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UMass Chan program encourages teens of color to pursue careers in behavioral health

A four-week program at UMass Chan Medical School exposes underrepresented teenagers to jobs in psychology, psychiatry, and social work, hoping to fill a shortage of diverse providers.

By [Zeina Mohammed](#) Globe Staff, Updated August 18, 2023



Pius Baidoo worked through a role-playing scenario with a fellow student during the Dynamic Futures program at UMass Chan Medical School. LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

Pius Baidoo, 18, is tired of seeing men and boys in his community suffer quietly — told to “suck it up” when things get hard. He wants to be a psychiatrist to encourage other Black men to seek therapy and to fill the void of providers who can relate to their experiences.

His only worry: the cost. “It’s a lot of schooling and money and money and money,” he said. “I’d have to give a good portion of my life to pursue this career. Is that a risk I’m willing to take?”

A local summer program is offering him and 21 other Worcester teens the chance to learn about careers in fields like psychology, psychiatry, and social work, gain valuable paid work experience and better understand their own mental health. Dynamic Futures, a four-week program run by UMass Chan Medical School in collaboration with the city’s Health and Human Services Office, local schools, and other community partners, aims

to inspire residents ages 16 to 18 who are underrepresented in medicine to enter these fields at a time when there is a national shortage of providers, especially those from communities of color.



Pius Baidoo listened to a speaker at the Dynamic Futures program at UMass Chan Medical School. LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

Over the past four weeks, students have met with addiction counselors, grief specialists, and social workers and observed their work on visits to an addiction recovery center, a prison, and a local food pantry.

Dynamic Futures was created during the pandemic, when colleges and high schools struggled to find enough providers to offer students mental health services. At the same time, university leaders noticed that few students were enrolled in majors related to mental health, said Ché Anderson, assistant vice chancellor for city & community relations at UMass Chan Medical School, who runs the program.

“So not only were we in a crisis, but it seemed there’ll be a sustained crisis over time,” he said.

Across the state, “over the past few years, we’ve seen a number of behavioral health providers leave the workforce, in part because of burnout,” said Dr. Kevin Simon, Boston’s chief behavioral health officer who is not involved with the program. “So there’s a need not only to create pathways for underrepresented communities, but also to create a professional infrastructure that allows for them to thrive.”

The shortage has left post-pandemic Worcester struggling to support residents. “The city is seeing a lot of addiction, homelessness, and mental health issues,” said Dr. Matilde Castiel, the city’s health and human services commissioner.

Castiel, who teaches at UMass Chan and serves as medical director of the Hector Reyes House, a substance use treatment facility for Latino men in Worcester, said getting appointments with clinicians is a challenge for residents, but finding clinicians of color that reflect the community is an even bigger hurdle.

Last week, Baidoo sat across from a fellow student and role-played a mental health counselor meeting a patient for the first time.

“This emotional burden you’re carrying, can you share it with family?” Baidoo asked his partner, who was pretending to experience extreme school-related stress.

Dr. Melissa Fischer, who teaches at the medical school, led the session, explaining to students how to interview and communicate with patients, how to give nonverbal cues to signal listening, and how to rephrase and repeat patients’ responses to validate their emotions.

As his “patient” described difficulty juggling advanced courses, extra-curricular activities, and supporting a friend through a crisis, Baidoo made sure to maintain eye contact and nod supportively. Surprised by how intimate the fake exercise felt, he said it felt good to truly listen and feel helpful to someone in pain.



Dr. Melissa Fischer LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

For Ashley Flores, 17, learning about addiction during a pilot program at UMass held last year helped her understand and empathize with people in her own family who had struggled with substance use during her childhood. Growing up with family members who were incarcerated and dealing with addiction took a toll on her in ways she hadn’t begun to unpack before the group’s visit to the Worcester County Jail, she said.

“Understanding the perspective of a person struggling with addiction helped me see that it’s not always that person’s fault,” she said. “It hit me hard and helped me get through things I had blocked away.”

Reynaldo Bueno, 16, said this year’s program gave him the vocabulary to begin understanding his own emotions and mental health struggles. He was raised, he said, in a Dominican community where mental health was not often discussed.

“I never thought of it as an illness, just a current emotion you have to get through,” said Bueno, 16. “Now I’m understanding you can get help to try and relieve yourself of whatever you’re feeling.”

This week — the program’s final one — students embarked on paid internships at local research labs, addiction recovery centers, and nonprofit organizations.

But the program’s benefits extend beyond the summer.

To address financial barriers to careers in mental health, Dynamic Futures will cover the cost of a mental health certification program in the fall that allows teens to earn money by training other teenagers to become peer counselors, according to Anderson. In the spring, the program will offer its teen participants a free college-level introduction to psychology course.

In addition, students have been paired with mentors who will support them over the next year as they navigate the end of high school, graduation, college applications, and how to build careers.

Although he’s still not sure what he wants to do, Bueno said it’s always been crucial for him to pick a career that helps uplift his community. After going through the program, he said he’s leaning toward becoming a therapist to help others like him break through the stigma of not being okay.

“Community is everybody coming together to help,” he said. “We’re not going to get anywhere without each other, and I want to contribute.”



Students listened to a presentation as part of the Dynamic Futures program at UMass Chan Medical School. LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF
