

# The University of Connecticut Urban Service Track: An Effective Academic- Community Partnership

*Petra Clark-Dufner, MA; Bruce Gould, MD, FACP; and Kara O'Brien, RN*

The University of Connecticut's Urban Service Track (UST) is a unique academic-community collaboration with a focus on training health professions students to provide care to underserved patient populations in Connecticut's urban centers. Created and supported by the Connecticut Area Health Education Center Program (CT AHEC), which is located within the University's Center for Public Health and Health Policy, the UST is quickly becoming a destination program for current and prospective health professions students interested in primary care.

Now in its second year of operation, UST has 54 students enrolled. Designated as Urban Health Scholars, UST participants are full-time enrollees in one of the university's schools of Dental Medicine, Medicine, Nursing, or Pharmacy. Students come from the Storrs and Farmington campuses, which are 40 miles apart. The primary service area for Urban Health Scholars is Connecticut's capital, Hartford, which has a population of 124,397 and the dubious distinction of having the sixth highest child poverty rate among United States cities of 100,000 or more residents. Two students have graduated from UST since its inception, and both are working with underserved patients, one in Connecticut and one in North Carolina.

## What is UST?

Modeled on the "rural physician" training programs formulated by several medical schools in the 1970s, UST identifies students interested in working with diverse patient populations in underserved urban communities. The CT AHEC Program is the fiduciary agent and home for UST. Its mission to bring academic and community partners together to address health dispari-



*National Kidney Foundation Kidney Early Evaluation Program (KEEP) screening in Waterbury, CT. (Daniel Morris (SOM-2) and client).*



*Urban Health Scholars at the UConn Migrant Farm Clinic in Windsor, CT. Hassam Sultan (SODM-1), Kevon Rennie (SODM-2), Natalia Sanchez (SODM-1), patient and Ruth Goldblatt, DMD, FACP precepting.*

ties supports Urban Health Scholars by providing real-world applications in one of Connecticut's poorest urban communities.

Urban Health Scholars are at various educational levels, including undergraduate and graduate students in the Schools of Nursing and Pharmacy, first- and second-year dental and medical students, and residents in Family and Internal Medicine. Approximately 1/4 of the students come from underrepresented populations and several come from urban underserved communities. Urban Health Scholars are united by three common principles: 1) a desire to work with diverse underserved patients, 2) a proven track record of volunteerism,



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*Faith Congregational Church community health fair, Hartford, CT. (Ana Martinez (SOPH-P3) and client).*

and 3) a desire to learn from and work with interprofessional teams of health care providers.

As an “add-on” program to students’ curriculum within the four schools, the Urban Service Track provides participants with enhanced learning opportunities. These include bi-monthly learning retreats featuring community clinicians, social service agency representatives, and faculty mem-

bers from the University of Connecticut as well as their clients and patients. Over the course of two years, Urban Health Scholars are introduced to 11 competency areas which include health care financing, advocacy, population health, health disparities, cultural humility, quality improvement and patient safety, interprofessional team building and leadership, and utilization of community resources. The competencies were identified in partnership with the Community Health Center Association of Connecticut (CHCACT) by surveying practicing clinicians who provide care to underserved urban patient populations.

At learning retreats, students are introduced to different vulnerable patient populations to enhance their knowledge and understanding of health care issues and barriers specific to that population. Urban Health Scholars see the curriculum and facilitators as providing valuable information and perspectives on

“in-the-trenches” health care and services.

### Programmatic Elements

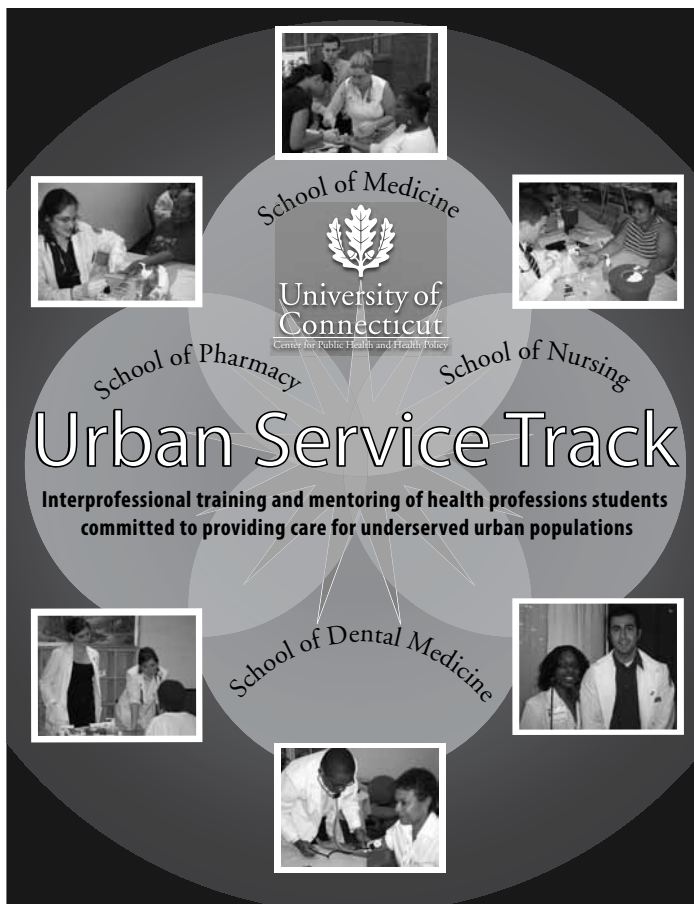
Urban Health Scholars are placed at community health centers and/or community health agencies with diverse patient populations through their respective schools. This provides participants with a common clinical experience from which they can approach care for the underserved. Urban Health Scholars also plugged into a menu of community volunteer activities. All students are required to attend quarterly learning retreats and participate in two community service activities during the fall and spring semesters that may include: National Kidney Foundation’s Kidney Early Evaluation Pro-



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gram (KEEP), health fairs and screenings, health prevention and promotion activities during National Primary Care Week, and participation in the Mission of Mercy, a free mobile dental clinic.

Learning to advocate for vulnerable populations is key to the UST experience. Urban Health Scholars participate in the annual National Association of Community Health Centers' Policy and Issues Forum held in Washington, D.C. that includes a day on Capitol Hill.

Coordinating schedules and facilities for students at different educational levels from four different schools and two different campuses is challenging. With the addition of a second cohort of Urban Health

combination of university and extramural funding. As financial resources at the university and the state continue to constrict, UST will need to be more creative and aggressive in identifying funding to support the program. The Center for Public Health and Health Policy provides financial support for program personnel and the four schools provide in-kind support for key faculty representatives/advisors for the Urban

Service Track. Community partners provide stipends for students participating in six-week community research projects, use of facilities at no cost, and frequently support meals and refreshments at the learning retreats. Additionally, funding from several foundations supports the program.

As part of future funding strategies, the Urban Service Track will diversify dollars supporting the program and integrate successful curricular components into the mainstream curriculum of the four health professions schools.

### **Conclusion**

Originally the University's Urban Service Track was conceived as an enrichment program designed for 12-16 students enrolled annually (3-4 per school). During UST's first two years of operation, the number of applicants and student participants has more than doubled. This may be due to timing, the increasing awareness to recruit and train primary care providers, the realization by health professions students that they need a "toolbox" that better equips them for working with underserved patients, or any combination of these factors. As successive cohorts of Urban Health Scholars participate in UST, we will continue to evaluate program elements to see if this unique academic-community partnership is feeding the pipeline for primary care providers committed to working with urban underserved populations.

*...the increase in participation by health professions students may be due to their realization that they need a "toolbox" that better equips them for working with underserved patients...*



*Urban Health Scholars at the 2008 National Association of Community Health Centers' Policy & Issues Forum. Left to right, Petra Clark-Dufner (UST Director), Jessica Johnson (SOM-2), Nick Calabres (SON), Lisa DiFedele (SOM-1) Daniel Morris (SOM-2), Kara O'Brien (SON), Cheryl Bilinski (SOM-2), Jennifer Jaskolka (SODM-2), Ana Martinez (SOPH-P3), Kevon Rennie (SODM-2), Melissa Mangini (SON), Bruce Gould, MD (CT AHEC Director)*

Scholars in fall 2008, the number of learning retreats doubled, creating additional demands for facilities and speakers. Community leaders and University and UST faculty responded with added commitment to the program.

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