

# SUNY Downstate Medical Center: Preparing Multilingual Physicians for a Community of New Americans

Located in one of the most ethnically diverse communities in the nation, SUNY Downstate's medical students speak more than 95 different languages. This diversity is critical for the university's ability to serve non-English speaking patients. The university uses the American Medical College Application Service (AMCAS) survey, which asks participants about their language usage and proficiency, to monitor linguistic diversity and assess how well they are meeting local patients' needs.

## CHALLENGE

**Prepare physicians who provide culturally-effective care to a diverse, non-English speaking patient population**

Language and cultural barriers pose a significant problem for health care quality and patient satisfaction. In order to provide effective care, providers must be skilled at navigating these differences. They must confirm that patients feel comfortable sharing vital information about their health, understand the treatment options available, and are prepared to follow through with healthy behaviors. Having medical providers similar to patients in important dimensions of identity (including race, ethnicity and language) enables effective communication and improves the provider-patient relationship.<sup>1</sup>

Because of its location in one of the most ethnically diverse urban communities in the country—Brooklyn, New York—SUNY Downstate Medical Center understands the importance of linguistic concordance and is deeply committed to graduating culturally-aware providers who speak the languages of the patient population. Nearly 40 percent of Brooklyn residents are foreign-born, originating primarily from Asia, the Caribbean, Latin America, and the former Soviet Union.<sup>2</sup>

## SOLUTION

**Monitor linguistic diversity to inform recruitment of students, clinical staff, and faculty**

Clinics in the community meet the needs of this culturally diverse borough by training and hiring

physicians and staff with linguistic skills of the population. This alignment didn't happen on its own, however. The university actively seeks to recruit students, staff, and faculty from diverse backgrounds, and continually monitors diversity metrics to ensure that it is meeting its community health mission.

**"For example, at our Bay Ridge clinic we were seeing lots of Russian patients and there was no one on our clinical staff who could speak Russian. We recruited a primary care physician who was Russian-speaking and now we see many more Russian patients coming in. We have many first-generation Americans here and there are huge language gaps that need to be filled."**

**Dr. Carlos N. Pato**  
Dean, SUNY Downstate College of Medicine

Specifically:

- SUNY Downstate uses survey data from the AMCAS to evaluate languages spoken, as well as language proficiency, among its students
- In 2010, the university conducted a [Delphi survey](#) with members of its Community Advisory Board (CAB), which is part of SUNY Downstate Medical Center's Brooklyn Health Disparities Center, to identify the main health related research and policy issues in the borough. The 14-member CAB is comprised of community leaders who provide health and social services to Brooklyn residents.

## RESULTS

### *SUNY Downstate's medical school is more responsive to community needs*

- Results of AMCAS survey data showed that SUNY Downstate medical students speak more than 95 different languages other than English
- The university hired individuals proficient in the languages of the patient population to staff clinical rotation sites
- The CAB's top policy recommendation was to provide better access to preventative care, and recognized language, discrimination, and

immigration status barriers as impediments to effective health care encounters.

## LESSONS LEARNED

- Continue to monitor data sources like AMCAS to ensure student population is linguistically diverse.
- Allow the needs of ethnically diverse patient populations to inform decisions about staff and faculty recruitment, particularly clinical staff.
- Engage the community in developing the university's policy and research agenda.

## **ABOUT SUNY DOWNSTATE**

SUNY Downstate Medical Center, founded in 1860, was the first medical school in the United States to bring teaching out of the lecture hall and to the patient's bedside. A center of innovation and excellence in research and clinical service delivery, SUNY Downstate Medical Center comprises a College of Medicine, Colleges of Nursing, College of Health Related Professions, a School of Graduate Studies, a School of Public Health, University Hospital of Brooklyn, and a multifaceted biotechnology initiative including the Downstate Biotechnology Incubator and BioBAT for early-stage and more mature companies, respectively.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Schouten & Meeuwesen, 2006; Cooper, Roter, Johnson, Ford, Steinwachs & Powe, 2003; Ferguson & Candib, 2002

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.downstate.edu/healthdisparities/pdf/BHDC-Shared-Research-and-Agenda-Detailed.pdf>