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From Our Director
Valerie Romero-Leggott, MD
Executive Director, UNM Combined BA/MD Degree Program

The UNM Combined BA/MD Degree Program is bidding farewell to Greg Martin, professor in the Department of English Language and Literature, who for the past seven years has served as the director for the program’s Arts and Sciences component and has taught Literature and Medicine to all of our BA/MD students. Greg is leaving the university to focus upon his first love – his writing. If you have had the opportunity to read some of Greg’s work, you will know that the world deserves more, so we are deeply pleased to hear of Greg’s future plans. But we will be sorry to lose somebody who has been such an asset to the program, an amazing leader and a good friend and mentor to our students and staff. He is certainly someone who espouses the core values of UNM in all that he does.

I think I speak for all the BA/MD faculty when I say Greg has not only made significant contributions to our program but to the entire UNM community. His accomplishments include developing a critical mass of faculty hires specifically serving the BA/MD students, opening the HMHV minor to the general UNM population and establishing the Foundations of Science Learning Academy.

Greg has done a great deal to create a strong foundation for future BA/MD students, and he has assured the future success of the program by paving the way for an outstanding successor. Sushilla Knottenbelt, PhD, has served as the program’s associate director for the past year and will assume the duties and responsibilities of Arts and Sciences director. Sushilla was hired as a joint-appointment faculty member in the BA/MD program to teach the General Chemistry two-semester sequence in Fall 2011 and has served as chair of the BA/MD Basic Sciences subgroup of the Committee for Curriculum and Student Progress since Fall 2012. Her expertise lies in helping students develop learning skills, in active-learning and student-centered pedagogies and the classroom environments that facilitate them. Please join me in welcoming her to her new position.
Dr. Loretta Cordova de Ortega is one of the original BA/MD Admissions Committee members, and she has served the committee for 12 years, now holding an advisory role as an “emerita.” She is one of the few people who has seen every cohort interviewed, discussed, and selected for the program, and for the first ten years she was an active interviewer, meeting and talking with BA/MD applicants from all over the state.

Dr. Cordova de Ortega grew up in Valencia County, and went away from home in order to attend college in California. But upon graduation, she was back in New Mexico working at UNM as a lab tech, and it was there that the idea of going on to medical school was first suggested to her. She applied and was admitted to UNM School of Medicine as one of only five females who were accepted. Always a trailblazer, in the early days of her career as a doctor, she was also one of only a few Hispanic females faculty at UNM pediatrics, and even now serves as a mentor to minority faculty.

At the inception of the BA/MD program in 2005, she was asked to serve on the Admissions Committee. That early committee had long discussions about the purpose and direction of the program, and how to best evaluate the candidates. “Even back then we looked at a more holistic approach—looking at their life experiences, their accomplishments, their ties to their community. Having grown up in a small community myself, I knew that students, even at the high school level, were the pride of their community. Our mission was to improve the health of the state, and have the students go back and work in their communities. Who better than the people from those communities to work in them, because they know what it is like?”

Dr. Cordova de Ortega felt a responsibility to serve as a voice for the applicants In order to highlight those students who demonstrated a deep commitment to their communities and a lived comprehension of diversity, the committee formulated an evaluation system that would look at both cognitive and non-cognitive accomplishments,. Also important, she feels, was designing the program using a cohort model, because the workings of the cohort can help all the students become successful, with the stronger ones helping those who come from more under-served communities.

“What's exciting about the BA/MD program is that medical school wasn't part of the conversation when I was growing up. This opportunity wasn’t offered to me. Only the people who already had medical school as an example would think about going to medical school. I didn’t have a role model, and now I am a role model! So you see progress and change. What is exciting about this program is that we are telling students: Think about this. You can do this. What other career could you have such a great impact on peoples’ lives, and on your own life too? I think it is rewarding that the State has invested in this, and that it is a good investment and is working well. We can always refine it, and it gets better and better.”
In Gallup, like many other rural New Mexico towns, it is common to routinely travel to Albuquerque to access things that are not immediately available in your hometown. Growing up, this took the form of traveling two hours each way for club soccer and various types of shopping, including for back-to-school clothes, home furnishings and even trips to Costco. However, it wasn't until my third year of medical school at the University of New Mexico School of Medicine that I began to realize the impact that distance to specialty medical care has on citizens in our state.

The UNM hospital is the only level one trauma center and only comprehensive cancer center in the state. Additionally, it provides the only access to numerous other specialty services in New Mexico, particularly pediatric specialty care. For many patients in New Mexico, this means that routine travel to Albuquerque is their only lifeline to necessary medical care, as if the well-known route up and down I-40 or I-25 is as essential to their survival as blood flowing to and from their heart.

This reality became very clear to me as a third year medical student when I met a patient from Shiprock, NM who was being seen at the UNM Cancer Center for a new cancer diagnosis. We discovered we both grew up in Gallup, NM and had graduated from Gallup High School about 20 years apart. We enjoyed swapping “Bengal” stories until the serious part of the appointment came. My attending, resident, and I laid out a treatment plan for her that involved surgery and an arduous adjuvant chemotherapy plan. Frequent trips to Albuquerque suddenly became a new reality for her and her family.

Over the course of the next two years, I was able to see her frequently through all of the steps of her treatment. She unfortunately had an early recurrence and was sent home on Hospice before I graduated medical school. I hugged her on her way out of the hospital and thanked her and her family for letting me be part of her journey. And I promised I would never forget her.

While many experiences in medical school shape our identity as physicians, the impact that this woman and her story had on me is second to none. Her bravery in fighting an aggressive cancer and willingness to travel for the best medical care possible instilled in me a desire to seek out the best possible surgical and oncologic training I could so that I could one day return to New Mexico and provide specialty care to those who need it most. Continued on next page.
This is the story I chose to share with the AAMC Affiliate Group on Baccalaureate-M.D. Degree Programs as part of the alumni panel at the 2017 annual meeting. There was concern amongst panel members that too many students would choose to go into specialty care instead of primary care possibly comprising the mission of the combined programs nationally. However, I am now 2.5 years into a planned ten year training journey, including eight years in General Surgery at the Johns Hopkins Hospital and two years of fellowship training in Surgical Oncology, and I affirmed that my goal to care for rural and under-served patients remains unchanged. My vehicle to do this is through surgical oncology while that of my peers may be in pediatrics, family medicine, pathology, or cardiology. The UNM BA/MD program trained us to recognize needs in our communities and gave us skill-sets to address them – I look forward to seeing how each alumna will do this throughout his or her career.

Personally, I owe a huge debt of gratitude to the UNM BA/MD program leadership for helping me realize that I could pursue a specialty surgical career and still fulfill the commitment I made when I accepted the program's offer as a high school senior. Combined BA/MD degree programs offer students around the country an incredible opportunity to pursue their dreams of becoming a physician in a streamlined fashion. For me, this went beyond a curriculum tailored to understanding social determinants of health, to first-hand experience of the need for specialist and primary care physicians alike to keep working towards ways to improve healthcare delivery to those who are under-served, whether they are from urban or rural areas. I can attest that the vision of UNM BA/MD program graduates supplementing the diverse healthcare needs across all sectors of New Mexico is being fulfilled as my friends complete their training and take jobs across the state. I hope to join them one day as we strive to provide the best care possible to all New Mexicans.

UNM SOM is well represented at the AAMC Affiliate Group on Baccalaureate-M.D. Degree Programs’ annual meeting and I would like to especially recognize the work of Dr. Valerie Romero-Leggott, Dr. Robert Sapien, Dr. Sally Fortner, Greg Martin, Karen McGillvray, Bryn McCabe-Kelly and Nichelle Gilbert for their investment in the success of the UNM BA/MD program and the personal success of each individual student. Because of your hard work throughout the years, the UNM BA/MD program is a national model for success in combined baccalaureate-M. D. Degree programs. I personally thank each of you for your investment in me; I wouldn’t be where I am without you. I know my classmates and fellow alumna of the program echo this sentiment. I also want to recognize Dr. Roth for successful implementation of his vision; you are a national leader in medical education and we all hope to make you proud. Finally, as the years go on, I know that we hope to make the leaders in the state government who have continually funded this program as well as the citizens of New Mexico proud of their investment in us. Whether we train in New Mexico or across the country, we are grateful for every opportunity and plan to become doctors and leaders whose work promotes the health and well-being of New Mexicans.
When we apply to this program as high school seniors, most of us have some strong idea of what we want to do with our career and this is usually shaped by some experience we may have had. We are often lauded for being so sure of what we want our future to look like at such a young age. When I was a child there were three things that I wanted to be when I grew up: a doctor, a scientist, and a power ranger. While that third goal may not be as achievable, I have quickly begun crossing the first two off my list because of the BA/MD program.

While I was in high school I participated in the Science and Engineering Research Challenge every year because I had a passion for asking questions about the world and seeking answers. While research was a large part of my identity, I knew that medicine was the career choice for me and my experience with the Rio Rancho Sports Medicine Team led me to consider Orthopedic Surgery. The first day on campus, when all 28 of us sat in a circle and went around the room saying what kind of doctor we wanted to be, I confidently stated Orthopedic Surgeon.

The summer before my freshman year at UNM, I participated in the Foundations of Science Learning Academy. This was one of the best decisions I have made because it shaped my life profoundly; I met my best friends that summer, I set out on a path that has entirely reshaped how I see my future, and I gained an incredible mentor. During the Foundations of Science Learning Academy, we were given the opportunity to work on a capstone presentation based on a review of the scientific literature about a specific topic. My partner for the project and I both had volunteer experience involving patients with dementia and so we chose an article about Alzheimer’s Disease to present.

That experience piqued my interest in neurological disorders, so I added a Psychology Minor to learn more about neurobiology. With the mentorship of Dr. Sushilla Knottenbelt, one of the professors who taught our summer bridge program, guided me through the capstone presentation, and was subsequently my General Chemistry professor, I got the opportunity to work on a research team in the Center for Biomedical Engineering at UNM.

I have been working under Dr. Eva Chi since the Fall of 2016 on the project “Development of A Novel Class of Protein Conformation Selective Molecular Sensors” funded by the National Science Foundation. This project has the aim of developing and characterizing a diagnostic tool to detect and track misfolded protein aggregates in the brain that are characteristic of many neurodegenerative diseases including Alzheimer’s disease and Parkinson’s disease. This diagnostic tool may be capable of providing early detection of neurodegenerative diseases like Alzheimer’s disease 20 years before patients begin showing symptoms. Additionally, by providing early detection and tracking of the protein aggregation process, we can better understand the progression of these diseases which are currently untreatable, have no definitive diagnosis prior to autopsy, and that we know so little about.

Being a part of this research team has given me valuable research and technical skills, allowed me to network with researchers and physicians across the university, state, and nation, directly supplemented my pre-medical education, and given me an opportunity to do meaningful work in a field of my interest. I design and conduct my own research projects as a valued member of a team of researchers working towards a common goal. Being a part of the research team has also provided me with both a faculty and graduate student mentor to guide me through the research process.

I began the BA/MD program wanting to be an orthopedic surgeon. With the resources I have been provided I have been able to explore my interests and pursue new academic goals.
Leading by Example
By Rushi Mankad, 2014 BA/MD Cohort

One of the many things I appreciate about UNM’s Combined BA/MD Program is that faculty and staff truly and heavily rely on student opinion and performance. Our Program continuously strives to make our eight-year journeys as fulfilling as possible by listening to students through various surveys, feedback forms and direct conversations; our Program is pushing the boundaries in implementing student-led discussions.

This year’s Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) national conference a newly-formed student committee comprised of students in various BA/MD Programs across the nation, including our own, the University of Illinois at Chicago, Virginia Commonwealth University, the City University of New York, and the University of Missouri-Kansas City. Our goal was to provide unique insights as students in addressing primary care physician shortages. This group recommended implementing narrative medicine in our programs. Narrative medicine is an educational approach that highlights humanism in medicine and contributes to meaningful community and clinical experiences.

Unsurprisingly, UNM’s Program is leading the way, as we have already implemented many of our committee’s proposed reforms. Our program promotes interdisciplinary education through the Health, Medicine, and Human Values curriculum, exposing students to under-served rural communities through Summer Practicum and Practical Immersion Experience (PIE), and providing courses, and Doctoring course; all specifically aimed to introduce narrative medicine in clinical settings and contribute to our dedication to serving rural and under-served New Mexican communities.

In preparation for the conference presentation, we surveyed undergraduate and medical school students at each of the schools represented in the committee regarding interest in primary care. Programs at schools implementing more narrative medicine-based approaches in their curriculum had higher percentages of students interested in primary care. Students at schools that had not implemented as many of these practices, asked for more immersion into primary care, especially in a clinical setting.

Our group from UNM felt that our mission-based program drastically stood out from the traditional, merit-based programs that came before us – not only in admissions and curriculum design, but also in the “big picture.” What are the students who go through such unique programs providing to society when they enter the workforce? How can they make a difference?

I am excited to be part of this small and growing group of students who aim to be the difference-makers. I took home a lot of great memories – not only from the conference, but also from the group dinners and sightseeing squeezed in our four-day trip. I connected with a lot of aspiring future doctors like myself. Needless to say, I am expecting great things to come from this group in the near future!
2018 MATCH DAY RESULTS

CONGRATULATIONS TO OUR 2018 BA/MD MEDICAL SCHOOL GRADUATES

D. Siddhartha Dhawan, M.D.
Socorro High School
Pediatrics-UCSF, Fresno Center for Medical Education and Research
Fresno, CA

Matthew Endrizzi, M.D.
Deming High School
Family Medicine- HonorHeath
Scottsdale, AZ

Oscar Estrada Munoz, M.D.
Rio Grande High School
General Surgery-UNLV School of Medicine
Las Vegas, NV

Leah Lucero, M.D.
Robertson High School
General Surgery-UCSF, Fresno Center for Medical Education and Research
Fresno, CA

Marques Pena, M.D.
Texico High School
General Surgery-UNM School of Medicine
Albuquerque, NM

Yousuf Qaseem, M.D.
Eldorado High School
Diagnostic Radiology- UC San Diego
San Diego, CA

Luis Pablo Roldan, M.D.
La Cueva High School
Otolaryngology-
Jackson Memorial Hospital
Miami, FL

Michelle Sandoval, M.D.
St. Pius High School
Internal Medicine-Pediatrics
University of Cincinnati Medical Center
Cincinnati, OH

Tyler Seybert, M.D.
Deming High School
Psychiatry- UNM School of Medicine
Albuquerque, NM

Utkarsh Shukla, M.D.
Las Cruces High School
Radiation Oncology-Tufts Medical Center
Boston, MA

Krystian Solis, M.D.
Gadsden High School
Neurology-UNM School of Medicine
Albuquerque, NM

Jeffrey Trujillo, M.D.
Grants High School
Anesthesiology- MCW Affiliated Hospitals
Milwaukee, WI

Karissa Vasquez, M.D.
Rio Grande High School
Family Medicine-Trident Medical Center
Charleston, SC

Kathryn Welch, M.D.
Socorro High School
Radiology- UNM School of Medicine
Albuquerque, NM

J. Michael Winer, M.D.
Piedra Vista High School
Family Medicine- Boston University Medical Center
Boston, MA