

CAREERS



University of California, Riverside instructor Dr. Rebeca Gavan lectures second-year medical students last November.

STAN LIM/UC RIVERSIDE

Answering the Call

Medical and nursing students step up to serve

By Robin Roenker

L AUREN LOPEZ, 24, HAS listed “doctor” as her dream career for as long as she can remember. “When school assignments would ask, ‘What do you want to be when you grow up?’ I’d write doctor, even before I knew how to correctly spell the word,” says Lopez, a native of Chino Hills, Calif.

Now enrolled as a first-year medical student at the University of California, Riverside, Lopez is one step closer to achieving her dream — in the midst of a

global pandemic.

When COVID-19 cases began to spread across the U.S. last spring, Lopez — accepted at UC Riverside for fall 2020 admission — was working a gap year as a medical scribe in a Southern California emergency room. In that role, she saw several COVID-19 patients firsthand.

Despite the challenges of the pandemic, Lopez did not second-guess her medical school plans. In fact, the pandemic only strengthened her career resolve.

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“It was so motivating, watching these physician role models who were handling the pandemic by thinking on their feet in terms of treatment and medications — especially during the early days,” says Lopez. “They were the front-liners. I have never felt more that I belonged somewhere. That experience really solidified my decision to go into emergency medicine.”

PART OF THE SOLUTION

Lopez is not alone. Across the country, students are stepping up in record numbers to serve in the time of COVID-19.

Dubbed the “Fauci Effect” by some media outlets — after Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases — applications to U.S. medical schools for fall 2021 enrollment were at an all-time high, up 18 percent nationally over the previous year, according to the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC).

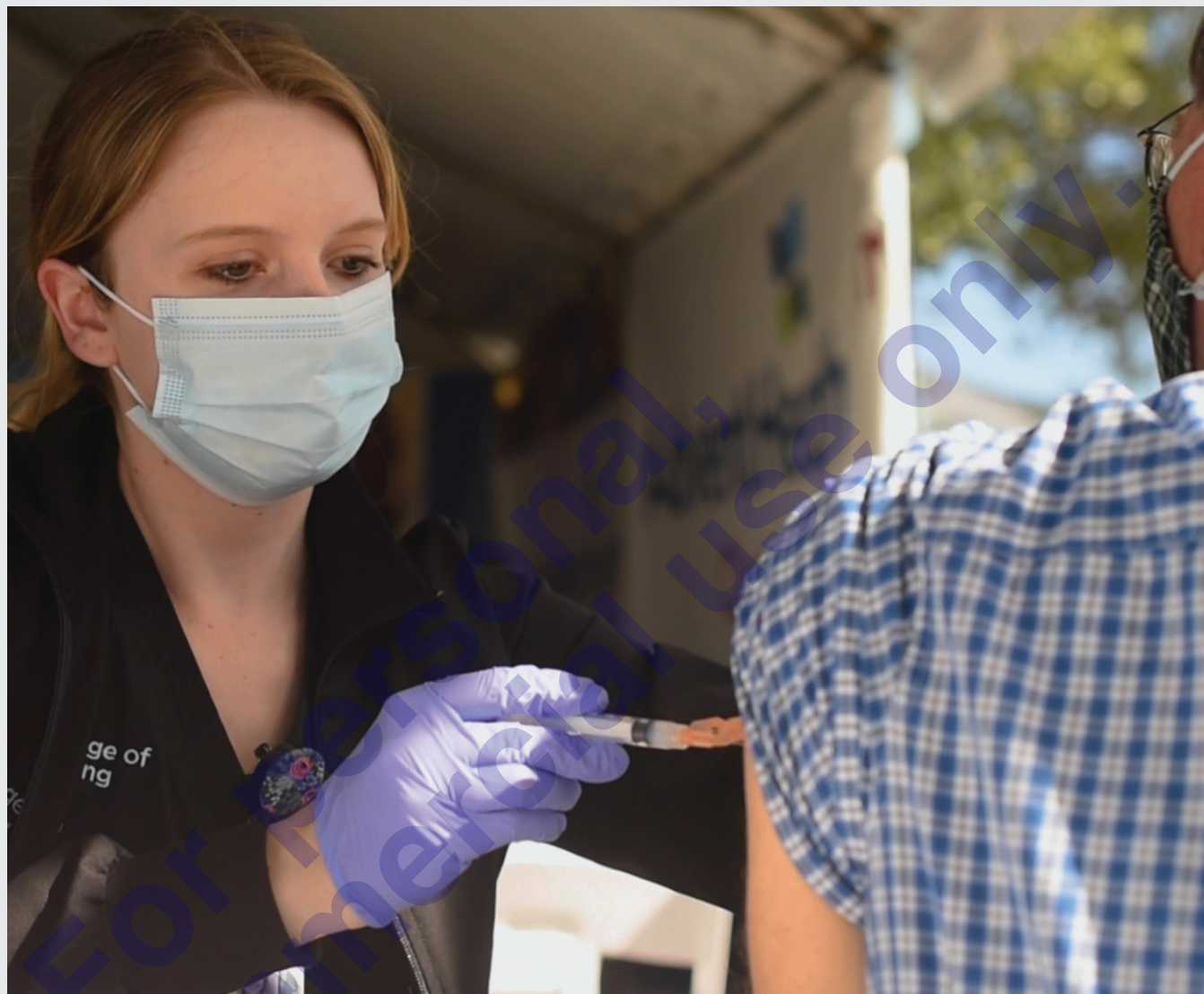
“The typical, or average increase in applications from one year to the next is roughly 2.5 percent, so to see an 18 percent jump is really impressive,” says Geoffrey Young, AAMC’s senior director of student affairs and programs.

AAMC is working to understand the factors driving the increase through incoming student questionnaires — including theories that the pandemic caused students to forgo traditional gap year work or travel plans or offered students more time to complete medical school applications when undergraduate studies shifted to virtual learning.

It could also be that the spotlight on public health in the past year — including media coverage of Fauci and other front-line health care workers — actually did encourage some students to apply.

“We believe that the Fauci Effect is one factor,” says Dr. Mary McSweeney, assistant dean for admissions at the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Medicine and Public Health, which saw a 25 percent increase in applications for its fall 2021 incoming class. “You have these altruistic young people seeing Dr. Fauci on TV — seeing a man of science in the era of a pandemic — speaking to their hearts about helping the public get through this terrible disaster,” McSweeney says.

But the effect isn’t limited to medical schools. Nationally, nursing schools across the country witnessed a 6 percent increase in applications in 2020, according to the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN).



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University of Central Florida nursing student Delainey Dietz administers a COVID-19 vaccine in Orlando, Fla., on Feb. 5.

FRONT-AND-CENTER VOLUNTEERING

At the height of the pandemic, many medical and nursing schools were forced to move much of their classwork online. Even now, many are operating on a hybrid — part online/part in-person — schedule.

“In the middle of March through June (2020), most medical schools, including ours, essentially shut things down,” explains Dr. Craig Hoesley, senior associate dean for medical education at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB).

Pre-clinical medical students at UAB moved to Zoom lectures and small group meetings virtually. Third- and fourth-year students, meanwhile, were pulled out of clinical rotations. Unable to see patients for several months, they were instead instructed through virtual activities — including the addition of a new virtual course on disaster medicine, inspired by the pandemic.

Faced with additional downtime during COVID-19, many

students sought opportunities to help their communities.

“These are students with a heart to serve. Rather than just sitting around in their apartments, they got out and got busy,” Hoesley says. “They were front-and-center volunteering.”

Nationwide, medical and nursing students were often on the front lines of community outreach efforts — helping distribute personal protective equipment, conducting COVID-19 testing, assisting with contact tracing, offering child care for health care workers and even grocery shopping for elderly neighbors.

This February, University of Central Florida nursing program senior Delainey Dietz was thrilled to help administer COVID-19 vaccines at a community vaccination event in Orlando. “You could see people’s eyes smiling,” says Dietz. “They were so excited to finally take a step toward living life a little more normally again.”

— Robin Roenker

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Dr. Jennifer Zamora, right, conducts a mock clinical exam with medical students at the University of California, Riverside.

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— DR. TAKESHA COOPER,
admissions committee chair,
UC Riverside medical school

“I think there has always been a strong interest in nursing as a career,” says AACN President and CEO Deborah Trautman. “What the pandemic did was really highlight the critical and central role that nurses play in keeping people healthy — in a way that I don’t recall any other crisis in the country doing.”

At the University of Nebraska Medical Center (UNMC), undergraduate nursing program applications are up 19 percent during the pandemic, while applications to the school’s accelerated baccalaureate

degree program — for students with degrees in other fields who wish to move into nursing — are up 27 percent, according to Juliann Sebastian, dean of UNMC’s College of Nursing.

“What we hear from our applicants is that they want to be part of the solution. They care about making a difference,” says Sebastian.

MOVING HEALTH CARE FORWARD

Rather than scaring students away, it seems the pandemic has motivated them

to serve.

“COVID reaffirmed my desire to go into medicine,” says Thomas Schrauth, a first-year medical student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison’s School of Medicine and Public Health. Schrauth was working as a certified nurse assistant at a hospital in Kenosha, Wis., when COVID-19 patients first started arriving last spring.

“Inspiring is probably the wrong word

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University of Alabama at Birmingham medical school students

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA AT BIRMINGHAM MEDICAL SCHOOL

because the loss of life was devastating, but for me, COVID was very reinforcing. The pandemic made it clear that long-standing health disparities — things like health care access and socioeconomic status — are what caused these disproportionate impacts, and those need to be addressed in our health care system moving forward,” Schrauth says.

At UC Riverside — which received 1,100 more medical school applications for fall 2021 than in any previous year — many applicants “wrote (in admission essays) about how they’ve been inspired to enter the health care field as physicians from seeing the devastation of the pandemic in their own communities,” says Dr. Takesha Cooper, chair of the medical school admissions committee. “There genuinely is this sense that students want to get out there and do their part to reduce the pandemic and move health

care forward in general.”

Independent of her studies, UNMC nursing senior Lizzy Kangas continued to work as a hospital patient care technician, often in COVID-19 units, throughout the pandemic. It’s an experience she feels will inform — and improve — how she approaches care for the rest of her nursing career.

“I watched our nurses suit up and bravely take care of COVID patients at a time when this was still brand new,” says Kangas, a native of Omaha, Neb., who will graduate this May.

“We didn’t know about long-term effects. We didn’t know about the rates of spread. They did not put on ‘brave faces.’ They were brave. There was no faking it,” Kangas adds. “Nurses have always been there for their patients physically, emotionally and mentally. But COVID really amplified that.”



UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA AT BIRMINGHAM MEDICAL SCHOOL

University of Alabama at Birmingham medical students join in a moment of reflection as part of a shared commitment to improve the health and safety of people of color.