Colorado Area Health Education Center's National Underserved Scholars Elective: Developing a Longitudinal Elective for Underserved Care

University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus

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COAHEC Colorado Area Health Education Center

Introduction

Healthcare inequities in the United States disproportionately affect rural communities, racial and ethnic minorities, and individuals with low socioeconomic status.[1] Although national organizations recommend longitudinal educational experiences to prepare medical students to address health disparities, traditional medical education often provides limited training and leaves students feeling underprepared to care for underserved populations.[2,3] To address this gap, the Colorado Area Health Education Center (COAHEC) developed the National Underserved Scholars (NUS) elective, a longitudinal program integrating didactic learning, clinical experience, and community engagement to prepare medical students to serve underserved communities.

Needs Assessment

A 2024 needs assessment surveyed University of Colorado School of Medicine (CUSOM) students and faculty to evaluate preparedness for caring for underserved populations and identify curricular gaps. Results showed that **40% of students felt unprepared to care for rural/frontier communities, while 66% of faculty felt students were only somewhat prepared**, with respondents highlighting the need for expanded didactic and experiential training in areas such as homelessness, refugee health, correctional healthcare, Indigenous health, and rural medicine.[4]

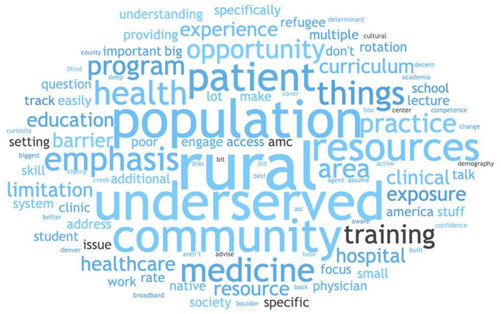

Figure 1. A word-map of the answers to the question: "What specific aspects of the curriculum do you believe are missing that would improve your/your student's preparation toward serving underserved populations?" [4]

Curriculum Development

The elective was developed through collaboration between COAHEC leadership and CUSOM student coordinators and is aligned with Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) competencies. Its curriculum integrates didactic learning with 40 hours of asynchronous lectures and monthly discussions, experiential learning with 40 hours annually in underserved clinical settings such as FQHCs and rural clinics, and 8 hours of community engagement with at least 8 hours of service per semester. This multi-modal approach emphasizes cultural humility and understanding of social determinants of health.

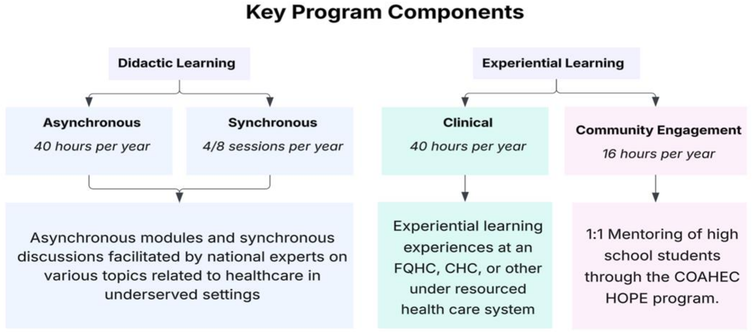

Figure 2. Components of COAHEC NUS Curriculum per year in the MS3 and MS4 phase of learning at CUSOM.[5]

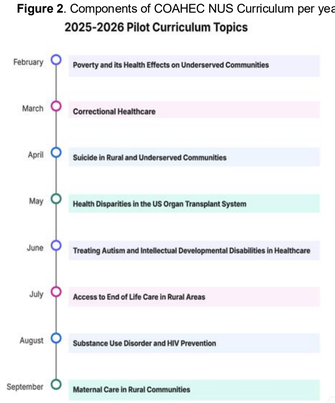

Figure 3. COAHEC NUS didactic session topics for the 2025–2026 academic year.5

Elective Proposal and Approval

The COAHEC NUS elective was approved as **IDPT 8104** within the CUSOM Trek curriculum for the 2025 academic year and was delivered as a four-semester hybrid course. It integrates HRSA AHEC Scholars requirements into the medical school curriculum, allowing students to earn academic credit while completing longitudinal underserved care training.

Operational Structure and Implementation

The COAHEC NUS elective is the **only student-run elective at** CUSOM with student coordinators leading program operations including speaker coordination, recruitment, and program management. The curriculum consists of monthly asynchronous expert lectures followed by live discussions, with learning activities and evaluations managed through Canvas and OASIS. Community service can be completed through a partnership with the BA/BS-MD program at CU Denver by mentoring undergraduate students

Early Outcomes and Initial Impact

The elective **completed its first academic year with an inaugural cohort of 12 students** and demonstrated strong educational impact. Student surveys showed 98–100% improved understanding of social determinants of health, 82.4% increased confidence caring for underserved populations, 86.3% improved communication with diverse patients, and 88.2% increased confidence in advocacy. The program also influenced career interests, with 94% reporting increased interest in underserved practice and 98% reporting a strengthened commitment to addressing health disparities.

Discussion

The COAHEC NUS elective addresses gaps in medical student preparation for underserved populations through a longitudinal, multi-modal curriculum combining didactic content, experiential learning, and community engagement. Early outcomes suggest substantial gains in knowledge, confidence, and practice commitment, while ongoing expansion and community-centered initiatives aim to create sustainable community impact. The elective provides a national framework for the implementation at for other medical schools.

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