'll work to manage infectious diseases in the region.



Delos Santos was part of the first 12-student cohort in an MPH program whose graduates are already making an impact in the area. "It was a great group of students who all really had a commitment to serving underserved communities," said Mark Wolfson, PhD, chair of the Department of Social Medicine, Population, and Public Health (SMPPH) at the SOM who helped develop the program.

A PROGRAM FOR THE COMMUNITY

Besides the program's multidisciplinary instructors, who represent 12 departments across five colleges at UCR, MPH students appreciated the program's cohort model. "I love the size of this program," said Nina Ruedas, LMFT, MPH, a member of the inaugural MPH class of 2026.

Another notable aspect of the program was the final capstone or thesis project designed to positively impact the community. "We as a program are very proud that these projects... will be useful to the agencies that the students partnered with," Wolfson said.

After two years, everything came together for the program's first commencement ceremony in June 2026. "Seeing the students at the hooding ceremony... and witnessing the smiles on their faces after all they had accomplished was truly beautiful," said Cristina Gonzalez, a project manager in SMPPH. With her new degree in hand, Ruedas plans to pursue a PhD in Education, Society, and Culture at the UCR School of Education with a focus on sexual health education in higher education.

While it continues to make enhancements, UCR's MPH program already serves as a notable local offering. The number of applications in the first years has shown the substantial interest, and the high need, for the program. "We're helping shape the next generation of public health leaders," Gonzalez said. "I would encourage anyone who wants to improve health, enhance quality of life, and create meaningful change to apply."





UCR MPH CAPSTONES MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN THE COMMUNITY

For their capstone projects, each Master of Public Health (MPH) student at the UCR SOM works alongside a local organization to create a project or proposal that will provide a clear benefit to the community. “They let us know that there are gaps in our knowledge about certain issues regarding public health in the Inland Empire,” said Mario Sims, PhD, faculty director of the MPH program.

Three projects from the inaugural class of 2026 are highlighted on the following page:



A STRATEGY TO ADDRESS LATINX IMMIGRANT HEALTH LITERACY

For her capstone, Karina Young created a policy brief on educating Mexican immigrants in California about navigating U.S. healthcare. Her brief detailed the development of a mobile health app, Como Conseguir Salud, featuring educational materials created with guidance from community leaders. “Latinos have been found to have a higher prevalence of chronic disease, so this intervention has the potential to greatly reduce the rates of chronic disease across California,” Young said.



ASSOCIATION BETWEEN CDC SOCIAL VULNERABILITY INDEX SCORES AND AREA-LEVEL MENTAL HEALTH OUTCOMES IN INLAND EMPIRE ZIP CODE TABULATION AREAS (ZCTAS)

Eliana Pandian’s thesis examined the link between social vulnerability and mental health outcomes using local zip code data. She identified a statistically significant link between poor socioeconomic status and mental health days, and found that those who lived closer to a university had better mental health outcomes. Pandian is now working on publishing a paper with her findings. “The research gives us a tool as to... which areas within the Inland Empire we really want to focus our efforts on,” she said.



EXPANDING WOUND CARE TO NON-CLINICAL SETTINGS: A PROGRAM PROPOSAL FOR SERVING THE UNHOUSED COMMUNITY IN RIVERSIDE, CALIFORNIA

After completing his MPH program internship at Riverside Kansas Avenue Seventh-day Adventist Church near UCR’s campus, Jorge Delos Santos continued volunteering there. When an individual showed up with a dog bite injury, Delos Santos’ project, a proposal for a wound care program, arose organically. “It was more of looking at their existing structure and then building out a program that will enhance it,” he explained.



DEVELOPMENT

CONTINUING A LEGACY IN MEDICINE: THE KHONG-CHAN-NG FAMILY ENDOWED SCHOLARSHIP FUND

Every evening, when Doan Khong, MD, came home from his family practice in a medically underserved neighborhood in San Francisco, he brought his work with him. He described his patients, his days, and his purpose. His four daughters listened. “He shared with us about his calling, and that influenced us to want to do the same thing as he did,” recalled his oldest daughter, Dorothy Khong, MD.

All four daughters went on to pursue medicine. Three of them--Dorothy, Amy Khong, MD, and Christine Khong, MD--attended the UCR/UCLA Program in Biomedical Sciences, which was renamed the UCR/UCLA Thomas Haider Program in Biomedical Sciences in 1997 and became the UCR School of Medicine in 2013.

Dorothy first heard about the program from a family friend and enrolled in 1995, followed by her two sisters in 1999 and 2003. Both Dorothy and Amy remembered the warmth of a program that enrolled just 24 students for the first two years of medical school before the cohort completed their medical degree at the UCLA School of Medicine. For Amy, the program helped her find her path to psychiatry. “To this day, without the Riverside program, I don’t know if I would get to go through this medical school route,” she said. “I feel very thankful.”



“BEING ABLE TO PAY IT FORWARD... SEEMED LIKE THE THING TO DO.”

In 2025, the family established the Khong, Chan, Ng Family Endowed Scholarship Fund as a permanent legacy of their dedication to medicine, service, and opportunity. “Being able to pay it forward... seemed like the thing to do,” Dorothy said. The fund, structured as an endowment for enduring impact, aims to support students who share the SOM’s mission of building a diverse physician workforce to improve care in the region.

The family sees themselves in the students they hope to help. “We identify with a lot of the students who are probably the first in their family to go to college,” Amy said. “It’s these small opportunities... that change everything.” Jane Hoag, director of Development at the SOM, called the fund “inspiring.” “What makes their gift so meaningful is the intentionality behind it... they’re determined to ensure other students have access to that same transformative experience,” she said.

The Khong sisters hope their story encourages other alumni to reflect on ways they might give back, in whatever form feels right to them. Amy also credited a company match program through her husband Ben’s employer at the time. Citing mentoring and volunteering as other ways to contribute, Amy added, “Anybody can help give back, no matter how big or small, and it could be the thing that helps just that one student make it through.”



GALA RAISES $193,000 FOR MISSION AWARD SCHOLARSHIP

More than 350 people raised $193,000 for the school's eighth annual Mission Award Scholarship at the 2025 Celebration of Medical Education gala on October 4, 2025.

"This event continues to grow each year and so has your support," said Deborah Deas, MD, MPH, the vice chancellor for health sciences and the Mark and Pam Rubin dean of the School of Medicine. "It warms my heart to realize that each of you truly understands the significance of medical education and the impact it can have on our community."

Medical student Jalene Rodriguez, who received the mission award funded by the 2024 gala, addressed the attendees and spoke about the empowerment she felt visiting a Spanish-speaking physician when she was growing up in Riverside. She began volunteering as a translator at the Riverside Free Clinic and was inspired by their stories to serve those communities and become a physician advocate. "Thanks to your support, I have the privilege of pursuing this dream," she said.

Guests were entertained by third-year medical student Marina Gad El Sayed, who sang "Climb Every Mountain" from *The Sound of Music*. She dedicated the song to her siblings as well as to "all current and future medical students as they work to find their passion in life."

"I am deeply grateful to our amazing sponsors and supporters for helping make the School of Medicine's gala such a memorable evening," said Executive Director of Development Edna Yohannes. "This generosity and partnership lift up our students, inspire our faculty, and strengthen the health of Inland Southern California communities."





EDUCATION

UCR SOM ANNOUNCES NEW EVOLVE CURRICULUM

In March, Senior Associate Dean for Medical Education Pablo Joo, MD, announced that the School of Medicine would be undertaking an ambitious enhancement to its academic curriculum to meet the needs of medical students as they prepare for the modern healthcare landscape.

“We are aligning our program with the latest research, evolving healthcare needs, and evidence-based practices to ensure every UCR medical student who graduates is ready to make a meaningful difference in the lives of their patients and communities,” Joo said. “Some of these transformative elements are already being piloted, while others are under active development. Together, they represent an exciting new chapter in UCR SOM’s ongoing mission to shape the future of healthcare in Inland Southern California and beyond.”

The curriculum will begin in 2027, bolstering the already strong medical education that UCR SOM students are receiving.

Highlights include:

- **Advance with science & innovation:** The curriculum will continue to align with the latest research, evidence-based practices, and evolving healthcare needs to prepare students for real-world impact.
- **Empower future physicians**: Upon graduation, doctors will have strong knowledge, clinical skills, and professional values — and be ready to adapt to new discoveries, emerging technologies, and changing healthcare systems.
- **Commit to lifelong learning:** The curriculum will cultivate resilience, curiosity, and professional identity to sustain excellence throughout their careers.
- **Integrate science with humanity:** The four science pillars will be embedded into training to create compassionate, patient-centered physicians who understand the social factors shaping health and advocate for patients, families, and communities.
- **Exceed standards, drive progress:** The curriculum will continuously update content to surpass board requirements, introduce innovations in teaching, and strengthen student performance.

The name EVOLVE is an acronym for “Expanding Vision. Optimizing Learning. Valuing Excellence.” It was the winning entry in a naming contest submitted by second-year Master of Public Health student Kenneth Chiu.

More information about the curriculum can be found on the UME website at ume.ucr.edu.

EVOLVE

CURRICULUM

Expanding Vision. Optimizing Learning. Valuing Excellence.

UC RIVERSIDE | School of Medicine

UCR SOM CELEBRATES CLASS OF 2029 WHITE COAT CEREMONY

The UC Riverside School of Medicine welcomed the Class of 2029 at its 13th annual White Coat Ceremony on August 8, 2025. Held at the Student Recreation Center, the event marked the formal entry of 90 medical students and five biomedical sciences students into the profession of healthcare.

Deborah Deas, MD, MPH, the vice chancellor for health sciences and the Mark and Pam Rubin dean of the School of Medicine, addressed the cohort during a transformative period for the university. She highlighted the expansion of UCR Health, including new outpatient clinics designed to bolster the school's mission of enhancing regional health and well-being.

The Class of 2029 reflects UCR's commitment to diversity and community representation. Notably, 90% of the students have ties to the Inland Empire, and 60% grew up in medically underserved regions. Additionally, 51% come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and 40% are the first in their families to complete college.

Keynote speaker Evita Limon-Rocha, MD, a UCR alumna, psychiatrist, and chair for the admissions committee, encouraged students to embrace their personal histories. "Never forget your tapestry, your story, [and] your mission," she said.

New UC Riverside Chancellor S. Jack Hu, PhD, who began his tenure on July 15, offered remarks during the ceremony, marking his first formal address at a UCR event.

"We are both beginning new journeys that will demand perseverance, adaptability, and resolve," he said. "When I was invited to lead this university, I was drawn to UC Riverside's unwavering commitment to excellence and access. These values are not only foundational to a great public research university, they are fundamental to the practice of medicine."

The ceremony concluded with the class reciting a self-authored oath, pledging to provide care tailored to individual lived experiences. With the addition of these 90 medical students, the School of Medicine's total enrollment reached 394, further cementing its role in training a physician workforce that mirrors the diverse population of Southern California.





UCR SOM CELEBRATES

MATCH DAY 2026

On Friday, March 20, 2026, UCR SOM medical students joined with friends and family at the Marinaj Banquet and Events Center in Moreno Valley for the annual Match Day celebration.

In total, 98.7% of UCR SOM fourth-year medical students placed into residency programs, with 92% staying in California, 51% remaining in Inland Southern California, and 70% entering primary care and shortage area specialties.

Deborah Deas, MD, MPH, the vice chancellor for health sciences and the Mark and Pam Rubin dean of the School of Medicine, congratulated the Class of 2026. “At your White Coat Ceremony, we shared the significance of the white coat and implored you to reflect on the humanism values in medicine every time you don the white coat,” Deas said, reminding students of the ceremony at the beginning of medical school that symbolized the first step in their medical journey.

Brandon Ngo, who matched into the much-needed specialty of family medicine at Riverside University Health System, said, “When I was growing up, I envisioned physicians to be the ones at the forefront of really taking care of patients... and being with them on their lifelong journey. It’s really nice to continue my journey, finish off my training, and return to the community where it all started.”

“This is just the beginning; your future has yet to be fully written,” Hanh The-Trinh Nguyen, MD, associate dean of Career Advising, told the audience. Following Nguyen’s speech, the students gave a standing ovation to recognize and thank him for his support.



UCR SCHOOL OF MEDICINE COMMEMORATES 10TH COMMENCEMENT AND HIPPOCRATIC OATH CEREMONY

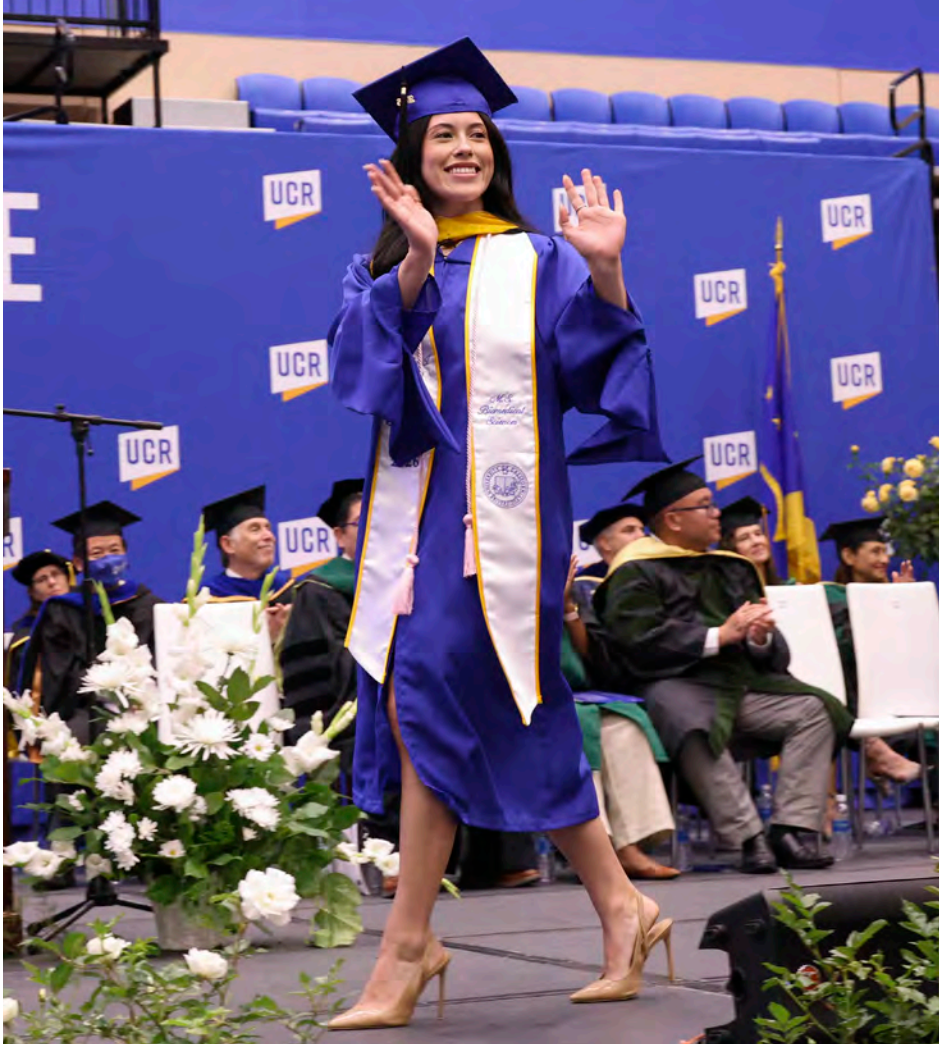
In June 2026, the UC Riverside School of Medicine celebrated its 10th Commencement and Hippocratic Oath Ceremony with California Surgeon General Diana Ramos, MD, presenting the keynote address. The event marked the SOM's first unified, shared commencement across degree programs, with 78 Doctor of Medicine (MD) students, 28 Master of Biomedical Sciences (MS) students, and 12 Master of Public Health (MPH) students receiving their degrees.

It was also the very first commencement for the school's new two-year MPH program. "Seeing this class cross the stage today is truly a historic moment for the UCR School of Medicine," said Vice Chancellor for Health Sciences and Mark and Pam Rubin Dean Deborah Deas, MD, MPH, in her opening address. They "represent the next generation of public health leaders in the Inland Empire."

Match statistics for the MD Class of 2026 highlighted the upcoming physicians' commitment to the SOM's mission of improving healthcare in the region. Of the 78 graduating medical students, 92% will remain in California for their residency training, with 51% staying in the Inland Empire and 70% entering primary care and shortage area specialties.

MD student speaker Zayan Musa reflected in her speech on the mistreatment and suffering of children around the world that inspired her to become a pediatrician. "I cannot change a system, but I can try my best to provide patients with resources and the care they deserve to have as a human," said Musa, who will enter the pediatrics residency program at Stanford University School of Medicine. "We share a common goal: bettering the health outcomes of our communities."

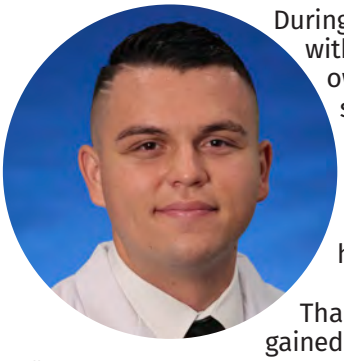



UCR



UCR SCHOOL OF MEDICINE CLASS OF 2026 SPOTLIGHT

SEEING HIMSELF IN HIS PATIENTS: JAVIER PRIETO, MD



During one of his pediatrics rotations at the UCR SOM, Javier Prieto, MD, encountered a young patient with a tumor growing in his kidney. Prieto helped reassure the family in Spanish, then related his own experience of having an underdeveloped kidney removed as a child. "For me to share my story with the patient at that time, I felt a sense of relief on his end," Prieto said, calling a kidney removal just a "bump in the road." Prieto's frequent kidney procedures throughout his childhood inspired his dream of becoming a urologist himself. Growing up in Victorville, he chose UCR for medical school with the hope of serving the local immigrant community. Yet with few medical students pursuing the niche urology field, Prieto, a first-generation college student, had to find his way down the less common route.

Thanks to help from SOM staff, particularly the Office of Career and Residency Advising, Prieto gained access to faculty physicians, a summer program in urology at UCLA, and research opportunities. "That really set the path for me," he said. Prieto matched into the urology residency program at St. Joseph's Medical Center in Stockton and hopes to eventually practice in the Inland Empire. "To return home and serve where I grew up would be amazing," he said.

REDISCOVERING EMERGENCY MEDICINE: ANDREW MCLAIN, MD



When Andrew McLain, MD, started at the UCR SOM, he was sure of one thing: He did not want to specialize in emergency medicine. For the former emergency medical technician (EMT), "I initially told myself I wasn't going to do emergency medicine because I wanted to see more of the long-term side," he said.

As McLain completed his medical student rotations, though, he rediscovered the aspects he'd loved about being an EMT and found satisfaction in easing patients' discomfort, now with more tools. "You can give them something to make them feel better, and even if you're discharging them there's a big impact on that person's day or even life," he said.

Unique challenges and life experiences also shaped McLain's career aspirations. After entering medical school in 2020, he took two years off following a head injury and shoulder surgery. During his fourth year of school, his wife Mariah McLain had their first child, making clocking in and out for defined shifts in the emergency department more attractive for him. McLain will join the emergency medicine residency program in his hometown at Southwest Healthcare Temecula Valley Hospital.

A LOVE OF SCIENCE: JENNELL JENNETT, PHD



After studying microbiology in college in Arizona, Jennell Jennett, PhD, considered becoming a doctor. Yet while working in a primary care office after earning her bachelor's degree, "I realized direct patient care maybe wasn't for me," she recalled. "There wasn't enough science I was able to do every day." Jennett happened to start a job in biotechnology and found her true calling, enrolling in UCR's biomedical sciences PhD program in 2021. In the lab of Associate Dean for Biomedical Research Meera G. Nair, PhD, Jennett's research focused on immunology and host immune responses to infection, including how cannabis exposure may alter immune responses during parasitic infection. Another of Jennett's projects examined the link between helminth (parasitic worm) infections, diet, and weight loss.

The project led to Jennett working to develop a stem cell therapy that replicated the effects of a parasitic infection with the goal of reducing obesity. In the end, the treatment didn't work well enough to continue with development. Still, Jennett pointed out that such projects contribute to scientists' underlying purpose of making a positive impact. "We want to see people living better lives," she said, "so however we can get closer to that goal, we get excited about it."

SHARING VETERANS' STORIES: ALICIA JUNKER, MPH



In memory of a friend and fellow veteran who passed away from lung cancer, Alicia Junker, MPH, decided to focus on burn pits for her MPH thesis at UCR. "When you are a soldier... no one thinks that 10 years from now, you're going to die because there were toxic chemicals that you were breathing in," said Junker, a member of the MPH program's inaugural class of 2026 and an employee at Riverside University Health System Public Health (RUHS-PH).

Junker explained that the practice of burning trash and plastics produced smoke throughout military bases, often leading to future health conditions for those in the vicinity. She reviewed and analyzed public online forum posts and video testimonials from veterans with health issues linked to burn pits. Junker aims to use her research to improve veterans' health while helping community members see veterans as people just like them. "We have complicated stories to tell. We're moms, we're LGBTQ, we're Black or Asian--veterans encompass every population," she said.

Junker's veteran status represents just one facet of her own story. Halfway through her MPH degree, she received a breast cancer diagnosis. Despite two surgeries and four rounds of chemotherapy, she continued with her coursework and graduated with her class. Junker also continued her full-time job, though she had to be excused from military drills and ultimately retired after serving for 23 years in the Army reserves.

She plans to continue veteran-focused research at RUHS. "I'm excited to destigmatize the veteran population a little bit, raise a little awareness and share a different side of it to people," Junker said.

FACULTY PROFILE: ADOLFO AGUILERA, MD

LONGTIME CLINICAL EDUCATOR HAS MADE MEDICAL EDUCATION HIS MISSION



A few years after his family immigrated from Mexico to the San Fernando Valley, Adolfo Aguilera, MD, said his older sister Victoria and brother Bernardino sat their younger siblings down and asked what they wanted to be when they grew up. Six-year-old Aguilera said he didn't know. "She was like, 'Okay, well, you're going to become a doctor, you're going to become a lawyer... and you're going to become an engineer,'" Aguilera recalled. As the one chosen to be a doctor, "I ran with it," said Aguilera, now a physician at Riverside University Health System (RUHS) and director of clinical skills at the UCR SOM.

FULFILLING UCR'S MISSION AND HIS OWN

Upon graduating from medical school in Illinois, Aguilera matched into a family medicine residency program in Riverside that would eventually become RUHS. He accepted a faculty position in Riverside after residency. "One of my professional goals was always to work with underserved communities," Aguilera said. A few years later, in 2002, Aguilera began working with UCR and helped develop the mission of its new medical school. The school, which opened in 2013, "was to train medical students to be able to stick around this area and work with vulnerable populations, and that's near and dear to my heart," he said.

On top of his ongoing work as a physician and residency associate director at RUHS, Aguilera has served for years as the SOM's clinical skills director teaching examination techniques and cultural awareness. "Clinical skills is about exposing students to scenarios that make them challenge their own biases, and hopefully keep an open mind whenever they're encountering any patient," he explained. "In addition, we teach them... to use communication for connection to make that patient feel valued."

Aguilera's efforts earned him the lifetime achievement award in education at UCR in 2023-2024. Students "are the ones that bring those glowing eyes, those aha moments, and I feel like, 'Wow, I was part of that,'" Aguilera said. "My main motto has been to give back, give it all you've got, and don't give up no matter the obstacles that you face," he added.



CELEBRATION OF WOMEN IN MEDICINE AND SCIENCE EMPHASIZED WOMEN'S ROLES AS AGENTS OF CHANGE

The UC Riverside School of Medicine highlighted the transformative power of women in leadership during its annual Celebration of Women in Medicine and Science on Sept. 4, 2025. Centered on the theme "Women as Agents of Change," the event featured a keynote address by Deborah Prothrow-Stith, MD, dean of the Charles R. Drew University of Medicine and Science College of Medicine, who addressed the vital role women play in shaping the future of health care throughout the Inland Empire.



Deborah Deas, MD, MPH, the vice chancellor for health sciences and the Mark and Pam Rubin dean of the School of Medicine, opened the celebration by highlighting that women do not just participate in medicine—they define its future. Deas noted that when women lead, they open doors for others, fostering an environment where progress and lasting change can flourish.

Prothrow-Stith's address, titled "Women in Medicine: New Viewpoints Can Make a Big Difference," recounted her early experiences in an emergency room, which drove her toward a career in public health and violence prevention. She urged attendees to trust their instincts when they sense systemic flaws. "When you get new viewpoints at the table, change can happen in important ways," she said.

A panel discussion moderated by Michelle Porche, EdD, and featuring UCR SOM faculty, staff, and students discussed the importance of mentorship and persistence.

The event was presented by the SOM Office of Faculty Development and the Office of Strategic Initiatives as part of the school's celebration of the American Medical Association's Women in Medicine Month.

CALIFORNIA MEDICINE SCHOLARS PROGRAM HELPS BUILD A DIVERSE PHYSICIAN WORKFORCE

In 2020, Ariel Galindo's mother broke seven bones in a fall, leaving her bedridden. However, Galindo observed that her physician wasn't adequately addressing her pain. "I immediately thought to myself, 'Why doesn't this physician have that training that would make him have a better interaction with my mom?'" he recalled. "That's when I decided... I can bring it to the profession."

With the encouragement of his chemistry professor at Chaffey College, Galindo applied to the California Medicine Scholars Program (CMSP) at UC Riverside. Now, as a 44-year-old non-traditional student, Galindo is set to graduate from UCR in 2028 with medical school on the horizon.

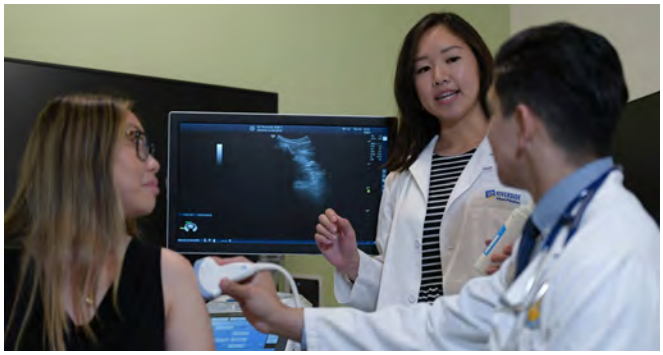
CMSP is one of 10 Pathway Programs at the UCR School of Medicine that prepare local high school and college students for medical school. Established in 2022, CMSP is dedicated to training homegrown doctors who have deep roots in the Inland Empire community, where demand for medical care outpaces the supply of physicians.

CMSP provides advising, mentorship, and professional development opportunities with a focus on qualified, local community college students who are largely underrepresented in medicine. A transformative aspect of the program is access to research opportunities and internships, which can be challenging to access for transfer students.

The program is ensuring that the future of healthcare in the Inland Empire is built by the same community it serves. According to Ana Guillen Lopez, CMSP's program director, "The big thing there is looking at the students who are from the Inland Empire, who have ties to the Inland Empire, and who ultimately would want to stay here and serve here."

With its first cohort going into their third year with the program after transferring to UCR in 2024, CMSP is fulfilling its mission. For those currently in community college who may feel overwhelmed by the winding road ahead, Galindo said, "I think CMSP actually takes the burden away from you and provides you with more resources to actually achieve what you want."

PEER-LED ULTRASOUND EDUCATION AT THE UC RIVERSIDE SCHOOL OF MEDICINE



During a recent career day at a local high school, second-year UCR medical student Leonardo Padilla stood in a classroom with an ultrasound probe in hand as students stared in wonder at the image appearing on the screen. Padilla was visiting as an instructor for the UCR SOM's Ultrasound Student Instructor Cadre (USSIC), a program where second-year medical students teach first-year students point-of-care ultrasound and participate in community outreach. "Watching students make those connections in real time was honestly one of the more rewarding teaching experiences I've had," Padilla said.

Second-year SOM students undergo a rigorous selection process to become USSIC instructors. The peer-teaching model shows learners that a skill is obtainable while solidifying instructors' skills, according to Lucas Friedman, MD, the director of the UCR SOM Ultrasound Thread and Designated Emphasis. As Padilla put it, "The moment you have to articulate why a structure appears the way it does sonographically... you quickly discover whether your understanding is genuine." First-year SOM student Analynn Lechien added, "The second-years just went through it themselves – they know what we struggled with."

The program's impact extends to undergraduate Probe Scholars like Nathan Hillyer, who volunteer as patient models. "As a pre-health student, being in a room with medical students who are in the exact position I am working toward is something really special," Hillyer said.

USSIC uniquely develops students' ability to reason through uncertainty in real time. Yet beyond clinical preparation, the program also helped Padilla rediscover his love of medicine. "Being able to teach it, share it, and watch others get excited about it has kept that spark alive for me," he said.

A DOCTOR IN YOUR CORNER

After a recent presentation on lung cancer at a high school, a teacher approached UC Riverside School of Medicine student Vjola Haka in tears. Sharing her own experience with breast cancer, the teacher thanked Haka for discussing the topic. “It really made me understand that we are impacting people,” recalled Haka, who gave the presentation as a member of the new UCR student group Doctor’s Corner.

Founded in 2013 as a community organization by Desiree Reedus, MD, MS, FACC, Doctor’s Corner originally aimed to inspire local medical students to remain and practice in the Inland Empire region amid its shortage of primary care and other physician specialties. “I have found that students who want to stay after their medical training are those who have a connection to the area,” Reedus said.

In 2026, Doctor’s Corner formed a student interest group at the UCR SOM. Participants take part in a range of activities, including teaching high school students to use ultrasound and stethoscopes, giving talks on heart health and other topics to older adults, offering guidance on pursuing a medical career for first-generation students, and tackling health misinformation.

As students in the group learn to communicate complex medical concepts to diverse audiences, they gain confidence and become rooted in the community. One of the first students in the original organization, Leila Magistrado, MD, is now an obstetrician-gynecologist practicing in Riverside. “She learned those leadership skills in Doctor’s Corner early on, and now she’s perpetuated those same skills with her own students,” Reedus said.



SUPPORTING STUDENTS FROM MEDICAL SCHOOL TO A CAREER

Most of the focus of the SOM's Office of Career and Residency Advising (OCRA) is during Match Week, when fourth-year students learn the location of their residency programs. Yet OCRA has a year-round commitment to helping students build their careers. "OCRA is here to support students from A to Z and everywhere in the middle," said residency and career advisor Jennifer Wilson.

Both Wilson and career and residency advising coordinator Darnell Sy joined UCR after serving as residency program coordinators. "My experience on the residency side shines some light on a lot of questions that they have about residency, like what are the things that should be important to them when interviewing," said Wilson.

The OCRA website lists its offerings organized by year in medical school. Besides assistance with writing and reviewing CVs, the office provides one-on-one mock interview workshops, personal statement editing, individual meetings with students, and more. The staff also ensures that all students can find time to work with them. "Some students can only meet with us during the evening because they're in clinical rotations during the day," Sy said.

While the residency application process officially starts after third year, both advisors recommended that students begin working toward it much earlier. One first-year student, Maryam Azizadah, has already worked extensively with OCRA. "The OCRA office was the first to say, 'Do you have a CV?' And I didn't," she recalled. In addition to developing her CV, Azizadah has met regularly with Sy to look for mentors, gaining connections to various programs that may help influence her career.

The culmination of the process, Match Week, is Wilson's favorite time of the year. "It's just so exciting because they send you the email, 'I'm going to be a doctor, I've done it,' and it's just amazing," she said.

GRANILLO NAMED ASSOCIATE DEAN FOR STUDENT SUCCESS



Christina Granillo, PhD, was appointed as associate dean for Student Success, with her position beginning on July 1, 2026. Granillo, an Inland Empire native and UCR alumna, has been an important part of the School of Medicine for nearly 15 years.

"I am so pleased to have Dr. Christina Granillo fill this important position," said Deborah Deas, MD, MPH, the vice chancellor for health sciences and the Mark and Pam Rubin dean of the School of Medicine. "Her career path has been leading her to this moment."

Granillo, who is also an assistant clinical professor of health sciences, will provide primary oversight of the Offices of Academic Success, Student Support & Wellness, and Registrar. She will also assist with general operations in the Office of Student Affairs, including medical school admissions, recruitment, student support, alumni relations, philanthropy, and Pathway programs. Her responsibilities include providing holistic student support, serving on the admissions committee, and counseling medical students on progress and other issues.

Previously, Granillo served as director of the Office of Academic Success and started her career at the UCR School of Medicine in Pathway Programs in 2012. She has represented UCR on various Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) national working groups and was named a Latina of Influence by Hispanic Lifestyle in 2020.

OGBOGU RECEIVES $10K SCHOLARSHIP FROM THE ASSOCIATION OF BLACK CARDIOLOGISTS



Medical student Jonathan Ogbogu, Class of 2028, received a $10,000 scholarship from the Association of Black Cardiologists (ABC), a Washington, D.C. based organization that leads initiatives to close gaps in cardiovascular outcomes through advocacy, education, research, and mentorship.

Ogbogu received the ABC/Johnson & Johnson MedTech Scholarship for Medical Students, which was launched in 2022 through a partnership between ABC and Johnson & Johnson MedTech and is given to students committed to cardiology and health equity.

"This scholarship is an investment in my mission to improve heart health outcomes across Inland Southern California," said Ogbogu, who grew up in Moreno Valley, attended John W. North High School, and received his undergraduate degree from UC Riverside before entering medical school.

The ABC celebrated its 50th year by presenting a total of $225,000 to 25 medical students across the country, with the announcement coming during its Golden Celebration Weekend on October 9, 2025.



DEI

DIVERSITY, EQUITY, & INCLUSION

INAUGURAL LUNAR NEW YEAR CELEBRATION HIGHLIGHTS DIVERSITY

More than 200 guests attended the UCR SOM's inaugural Lunar New Year Celebration on March 4. The event was held as a partnership between the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and the Asian Pacific American Medical Student Association (APAMSA).



The event included a variety of traditional activities tied to the annual holiday, which is celebrated across many Asian cultures, including traditional lion dancing, music, mahjong and other games, a fan dance performance by APAMSA members, a table where attendees could paint a lucky symbol on paper fans, and lunch. It also included a table where students wrote down their wishes to place on the wishing tree for the New Year, a tradition found across many Asian cultures.

Noting that different cultures have their own ways of celebrating the holiday, Emily Ho, APAMSA's co-president and SOM Class of 2028, said the student group conducted extensive research with the goal of making the event as inclusive as possible. "A lively holiday like Lunar New Year is the perfect time to gather and celebrate," she said. "Lunar New Year is an opportunity to highlight the rich cultural diversity here at UCR."





"I HAVE A DREAM... DEFERRED" REFLECTS UPON MLK'S ADDRESS



More than 200 students, faculty, staff, and guests attended a thought-provoking keynote lecture by Gabrielle Pina, DO, FAAP, titled "I Have a Dream... Deferred" on Wednesday, February 4, 2026 as part of the School of Medicine Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion's celebration of Black History Month.

The event was held in partnership with UCR African Student Programs.

Pina is the co-director of the Health Equity, Social Justice, and Anti-Racism Thread at the UCR School of Medicine as well as a pediatric hospitalist. Her keynote revisited Martin Luther King Jr.'s iconic "I Have a Dream" speech delivered on August 28, 1963 during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. She placed King's words in a historical context, focusing on both the history and its significance in the present day.

Tying the presentation into medicine, Pina addressed the differences between equality and equity, and that equality does not account for where people are starting. She showed data that revealed a double-digit decline in minority medical school applicants after the Supreme Court's ruling that race and ethnicity could no longer be used as a factor in the admissions process.

"That should break your heart. You will have less Black and Brown kids being treated by less Black and Brown physicians. That should be troublesome," she said.

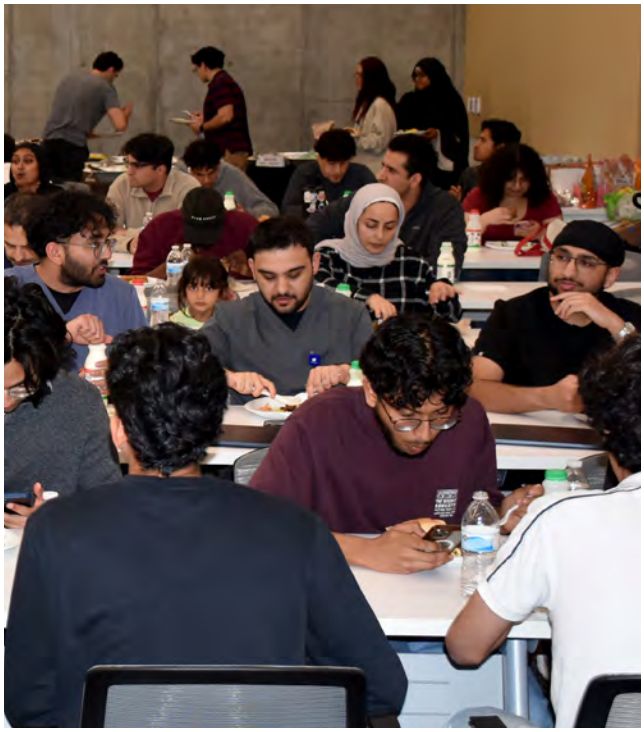
RAMADAN CELEBRATION HIGHLIGHTED BY IFTAR POTLUCK

More than 175 guests came together for the second-annual Community Iftar Potluck, co-hosted by the UCR Middle Eastern Student Center (MESC) and the School of Medicine's Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.

An iftar is a shared evening meal during Ramadan, held just after sunset when Muslims break their daily fast. The meal traditionally begins with dates and water, followed by prayer and a larger dinner. In addition to the food, a community iftar emphasizes fellowship, reflection, generosity, and unity.

Themed "A Journey Through Ramadan," the iftar began with welcomes from Aliza Alibhai, the UCR Health Clinical and Administrative Program (CAP) intern with the Office of DEI, and Muntadhar Aljadeed, MESC student and community organization outreach intern, followed by brief remarks by Denise Martinez, MD, associate dean of DEI at the UCR SOM, and Gina Waneis, MS, director of the MESC.

Sherif Hassan, MD, professor of internal medicine and executive associate dean of pre-clerkship medical education at the UCR School of Medicine, then presented on "The Physiology of Ramadan Diurnal Intermittent Fasting Beyond Spirituality: Metabolic, Cellular, and Critical Perspectives." The talk compared and contrasted the differences between intermittent fasting and the traditional fasting that takes place during the daylight hours of Ramadan and how each can impact the body.



MORE THAN 2,800 PEOPLE ATTEND DEI-HOSTED EVENTS

During the 2025–2026 academic year, the UCR School of Medicine Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) engaged 2,821 participants across more than 30 events to drive health equity, community engagement, and workforce diversification throughout Inland Southern California. These events included:

COMMUNITY BUILDING AND CULTURAL ENGAGEMENT

- **Third Annual National Latino Physician Day:** The largest in the nation for the second consecutive year.
- **Lunar New Year Celebration:** The first-ever Lunar New Year celebration held at the School of Medicine.
- **Second Annual Iftar Dinner (Journey Through Ramadan):** Cultural dinner celebrating Ramadan with the campus community.
- **Black History Month Lunch & Learn:** Keynote presentation featuring Gabrielle Pina, DO.
- **Diwali Lunch & Learn:** Cultural presentation and community meal celebrating Diwali.
- **Día de los Muertos and Fall Festival:** Observance honoring passed family members and ancestors.
- **Scrubs Got Talent:** Showcase highlighting talents across the medical student and staff body.
- **Veterans Day Lunch & Learn:** Community gathering honoring military veterans.
- **Native American Heritage Month Lunch & Learn:** Educational session focused on indigenous culture and equity.

CLINICAL SKILLS & PATIENT ADVOCACY WORKSHOPS

- **Street Medicine Special Event:** Interactive session on providing care to unhoused and marginalized populations.
- **Addiction Awareness & Narcan Training:** Practical skills training on substance use disorder and opioid overdose response.
- **Magnifying Empathy:** Workshop focused on care connections for low-vision and non-sighted patients.
- **Veteran Ally Training:** Interactive session on understanding veteran culture and healthcare needs.
- **Immigration Rights:** Training on advocating for and protecting immigrant patients.

STUDENT ORIENTATION & ACADEMIC LEARNING

- **MS1 Orientation Social:** First official gathering to welcome the incoming Class of 2029.
- **MS1 Transitioning to Medical School Panel:** Panel featuring MS2s, faculty, and leadership sharing guidance on belonging.
- **Implicit Bias Training:** Foundational equity workshop for first-year medical students.
- **LGBTQ Safe Zone Series & Rainbow Ceremony:** Three foundational allyship sessions culminating in a Rainbow Ceremony.
- **Community Building Circle & Community Care Café:** Peer connection and wellness events hosted in partnership with SOM Wellness.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT & RECRUITMENT

- **Inclusive Excellence GME Recruitment Event:** Second annual virtual recruitment session for residency applicants focused on equitable practices.
- **J.W. Vines DEI Colloquium:** Academic platform highlighting scholarship and research in health equity.
- **Healthcare Leadership Symposium:** Signature capstone event featuring students in the Healthcare Leadership Program.







RESEARCH

INHALED AGRICULTURAL DUST DISRUPTS GUT HEALTH

A new study found that inhaling agricultural dust may harm gut health, highlighting risks for workers in animal agriculture.

Led by Declan McCole, PhD, of the UCR School of Medicine, the research expands on earlier findings that hog farm dust causes airway inflammation. The research showed that inhaled dust can also disrupt the gut microbiome and weaken intestinal function, leading to increased intestinal permeability, often called "leaky gut." This condition has been linked to diseases such as inflammatory bowel disease, celiac disease, and type 1 diabetes.

In mouse models, exposure to swine farm dust triggered both lung inflammation and the movement of bacterial products from the gut into the bloodstream. Researchers also observed significant declines in beneficial gut bacteria, including Akkermansia muciniphila and Lachnospiraceae species, along with reduced levels of key metabolites involved in energy use, immune regulation, and maintaining the gut barrier.

The findings point to a broader "gut–lung axis," showing that inhaled pollutants can affect multiple organ systems, not just the respiratory tract. Agricultural dust contains fine particles, bacteria, and endotoxins, making it a complex exposure with systemic effects.

Researchers say the results underscore the need for stronger workplace protections to reduce long-term health risks for agricultural workers.



UC RIVERSIDE SOM HOSTS INAUGURAL UC SUMMIT ON METHAMPHETAMINE



On April 17, 2025, the UC Riverside School of Medicine hosted the inaugural UC Summit on Methamphetamine, a daylong event focused on the growing impact of methamphetamine use across California. The summit brought together addiction medicine leaders, UC faculty, researchers, clinicians, policymakers, and community partners to discuss research, treatment, and public health responses.

The event, attended by about 50 participants in person and online, was organized by Chair of the UCR SOM Department of Family Medicine Michelle Bholat, MD, MPH, and Steve Shoptaw, PhD, pictured above.

"Here at UCR, we're the right place with the right people to actually make a high impact in the area of methamphetamine," said Bholat.

The keynote address was delivered by Brian Hurley, MD, medical director of the Bureau of Substance Abuse Prevention and Control for the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health. Hurley shared national stimulant-use data and discussed evidence-based treatments, including contingency management, which he described as one of the most effective interventions for methamphetamine use disorder.

The summit also featured presentations on substance use treatment, research innovations, and policy from clinicians, researchers, law enforcement, and community partners. Afternoon breakout sessions focused on identifying research priorities and next steps.

A key goal of the event was to begin building a foundation for a UCR center dedicated to methamphetamine research and education.

LEVERAGING BIG DATA TO EMPOWER STUDENT RESEARCHERS

TriNetX, a global health research network that provides access to de-identified data from millions of patients, is helping to revolutionize how medical students at the UCR School of Medicine conduct clinical research. Daniel Novak, PhD, associate clinical professor and director of student scholarly activities, oversees the platform's integration into the curriculum, helping students bypass traditional hurdles such as complex institutional approvals and funding shortages.

TriNetX offers a massive HIPAA-compliant dataset from more than 170 health care organizations worldwide. By leveraging real-time electronic health record data, UCR researchers can conduct population-level studies in minutes—a process that historically took months of manual chart reviews.

"The pools of people you can look at are so big that it would be too expensive to recruit that many people to get that kind of scale," Novak said.

For many medical students, particularly those from underrepresented groups, the platform has lowered the barrier to high-impact research. Roy Mendoza, MD, a 2025 graduate, co-led a study published in the Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology that analyzed data from more than 150,000 patients. His research investigated the link between blood pressure medications and treatment rates for a precancerous skin condition.

The platform also supports public health advocacy. Leilani Tull, a student in the school's inaugural Master of Public Health class, used TriNetX to discover that Black and Latino patients with PTSD were significantly more likely to develop Alzheimer's disease than other groups. Her findings earned an honorable mention at the UCR Graduate Research Symposium.

By incorporating this technology, the School of Medicine aims to cultivate a "researcher identity" in its students. The goal is to produce physicians who can identify health disparities and use data to advocate for their patients in the Inland Empire. As the program grows, Novak hopes to use the platform as a resource for answering specific health questions posed by the local community, further bridging the gap between data science and clinical care.

ANNUAL HAIDER LECTURE: HEALTH EFFECTS FROM SALTON SEA DUST

David Lo, MD, PhD, a distinguished professor of biomedical sciences, detailed the environmental health crisis at the Salton Sea as the featured speaker at the 2025 Thomas and Salma Haider Biomedical Breakthrough Lecture.

Addressing approximately 100 attendees on Oct. 9, 2025, Lo's presentation, "Toxic Ecologies: The Salton Sea, Asthma, and Miasma," explored the biological mechanisms behind surging asthma rates in the Imperial Valley.

Lo's research identified that dust from the receding Salton Sea carries lipopolysaccharides, a bacterial toxin that triggers an innate immune response in the lungs. He described the phenomenon as a "miasma," where chronic inflammation is caused by inhaled toxins rather than a direct bacterial infection. To bridge the gap between complex science and public awareness, Lo collaborated on graphic narratives designed to educate local communities about these environmental risks. "It really embodies the mission of the School of Medicine," Lo said of the project's community impact.

The event concluded with Thomas Haider, MD, and Deborah Deas, MD, MPH, the vice chancellor for health sciences and the Mark and Pam Rubin dean of the School of Medicine presenting Lo with a commemorative plaque and an honorary certificate. The annual lecture series continues to highlight medical breakthroughs that directly affect the health and well-being of Southern California residents.



RALLY ADVOCATES FOR RESEARCH FUNDING IN WASHINGTON, D.C.

A delegation from the UC Riverside School of Medicine traveled to Washington, D.C., on Sept. 18, 2025, to join more than 400 experts at the annual Rally for Medical Research. The event served as a critical platform for researchers to advocate for sustained federal investment in the National Institutes of Health (NIH).

The UCR group was led by Meera Nair, PhD, associate dean of biomedical research, and Robert Rodriguez, MD, associate dean of clinical research. Accompanied by members of the UCR Office of Government and Community Relations, the delegation met with several congressional offices, including those of Sen. Alex Padilla and Reps. Mark Takano, Ken Calvert, and Raul Ruiz.

During these meetings, the representatives focused on how NIH funding directly impacts the Inland Empire. They highlighted research grants aimed at tackling chronic diseases prevalent in the region and emphasized the importance of training grants that support the next generation of local scientists. Legislators also showed significant interest in the school's expanding footprint, specifically the upcoming outpatient clinic serving the Riverside and Moreno Valley areas.

Beyond the legislative visits, Nair met with program officers at the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases to showcase the school's diverse research portfolio. The rally underscored UCR's commitment to bridging the gap between laboratory discovery and community health, ensuring that federal resources continue to flow into Southern California's medical infrastructure.







THRIVE PROGRAM FUELS CLINICAL RESEARCH AND HEALTH EQUITY

Clinical research is a key component of academic medicine, but it can be challenging for early-career physicians to find the time and resources to conduct that work. A new program at the UC Riverside School of Medicine, funded by a $550,000 grant from the University of California Office of the President's Advancing Faculty Diversity (AFD) program, is looking to change that.

The "Transformative Hiring for Representation, InclusiVity, and Excellence" (THRIVE) Program is providing five early-career UCR Health clinical faculty with 10% protected time to devote to their health equity, clinical education, and community outreach research projects as well as access to experienced research mentors across the School of Medicine.

Now in the second of its planned three-year duration, THRIVE was the brainchild of Associate Dean for Academic Affairs and Professor of Biomedical Sciences Iryna Ethell, PhD, and Associate Dean for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and Professor of Medicine Denise Martinez, MD.

"We have challenges like any other medical school," Ethell said. "We are good at finding excellent faculty and recruiting them, but how to retain them? How do you hire faculty whose goals and interests match our mission? One way to do it is to target it. Finding faculty with an interest in health disparities, with health inequities."

"Programs like THRIVE are essential if we want to move from intention to impact in health equity," Martinez said. "Supporting faculty who are committed to addressing disparities ensures that our research, teaching, and clinical care are aligned with the needs of our diverse communities."

It was the commitment to clinical and research efforts in these areas that appealed to Mahsa Khayat-Khoei, MD, MBA. "I was looking for a position that would support both clinical and research efforts," said Khayat-Khoei, who completed her fellowship in neuroimmunology at Brigham and Women's Hospital at Harvard Medical School. "I chose UC Riverside over several other academic and clinical focused programs because of the diversity of the patient population in the Inland Empire and the emphasis on diversity in research and clinical care through the THRIVE program."

The team concept serves as the backbone of the SOM's THRIVE program. In addition to working together at UCR Health facilities, the scholars and their mentors have regular meetings, including monthly dinners at faculty members' homes. All aspects of the program are designed to help them develop their research, find new grants, publish their work, and grow into higher clinical faculty positions.

Kathy Calderon, MD, a THRIVE Scholar who graduated from the UCR School of Medicine, praised the regular THRIVE scholar meetings.

"These meetings allow us to come together to break bread, discuss our work in health equity, and learn from and encourage one another in trying to make the world a better place," she said.

The THRIVE participants include:

- Kevin Gutierrez, MD, MS, HS Assistant Clinical Professor, Psychiatry/Neuroscience
- Kathy Calderon, MD, HS Assistant Clinical Professor, Family Medicine (pictured below left)
- Blanca Campos, MD, HS Clinical Assistant Professor, Family Medicine (pictured below right)
- Mahsa Khayat-Khoei, MD, MBA, HS Assistant Clinical Professor, Psychiatry/Neuroscience (pictured below center)
- Edward Troncoso, MD, HS Assistant Clinical Professor, Internal Medicine



SCHOOL OF MEDICINE RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

A gene therapy designed to replace a missing brain protein restored normal brain activity and improved behavior in a mouse model of Fragile X syndrome (FXS), according to a study led by Iryna Ethell, PhD, professor of biomedical sciences.

"In a typical brain, FMRP acts like a brake or a volume control," Ethell said. "Without it, neural circuits become overactive and less efficient, which contributes to many of the developmental and behavioral challenges associated with FXS."

A study led by Professor of Medicine Robert Rodriguez, MD, of more than 3,200 emergency department (ED) patients across the U.S. suggested that they can play an important role in increasing vaccine coverage, particularly among medically underserved populations.

The study also identified significant disparities in vaccination status. Patients without a primary care provider were more than twice as likely to be behind on influenza vaccination, with lower vaccination rates also seen in patients lacking insurance and African American patients.

Brandon Brown, PhD, participated in a study that highlighted the importance of rigorous participant verification procedures in online health research, particularly when studies recruit hard-to-reach populations and offer compensation for participation. Published in the journal AIDS and Behavior, the study enrolled young gay and bisexual men in the United States who used stimulants in an online randomized controlled trial.

"As public health research increasingly relies on online recruitment, the question is no longer whether fraudulent responses will occur when offering payment, but how researchers can identify and address them," Brown said. "Our study shows that a layered approach combining automated screening, human review, and participant verification can substantially improve confidence in online research findings."

A culturally adapted health and lifestyle program, ¡Coma, Muévase y Viva! (Eat, Move, and Live!), showed promising results in helping low-income Latina and Indigenous Mexican women in rural Inland Southern California make healthier changes in their daily lives, according to a study led by Ann Cheney, PhD, a professor of social medicine, population, and public health.

"Overall, women in the intervention group were more than twice as likely as women in the waitlist control group to report healthier eating and physical activity behaviors," Cheney said. "Our findings highlight the effectiveness of culturally relevant, promotora-led programs in reaching rural farm-working communities that often face food insecurity, limited access to preventive care, and barriers to healthy lifestyle resources."

A preclinical study led by Nicholas V. DiPatrizio, PhD, a professor of biomedical sciences, has shed light on a long-observed but poorly understood phenomenon: Chronic cannabis users tend to have lower body weight and a reduced risk of developing type 2 diabetes, despite the drug's well-known tendency to increase appetite. The findings, published in The Journal of Physiology, suggested that specific compounds within cannabis may play a key role in regulating metabolism.

"This suggests that THC alone is not responsible for the metabolic benefits associated with cannabis use," said DiPatrizio. "Other compounds in the plant appear to play a critical role."

Associate professor of biomedical sciences Xuecai Ge, PhD, offered insight into how the primary cilium, a microscopic, antenna-like structure found in nearly every cell in the human body, may play a crucial role in how the brain forms.

To investigate, Ge's team examined neural progenitor cells — early-stage cells that give rise to neurons. Each of these cells contains a single primary cilium that extends into the ventricles, fluid-filled cavities in the developing brain.

"We discovered many proteins that no one expected to find in the cilium," Ge said. "And in some cases, these proteins are directly linked to human developmental disorders."

Distinguished Professor of Biomedical Sciences David Lo, MD, PhD, and graduate student Diana Del Castillo discovered previously unrecognized immune surveillance structures in the skin. Found within hair follicles, the cells resemble M (microfold) cells — specialized epithelial cells traditionally associated with the gut and airway tissues. The findings suggested that the skin may use specialized "sentinel" cells located within hair follicle structures to monitor environmental exposure and microbial presence, expanding the current understanding of how barrier tissues defend the body.

"Hair follicles may represent a central hub for immune surveillance in the skin," said Del Castillo. "These structures bring together environmental exposure, immune sensing, and potentially even neural signaling in a highly localized environment."

Research by Professor of Biomedical Sciences Sika Zheng, PhD, discovered that a cellular cleanup system known as nonsense-mediated mRNA decay (NMD), driven by a crucial protein called UPF2, is essential for guiding newborn brain cells into organized layers and promoting normal brain growth, explaining how genetic disruptions

can lead to neurodevelopmental disorders. Without UPF2, excess proteins build up and turn off the navigation signals and internal scaffolding neurons need to reach their correct positions.

"By selectively removing UPF2 from radial glial cells and their neuronal progenies, we observed defects in neuronal migration," said Zheng, who directs the Center for RNA Biology and Medicine on campus. "Neurons moved more slowly and some failed to reach their designated cortical layers. As a result, the normal laminar organization of the cortex was lost. In addition, we found brains lacking UPF2 were significantly smaller, indicating that the pathway also contributes to overall brain growth."

Toxoplasma gondii, a common parasite affecting up to one-third of the global population, is far more complex than previously believed according to published research by Professor of Biomedical Sciences Emma Wilson, PhD. Humans commonly contract toxoplasmosis by eating undercooked meat or through exposure to contaminated soil or cat feces. The parasite is best known for its ability to hide in the body by forming tiny cysts in the brain and muscles.

Until now, scientists believed that the cysts contained a single, uniform type of parasite lying dormant until it reactivated. But using advanced single-cell analysis techniques, the team discovered that each cyst contains multiple distinct subtypes of parasites, each with different biological roles.

"We found the cyst is not just a quiet hiding place — it's an active hub with different parasite types geared toward survival, spread, or reactivation," Wilson said.

Two recent studies by Professor of Biomedical Sciences Declan McCole, PhD, highlighted the role of a gene called PTPN2 in protecting the gut from harmful bacteria linked to inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) and found that when the gene does not function properly, the gut becomes vulnerable to infection and inflammation.

Normally, PTPN2 helps maintain gut health by controlling inflammation and supporting a balanced gut microbiome. However, some people with IBD carry a faulty version of this gene, which reduces PTPN2 activity. When PTPN2 is impaired, the balance of gut bacteria is disrupted, making the gut more susceptible to harmful microbes.

McCole and his colleagues found that this loss of protection allows bacteria like adherent-invasive Escherichia coli (AIEC) to attach to gut cells, invade the intestinal lining, and multiply more easily.

"Our findings help explain why certain people are more prone to ongoing gut inflammation," McCole said. "The research also points to potential treatment strategies that could restore gut defenses and limit harmful bacteria in patients who are genetically at risk for IBD."

A study led by Changcheng Zhou, PhD, a professor of biomedical sciences showed for the first time that a father's exposure to microplastics (MPs) can trigger metabolic dysfunctions in his offspring. MPs are tiny plastic particles (less than 5 millimeters) resulting from the breakdown of consumer products and industrial waste. Metabolic disorders refer to a cluster of conditions — including increased blood pressure, high blood sugar, and excess body fat — that increase the risk of heart disease and diabetes. The study, published in the Journal of the Endocrine Society, is the first to bridge the gap between paternal exposure to MPs and the long-term health of the next generation (the "offspring").

"To our knowledge, ours is the first study to show that paternal exposure to microplastics can affect sperm small non-coding RNA profiles and induce metabolic disorders in offspring," Zhou said.

Zhou also published a study that suggests that everyday exposure to microplastics may accelerate the development of atherosclerosis, the artery-clogging process that leads to heart attacks and strokes. The harmful effects were seen only in male mice.

"Our findings fit into a broader pattern seen in cardiovascular research, where males and females often respond differently," Zhou said. "Although the precise mechanism isn't yet known, factors like sex chromosomes and hormones, particularly the protective effects of estrogen, may play a role."

Changcheng Zhou, PhD, a professor of biomedical sciences, identified a previously overlooked RNA molecule that plays a major role in controlling the body's cholesterol production and the development of heart disease. Named tsRNA-Glu-CTC, it could be a potential new target for future therapies aimed at lowering high cholesterol.

The research established a direct link between tsRNA-Glu-CTC and SREBP2 (Sterol Regulatory Element-Binding Protein 2), a key protein known as the "master regulator" of cholesterol production.

"We found that when tsRNA-Glu-CTC levels rise, it boosts SREBP2 activity, which switches on the genes that synthesize cholesterol," Zhou said. "This mechanism directly contributes to higher cholesterol levels and increases the risk of atherosclerosis, or the clogging of arteries."

A collaborative study by Sika Zheng, PhD, and researchers from the University of Southern California, reported on how a process known as alternative splicing, often described as "editing" the genetic recipe, may help explain why some mammals live far longer than others. The research compared alternative RNA processing in 26 mammal species and found that changes in how genes are spliced play a key role in determining maximum lifespan.
"We've long known that gene expression likely contributes to lifespan controls, but our study shows that how those genes are edited through splicing offers a novel and parallel

dimension to this process," Zheng said. "It's like discovering a hidden layer of genetic control that shapes lifespan in ways we had not appreciated before."

Professor of Biomedical Sciences Scott Pegan, PhD, contributed to a study that developed a vaccine for Crimean-Congo hemorrhagic fever, one of the world's most dangerous, yet overlooked, infectious diseases. No approved vaccines or treatments yet exist.

"CCHF is one of those viruses where you can't simply use the outer coat proteins to make a vaccine," Pegan said, adding that they used a virus-like replicon particle that looks and behaves like the real virus but is completely harmless.

"Made in the lab, this particle can enter cells like a normal virus, but it doesn't have the genetic material to replicate," Pegan said. "That allows the immune system to respond to the virus-like particle without any risk of infection."

Distinguished Professor of Biomedical Sciences Maurizio Pellecchia, PhD, the Daniel Hays Chair in Cancer Research, led a team that collaborated with scientists from the City of Hope that developed a novel "molecular crowbar" strategy to degrade the oncogenic enzyme Pin1, a protein that is overexpressed in many tumors, including pancreatic cancer. This approach not only targets cancer cells directly but also addresses tumor-supporting cells like cancer-associated fibroblasts and macrophages where Pin1 is active, potentially overcoming the treatment resistance posed by the fibrous tumor microenvironment in pancreatic cancer.

Professor of Biomedical Sciences Seema Tiwari-Woodruff, PhD, published a preclinical study that shows why some people with multiple sclerosis (MS) suffer from seizures. The research showed a strong connection between demyelination — the loss of the protective myelin sheath coating the axons of neurons — and seizure activity. The findings suggested new opportunities for targeted treatments that address the root cause of seizures in MS without suppressing overall brain activity. Current seizure medications often suppress overall brain activity, leading to side effects like fatigue and cognitive dulling.

"About four to five percent of people with MS develop seizures," Tiwari-Woodruff said. "It has been an understudied area, but these patients tend to experience worse cognitive outcomes and faster disease progression. Understanding what's happening in the brain is crucial."

Another of her studies identified two compounds that could remyelinate damaged axons. The researchers were able to launch a program that was licensed by Cadenza Bio, Inc. With subsequent investor financing, Cadenza Bio has supported continued development of the program. The company is now advancing toward clinical evaluation as a potential first-in-class therapy for people living with MS.

A study led by Professor of Biomedical Sciences Andre Obenaus, PhD, showed that concussions suffered early in life can cause subtle brain changes that re-emerge later in life. This may have significant implications for understanding the impact of head injuries in children. A single concussion early in life can cause lasting changes in white matter, which serve as the communications pathways. The findings highlighted the need for ongoing monitoring and care following head injuries in children.

"We've known that white matter is vulnerable after traumatic brain injury," Obenaus said. "What's been missing, however, is a comprehensive, long-term look at how a single juvenile concussion affects the brain over time. Our findings fill that gap and show that brain changes from early-life concussions may not be immediately obvious, but they can reappear and worsen over time."

A startup company located in the UCR EPIC Life Sciences Incubator space was awarded a $2.25 million small business innovation research grant from the NIH. The grant supported pre-clinical investigation of the drug Targefrin, an anti-metastatic agent designed to target and degrade EphA2, a protein frequently overexpressed in cancers such as pancreatic, prostate, lung, breast, ovarian, and colorectal cancers. The drug was discovered in the laboratory of distinguished professor Maurizio Pellecchia, PhD. Armida Labs was co-founded by Pellecchia and Carlo Baggio, PhD, a former senior scientist in the research group.

A study that investigated the well-being of Latina college students who have experienced intimate partner violence emphasized the need for culturally responsive approaches to support effective healing. Nancy Herrera, PhD, a postdoctoral researcher in the Department of Psychiatry and Neuroscience, said one of the study's main implications for mental health providers is the importance of attending to the well-being of Latina survivors by considering their cultural and gendered identities.

COMMUNITY-ENGAGED RESEARCH AT THE UCR SOM

As a community-based medical school, the UCR SOM also focuses on community-engaged research, where investigators and community members collaborate to conduct relevant research projects in their communities. Three SOM faculty members, Ann Cheney, PhD, academic lead for Unidas por Salud and faculty director of the Coachella Valley Free Clinic; Lisa R. Fortuna, MD, professor and chair of the Department of Psychiatry and Neuroscience; and Elizabeth A. Jacobs, MD, professor and chair of the Department of Medicine, shared their community-based projects and approaches at the University of California Biomedical Research Acceleration, Integration, and Development (UC BRAID) Community Engagement Retreat in September 2025.



CHENEY: A UNIQUE APPROACH TO LEADERSHIP IN COMMUNITY RESEARCH

For the past eight years, Cheney has worked with her community academic partnership team, Unidas por Salud, on projects focused on health disparities. Community members serving on the research team help draw participation from less accessible populations like the indigenous Mexican Purépecha community.

Research generates knowledge, but Cheney now also sees it as a tool for empowerment. Research team members who previously worked as farmworkers gained access to new positions. Cheney said their research efforts also led to the creation of the Coachella Valley Free Clinic. "The information we generate from research... we then put it back into the community via healthcare service delivery," she said.

FORTUNA: CAPAZ COMMUNITY HEALTH WORKER NAVIGATION PROJECT

Fortuna's CAPAZ Community Health Worker Navigation Project, a multiyear study funded by the National Institutes of Health and built on a partnership with Cultura y Artes Nativas de las Américas (CANA), focuses on developing a culturally grounded community health worker navigation model and a structural intervention to improve mental health access.

"CAPAZ advances community-engaged research by ensuring that community partners define the priorities, co-design the methods, and guide implementation so the work reflects real needs and cultural strengths," Fortuna explained.

JACOBS: INCREASING CLINICAL TRIAL PARTICIPATION THROUGH COMMUNITY-LED RESEARCH

Jacobs leads a team focused on increasing the understanding of regenerative medicine in the Inland Empire, including increasing access to clinical trials among underrepresented populations. "It is about helping people understand what clinical trials are, and why you'd want to participate in them," Jacobs said. "That way, hopefully we'll know whether these therapies work well in different communities and different populations."

"Community engagement always helps you be more successful as an investigator, because you're understanding... what matters to the community, and you're building more trust with the community," she added. "We know it's so important to do really good science to have communities collaborate; that's why we do it."

DEAN'S COLLABORATIVE SEED GRANT PROGRAM SUPPORTS RESEARCH AT THE UCR SOM

In early 2025, three interdisciplinary teams at the UCR SOM received a 2025 Dean's Collaborative Seed Grant of up to $25,000 to support cross-departmental research. "This program is critical in fostering new impactful research avenues," said Meera G. Nair, PhD, associate dean for Biomedical Research at the UCR SOM. "With this seed funding, they have the opportunity to test their exciting new ideas and gain traction for external funding opportunities."

DISTINGUISHING ASTHMA-LIKE PULMONARY DISEASE INDUCED BY LPS-LADEN SALTON SEA DUST IN A PEDIATRIC POPULATION

Health Sciences Assistant Clinical Professor Esther Caroline McGowan, MD, and Distinguished Professor of Biomedical Sciences David Lo, MD, PhD, received funding to study the impact of Salton Sea dust on asthma in children.

Building on prior work showing that the dust triggered lung inflammation in mouse models through lipopolysaccharides (LPS), the seed grant allowed the team to move from bench research into a clinical study. "The steps we've taken in defining what can be done at UCR School of Medicine will go a long way for the next project," McGowan said.

IMPACTS OF OCCUPATIONAL EXPOSURES ON IMMUNE AND PULMONARY HEALTH IN FARMWORKER POPULATIONS IN INLAND SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

Assistant Professor of Biomedical Sciences Erica Heinrich, PhD, and Ann Cheney, PhD, faculty in the Department of Social Medicine, Population, and Public Health and faculty director of the Coachella Valley Free Clinic, received funding to investigate respiratory and immune health risks among agricultural workers.

"To obtain larger extramural grants, we needed resources to gather pilot data and demonstrate we can conduct these detailed physiological studies," Heinrich explained. The grant supported enrolling 80 participants in a study, securing IRB approval, training student volunteers, and beginning data collection.

INTERACTION OF HIV AND METHAMPHETAMINE ON ANTI-VIRAL AND IMMUNE MECHANISMS OF DOPAMINE DYSFUNCTION IN ADDICTION

Assistant Professor of Biomedical Sciences Natalie Zlebnik, PhD, and Professor of Biomedical Sciences Marcus Kaul, PhD, with consultation from Professor of Biomedical Sciences Adam Godzik, PhD, received seed grant funding to examine how HIV-related immune changes may increase vulnerability to addiction and relapse.

With the funding, the team secured federal authorization to work with methamphetamine, obtained research-grade drug supplies, trained graduate students, and began active data collection.





CLINICAL

STAR PROGRAM CREATES NEW COMMUNITY YOUTH BEHAVIORAL HEALTH CENTER



A community open house at the new School-Linked Trauma-Informed Program (STAR Program) in Riverside celebrated the grand opening of a new community hub for child and adolescent behavioral health sciences.

The STAR Program will provide trauma-informed, school-linked therapy for children, youth, and families, while also housing a program that is part of a statewide initiative to increase access to trauma-informed care. This initiative is led by Kimberley Lakes, PhD, and the UCR School of Medicine's Department of Psychiatry and Neuroscience. It is funded by California's Children and Youth Behavioral Health Initiative (CYBHI). In addition, the program will serve as a training site for UCR medical students, psychiatry residents, and fellows.

"I am excited about how the program will continue to advance our services, research, and community partnerships for promoting child, adolescent, and community mental health," said Lisa Fortuna, MD, MPH, the chair of the Department of Psychiatry and Neuroscience.

The open house introduced the team, showcased the space, and highlighted the partnerships and grant funding that brought the program to life. Collaborators include schools and other community and county organizations working to strengthen behavioral health access across the region.

The launch of STAR marks the beginning of a long-term effort to address behavioral health needs in the Inland Empire. Organizers expressed gratitude to community partners, funders, and supporters who contributed to the program's development, from grant administration and staffing to supplies and space preparation.



"I AM EXCITED ABOUT HOW THE PROGRAM WILL CONTINUE TO ADVANCE OUR SERVICES, RESEARCH, AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS FOR PROMOTING CHILD, ADOLESCENT, AND COMMUNITY MENTAL HEALTH."

-Lisa Fortuna, MD, MPH
Chair of the Department of Psychiatry and Neuroscience





BUILDING A NETWORK OF CARE ACROSS THE INLAND EMPIRE

In April 2026, UCR Health signed a lease for a new multispecialty clinic at The Dos Lagos Shopping Center in Corona, the first new clinic location identified under the 10-year, multi-phase clinical expansion announced in June 2025. Design and planning advanced through spring 2026, laying the groundwork to bring academic primary and specialty care into one of western Riverside County's fastest-growing corridors.

That Corona clinic is part of a broader effort to expand UCR Health's services. Seven clinicians joined UCR Health during the year — six physicians and a nurse practitioner — across internal medicine, cardiovascular medicine, geriatrics and palliative care, pediatrics, obstetrics and gynecology, and neurology, at the Riverside Downtown, Riverside South, and La Quinta clinics. Growth in clinicians was matched by changes in how patients reach them: UCR Health expanded online scheduling and redesigned appointment workflows so patients could book care, message their teams, and manage follow-up more easily.

The year also brought a new pathway into the system. In April 2026, UCR Health welcomed its first UC Blue & Gold HMO members, giving UC employees and their families a primary care home with coordinated referral into UCR Health specialists, imaging, and procedures. The managed-care strategy was designed to keep more of a patient's journey inside one connected system, rather than requiring patients to piece together care across multiple outside referrals.

Alongside that work, UCR Health advanced its Commercial Managed Care and Clinically Integrated Network (CIN), built in partnership with UC San Diego Health. The CIN allows independent physicians and community medical groups to affiliate clinically with UCR Health and gain access to UC-level population health and quality tools while maintaining their community independence. Participating physicians gain access to Epic, the electronic health record used across UC academic medical centers, along with shared quality standards and coordinated referrals — infrastructure that small practices rarely can build alone.

Together, the Corona expansion, clinician growth, managed-care work, and CIN development reflect a single goal: making high-quality care easier to access, easier to navigate, and more connected across the Inland Empire.

GIVING CLINICIANS MORE TIME WITH PATIENTS

In mid-May 2026, UCR Health launched a pilot of Nabla, an ambient artificial intelligence scribe that drafts clinical notes from patient visits. Five providers — four in Family Medicine and one in Rheumatology — participated through June 2026, generating 279 notes.

Documentation is essential to continuity and patient safety, but it also requires substantial clinician time. Nabla is designed to reduce typing during the visit, so physicians can focus more fully on the patient in front of them. Clinical Informatics reported that the pilot improved workflow efficiency and enhanced patient-clinician interaction by allowing greater clinician focus during the encounter.

Ambient documentation was one part of a wider set of AI capabilities in use during the year. Care teams also used Epic In Basket Augmented Response Technology, or ART, which drafted 1,227 replies to patient portal messages over the course of the year. In both tools, AI prepares a draft and a clinician reviews, edits, and decides what enters the record or reaches a patient. Diagnosis, treatment, and communication remain the responsibility of UCR Health's clinicians.

The Nabla pilot gave UCR Health a focused way to evaluate how ambient AI could fit into everyday care. By testing the technology with a small group of physicians and monitoring its use in real clinical workflows, UCR Health began building practical experience with AI while keeping patient attention, safety, and clinician oversight at the center.

UCR HEALTH BRINGS DIAGNOSTIC CARE CLOSER TO HOME

During the 2025-26 year, UCR Health expanded in-office screening and diagnostic capabilities so more testing could be completed within the health system and, in some cases, in the same clinic where patients see their physician.

At the Riverside Downtown clinic, UCR Health added echocardiography and treadmill testing supported by an echocardiography technician. Lead-screening equipment was placed at Riverside Downtown and La Quinta, increasing screening capacity at both sites. At Riverside South, a new ultrasound machine supported through philanthropic funding enabled scans to be performed in the exam room rather than requiring a separate testing location, and a dedicated non-stress test room was equipped for obstetric monitoring. Self-collection for cervical cancer screening specimens was rolled out at Riverside Downtown and Riverside South, giving patients another option for completing an important preventive screening.

Diabetic retinal screening showed the clearest impact. A retinal camera purchased in the prior fiscal year went into clinical use early in 2025-26, converting what had been a multi-step referral to an outside specialist into an immediate, point-of-care service. The change moved the diabetic retinal exam completion rate from a 22.1% baseline at the start of the fiscal year to a weighted annual average of 40.2%, with completion rates nearly doubling in the months after the camera entered service. The improvement was recognized by UC Office of the President population health leaders.

These changes share a common purpose: reducing the number of steps between a clinician identifying a need and a patient completing the recommended test. Keeping more screening and diagnostics within UCR Health can support more coordinated follow-up, fewer handoffs, and fewer office visits for patients. For people managing chronic conditions or completing preventive screening, making testing available closer to the point of care can make it easier to stay on track with the next step in treatment or monitoring.

Point-of-care testing grew as well. UCR Health expanded its screening to include lead screening, purchasing a Magellan analyzer in July 2025 that was received and placed into service early in the fiscal year, with a testing protocol developed by the Quality team with the chief medical officer and approved by the Quality Committee. The new capability joined an existing point-of-care menu that includes HbA1c, strep, COVID-19, pregnancy, urinalysis, bilirubin, and blood glucose testing — giving clinicians same-visit answers across a broad set of common clinical questions.

RAISING THE BAR ON QUALITY AND ACCESS

In September 2025, UCR Health received its final Merit-based Incentive Payment System (MIPS) score for performance year 2024: 93.07 out of 100, compared with 75.00 for performance year 2023. Because MIPS results lag the performance year, the score reflects care delivered in 2024 but was released during the 2025-26 reporting period.

Quality improvement during the year also took a more concentrated form. In March 2026, UCR Health convened a weeklong rapid improvement event around a single problem: patients were arriving for care with open care gaps — overdue screenings, unmanaged chronic conditions, missed preventive services — and those gaps often stayed open after the visit ended. The event, titled Advancing Quality Through Proactive Care Gap Management, was led by Amanda Sanchez, MPH, a quality analyst at UCR Health, and mentored by Naveen Raja, DO, chief medical officer.

The team was deliberately broad, bringing together physicians and residents, medical assistants, front desk staff, clinic management, the Quality Team, Clinical Informatics, Health Information Management, the Patient Access Center and Revenue Cycle, nearly every role a patient's record passes through between scheduling and billing. Over five days the group mapped the existing workflow, designed a future state, and built standardized processes spanning scheduling and patient access, pre-visit planning, front desk and medical assistant workflows, physician workflows, and care gap follow-through. The standards clarify who is responsible at each step and create a consistent opportunity to address a care gap at every encounter. The team set a specific target: to close or actively address at least 75% of identified care gaps during patient encounters within three months. By the time the standardized workflows had been in place a few months, the team had reached 61% of care gaps closed or actively addressed and was continuing to work toward the goal. The event also produced a new formalized quality training for all residents and physicians, embedding the care-gap standards into how clinicians are onboarded and developed.

Access improved alongside quality. UCR Health rolled out online scheduling across its specialties, and by year's end an average of 12% of eligible appointments in primary care, rheumatology, cardiology, neurology, and pediatrics were being booked online, giving patients flexibility to schedule care without relying solely on a phone call during business hours. A visit-preparation team also launched and completed visit prep for more than 80% of completed visits, helping care teams enter appointments with key information ready. Dedicated staff conducted outreach calls to patients with care gaps, supporting follow-up for preventive and chronic-care needs.

Together, these efforts show how quality and access improvements reinforce one another. By improving workflows, preparing visits more consistently, and making it easier for patients to schedule and reconnect with care, UCR Health strengthened both the clinical experience and the systems that support it.

IMPROVING MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS TREATMENTS IN THE INLAND EMPIRE: MAHSA KHAYAT-KHOEI, MD



As a medical student, Mahsa Khayat-Khoei, MD, found neurology complex and interesting, but also somewhat intimidating. “You get to study neurons and different diseases that affect different areas of the brain, but there was no treatment, which was disappointing,” recalled Khayat-Khoei, now a fellowship-trained neuroimmunologist at UCR Health.

Then she discovered the field of multiple sclerosis (MS). When she witnessed successful treatments, “That made me interested in… contributing to research that can have meaningful effects for the patients,” Khayat-Khoei said.

HELPING PATIENTS THROUGH RESEARCH

After completing her fellowship in multiple sclerosis and neuroimmunology at Harvard Medical School, Khayat-Khoei joined UCR Health in October. By studying innate immune cells that may contribute to inflammation and the progressive form of MS, she aims to identify changes in the cells over time. “If we confirm that there is a pattern, then we can go after a biomarker, a blood test that can then tell us who is moving toward more progressive MS,” she said.

The diversity of the Inland Empire community will also allow Khayat-Khoei to apply her research to broader groups. “I may be able to identify a more individualized pattern that we might have overlooked when focusing our research only on one patient population,” she said. She added that her research already gives her deeper insights into effectively treating her current patients without prescribing unnecessary medications or steroids. “It makes you more aware of the whole picture… and to be more careful in my treatment choices for patients,” she said.

One MS patient went without care for two years before coming to UCR Health. “She told me, ‘I feel hopeless with this disease, there’s no treatment,’” Khayat-Khoei said. “I was able to give her more information and make her feel more in control of her disease moving forward.”

EDUCATING PATIENTS AND THE COMMUNITY

Khayat-Khoei also gives presentations to community members to help people recognize neurological symptoms that require urgent medical care. “Especially with a stroke, if you do not take the warning signs seriously, you might end up with long-term disability,” Khayat-Khoei said. “But if you seek help early, ideally in the first four hours after symptom onset, you can have a full recovery.”

“It’s really important to inform the community,” she added. “I enjoy doing that because I feel people truly need it and can benefit from more health and neurological educational opportunities.”

HELPING YOUNG PATIENTS AND STUDENTS THRIVE: LISA FORTUNA, MD



For Lisa Fortuna, MD, MPH, MDiv, a love of working with children and helping them transition successfully to adulthood initially drew her to specialize in pediatrics. Yet she soon noticed that young people were at a particularly critical stage of their lives regarding their mental health.

"Even though it's such a wonderful time of new opportunities, it's also a vulnerable time where we see the emergence of mental health problems," said Fortuna, now chair of the Department of Psychiatry and Neuroscience at the UCR School of Medicine. "I decided to make the change to child and adolescent psychiatry because I was so interested in... how young people can be helped to thrive." Following a two-decade career in public and mental health, Fortuna brought her expertise to UCR in 2023.

EXPANDING CULTURALLY COMPETENT MENTAL HEALTH CARE

Many of the families Fortuna now works with at UCR Health have trouble finding a mental health provider, in line with the area's overall physician shortage. "That has a big impact, potentially negatively, for outcomes for young people at so many levels, from health to well-being to socioeconomically," she said.

With providers' diversity and cultural understanding also being crucial for effective care, Fortuna's Spanish language abilities and Puerto Rican background help her form deeper connections with her patients. "There's a lot of interest from patients in finding child and adolescent psychiatrists that will... be culturally appropriate and humble, that will really listen to parents' and youths' voices," Fortuna said.

IMPROVING PATIENT CARE THROUGH TEACHING AND RESEARCH

Fortuna also enjoys collaborating with residents and medical students on research that can potentially serve the region. UCR psychiatry resident Paula Mendoza, MD, worked with Fortuna and SOM student Kimberly Del Toro to create a tool measuring Spanish-speaking adolescents' attitudes about and knowledge of mental health care. Eventually, the goal is to create effective interventions to improve their trust in mental health care. "Seeing students and mentees doing fabulous work and creating their own ideas and presenting them makes me feel really positive about the next generation," Fortuna said.

Fortuna pursues her own community-focused research as well, including projects funded by the National Institutes of Health. "Especially now, when people are experiencing a lot of hard times, we have to listen to the community and see how we can be the helpers," she said. "At this stage of my career, I want to get that next generation of providers thinking critically about what we can do better," she added. "The thing that brings me joy and helps me get past difficulties is the team of people, and younger people who are going to go forth and really carry this work forward."



COMMUNITY

OPEN HOUSE 2026 WELCOMES COMMUNITY TO THE SOM

UC Riverside School of Medicine welcomed the community to campus on April 11, 2026 for the annual Open House. The annual event showcased the SOM and illuminated the path to pursuing a career in medical fields. Over 1,000 people attended the event, including medical school applicants, newly admitted SOM students, students from schools in the area, and their families.

Open House 2026 began with a welcome from Deborah Deas, MD, MPH, the vice chancellor for health sciences and the Mark and Pam Rubin dean of the School of Medicine, to a standing-room-only crowd. Throughout the day, tours of the SOM Education II building and Center for Simulated Patient Care highlighted the school's learning environments and cutting-edge technology for training future physicians.

The SOM event also overlapped with Highlander Day at UCR, giving more prospective students the opportunity to explore pathways into medicine. The event also included faculty presentations and panels with medical, biomedical sciences, and master of public health students to discuss their experiences and answer questions.













PARTNERSHIP WITH THE CRAIG SCHOOL PROVIDES ON-CAMPUS MENTAL HEALTH CARE

In March 2026, the UC Riverside School of Medicine's Department of Psychiatry and Neuroscience partnered with The Craig School, an Irvine-based nonprofit serving students in grades 3–8 with ADHD and executive functioning challenges, to deliver comprehensive, no-cost mental health services directly on campus.

Funded through California's Children and Youth Behavioral Health Initiative (CYBHI), the program provides on-site neuropsychological assessments, diagnostic evaluations, and individual and group therapy. Notably, it is the first program in California to establish a sustainable reimbursement pathway for school-based mental health services.

Beyond expanding accessible care for students and families without out-of-pocket expenses, the initiative serves as an innovative training ground for UCR's child and adolescent psychiatry fellows and postdoctoral psychology fellows. Working alongside school staff, these trainees gain hands-on experience in community-embedded care models while advancing youth mental health care across the region.



"WE DESIGNED THIS PROGRAM TO HELP CHILDREN AND FAMILIES ACCESS EVIDENCE-BASED CLINICAL CARE WITHIN THEIR SCHOOL COMMUNITIES, AND TO ENHANCE MEDICAL AND POSTDOCTORAL TRAINING BY BRINGING RESIDENTS AND FELLOWS DIRECTLY INTO SCHOOLS."

- Kimberley Lakes, PhD
Professor in the Department of Psychiatry and Neuroscience at UCR

CENTER FOR HEALTHY COMMUNITIES ANNOUNCES MINI-GRANT PROGRAM RECIPIENTS

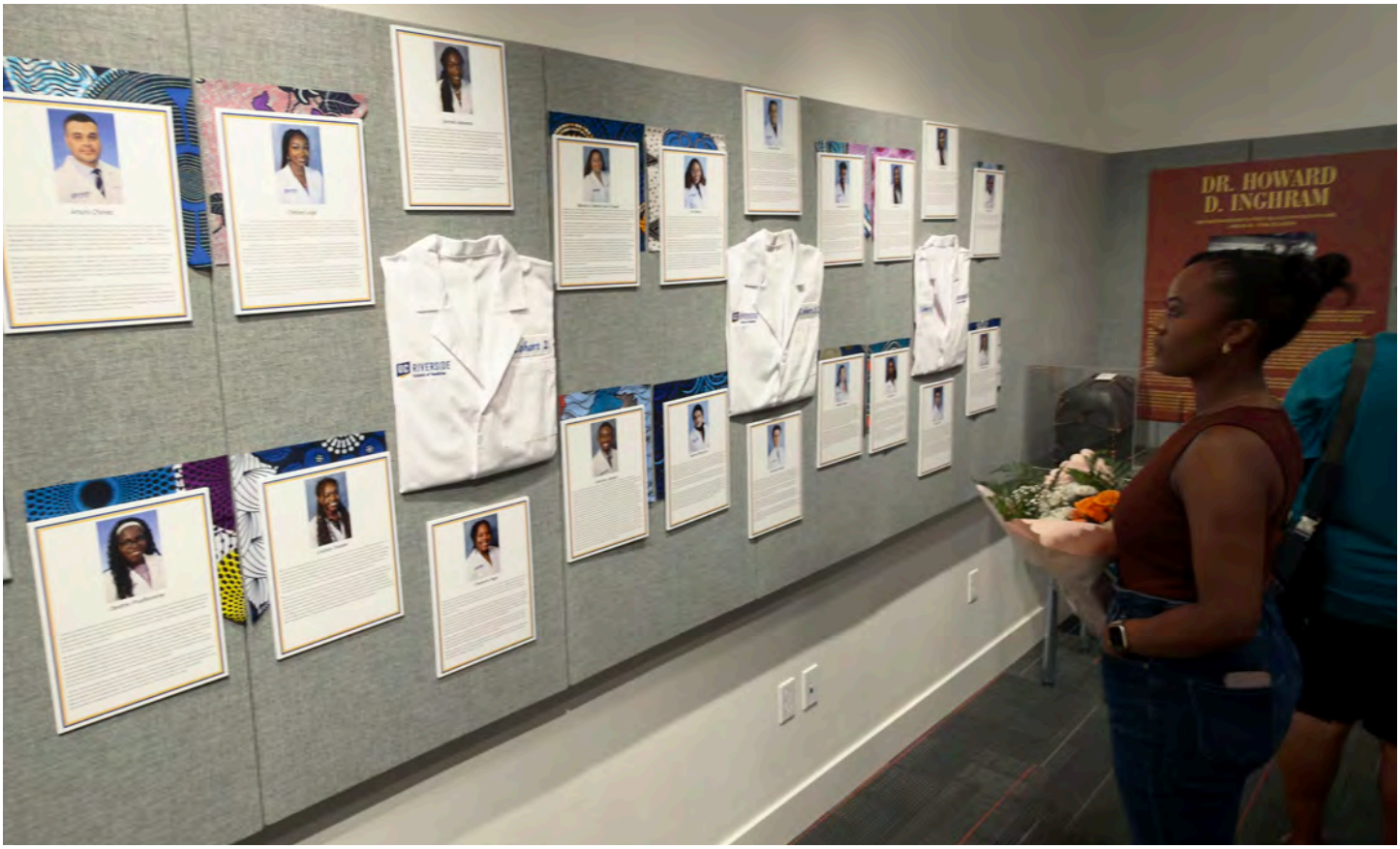


The UCR School of Medicine Center for Healthy Communities (CHC) announced the recipients of its 2026 Community Medicine and Population Health Mini-Grants Program. The program supported up to two community health initiatives and awarded more than $60,000 over the previous seven years to projects focused on improving population health.

The 2026 funded projects included two initiatives led by UC Riverside medical students and faculty partners. The first, "Milo and the Calm Crew: A Storybook for Growing Calm Minds," was a pilot intervention designed to support emotional regulation skills in children receiving care at the Coachella Valley Free Clinic. The project used a bilingual children's picture book to teach evidence-based coping strategies such as deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, grounding, visualization, and self-soothing techniques in an accessible format for young readers.

The second project, "Communities of Practice for Parents and Caregivers of Children with Neurodevelopmental Disorders (NDD Circle)," aimed to reduce caregiver burden by creating supportive peer learning communities for parents and caregivers of children with neurodevelopmental disorders. The initiative focused on shared learning, resource exchange, and building self-advocacy skills to better support children following diagnosis.

PRIME ABC PROGRAM CELEBRATED IN CIVIL RIGHTS INSTITUTE OF INLAND SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA EXHIBIT





An exhibition at the Civil Rights Institute of Inland Southern California in Riverside highlighted the growing impact of future physicians working to improve healthcare access and representation for African, Black, and Caribbean communities across the Inland Empire. The exhibit celebrated the UCR School of Medicine's Program in Medical Education - African, Black, and Caribbean (PRIME ABC) initiative and the students and faculty helping shape a more diverse healthcare workforce.

The PRIME ABC program prepares medical students to address the healthcare needs of historically underserved communities through immersive training, mentorship, and community engagement. Students partner with local clinicians and organizations while gaining a deeper understanding of the cultural and historical factors that influence health outcomes in the region.

Created by Michelle Burroughs, DHA, MPH, assistant clinical professor and director of community engagement in the Department of Social Medicine, Population, and Public Health's Center for Healthy Communities, the exhibit featured photos, biographies, and reflections from the program's first four student cohorts. Burroughs said the exhibit was intended to inspire future physicians while showcasing the importance of representation in medicine.

Fourth-year medical student Brooke Malone, a member of the inaugural PRIME ABC cohort, reflected on the program's mission and the sense of community it fostered among students committed to serving underserved populations. The exhibit underscored the ongoing efforts of the UC Riverside School of Medicine to cultivate physicians dedicated to improving health equity throughout Inland Southern California.

2025-2026 AWARD RECIPIENTS

FACULTY

Outstanding Year 1 Instructor
Erica Heinrich, PhD

Outstanding Year 2 Instructor
Michael Basch, MD

Outstanding Clerkship Instructor
Lynsey Lakin, NP

Outstanding Clerkship Instructor
Kevin Wethey, MD

Outstanding Clerkship Instructor
Jean Russell, MD

Outstanding Specialty (Year 4) Instructor
Hanh Nguyen, MD

Outstanding LACE Doctor Year I
Theodore Caspe, MD

Outstanding LACE Doctor Year 2
Hadia Ashraf, MD

Outstanding LACE Doctor Year 3
Javier Sanchez, MD

Alumni Recognition Award for Excellence
Jonathan Scott, MD

Award for Excellence in Patient Care
Kathy Calderon, MD

Award for Healthcare Innovation
Nanaefua Afoh-Manin, MD, MPH

Professionalism Award
Emily Dubina, MD

Outstanding Community Service Award
Brandon Brown, PhD

Faculty DEI Award
Michelle Porche, EdD

Outstanding Mentor of the Year Award
Basic Sciences
Meera Nair, PhD

Outstanding Mentor of the Year Award
Clinical Sciences
Denise Martinez, MD

Research Achievement Award in
Biomedical or Basic Science Research
Seema Tiwari-Woodruff, PhD

Research Achievement Award in Clinical
Research
Michelle Bholat, MD

Research Achievement Award in
Population Health Research
Ann Cheney, PhD

Basic Science Educator of the Year Award
Iryna Ethell, PhD

Clinical Faculty of the Year Award
Peter Ureste, MD

Community Educator of the Year Award
Paul Salama, MD, MPH

Lifetime Achievement Award
Lawrence Loo, MD

Distinguished SOM Service to UCR Cross-
Campus Community Award
Scott Pegan, PhD

SOM Junior Faculty (Assistant Professor)
Distinguished Service Award
Natalie Zlebnik, PhD

STUDENTS

Cancer Research Scholars Award
Yash Mehta

Outstanding LACE Student MS1
Aya Soler

Outstanding LACE Student MS2
Carl (Paul) Gerhardt

Outstanding LACE Student MS3
Christian Park

Outstanding Clerkship Student MS3
Arturo Chavez

Outstanding Clerkship Student MS3
Melody Zaki

Outstanding Clerkship Student MS4
Lucia Hong

Outstanding Clerkship Student MS4
Helen Setaghiyan

Thomas Haider Clinical Award of Excellence
Anh-Thy Phuoc Nguyen

Stewart and Elaine Shankel Award
Rachel Kamran

Dean's Mission and Values Award
Helen Setaghiyan

Dean's MS4 Social Justice Award
Zayan Musa

Outstanding Graduating Student: Ob/Gyn
Kelly Muller

Outstanding Graduating Student: Pediatrics
Nolan Langford

Outstanding Graduating Student:
Emergency Medicine
Sophia Potalivo

Outstanding Graduating Student:
Internal Medicine
Sophia Potalivo
Makhlouf Bannoud
Lucia Hong
Helen Setaghiyan
Darby Graham

Outstanding Graduating Student:
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Outstanding Community Service Award
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