

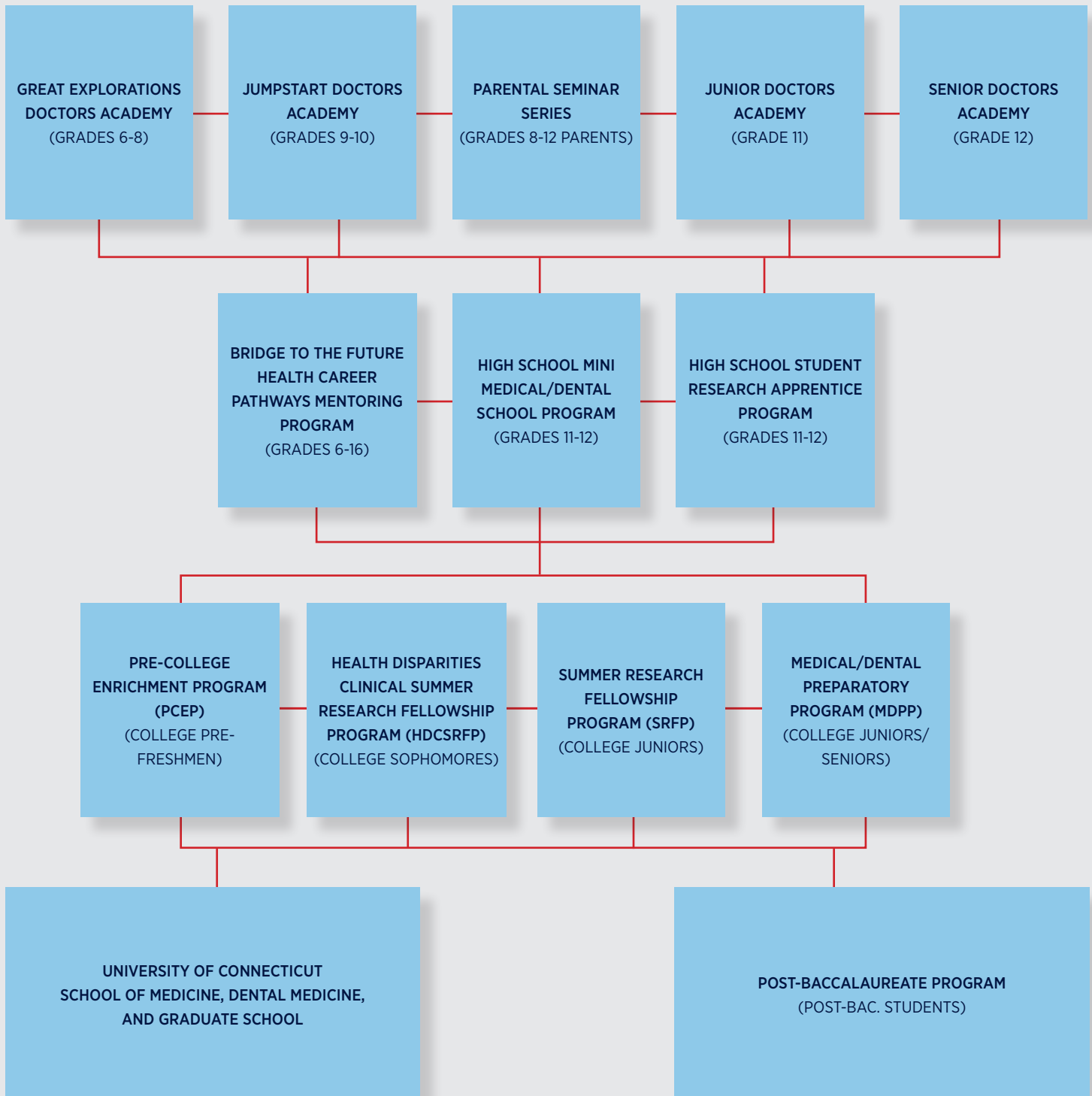
UConn HEALTH

HEALTH CAREER
OPPORTUNITY PROGRAMS



Read about the Aetna Health Professions
Partnership Initiative and Pathway
Programs at: health.uconn.edu/hcop

DECEMBER 2025



WELCOME FROM DR. MARJA HURLEY



Greetings from the Department of Health Career Opportunity Programs.

We continue to play a vital role in diversifying the student body of the Schools of Medicine and Dental Medicine at UConn Health. Given the ongoing health disparities in certain segments of our population, the goal of our department is to maintain a strong commitment to the recruitment,

retention, and graduation of diverse medical and dental students capable of providing culturally competent healthcare.

On July 18, we proudly celebrated 29 years of the Aetna Health Professions Partnership Initiative (Aetna HPPI) during the 2025 Summer Closing Ceremony. Gregory Jones, MBA, Chairman and Founder of The Legacy Foundation of Hartford, served as our keynote speaker. Dr. Prince Morgan, a general dentist in private practice at St. Barnabas Hospital in New York, a graduate of the UConn School of Dental Medicine Class of 2008, and a former Aetna HPPI pipeline participant, served as our dental alumnus speaker.

The Department of Health Career Opportunity Programs continues to support the following efforts:

- Our Medical and Dental Alumni seminar series for enrolled medical, dental, and graduate students from diverse backgrounds is now in its fourth year.
- Mentoring of middle and high school students by enrolled medical and dental students has been expanded.
- To increase STEM awareness for students in our Doctors Academy, we continue our collaborations with the Connecticut Science Center and have developed new collaborations with the Boys & Girls Clubs of Hartford.

This year, we congratulate the following individuals:

- Our graduating seniors participating in the high school Aetna HPPI Doctors Academy, who were all accepted into colleges.
- Our Health Career Opportunity Programs scholars in the School of Medicine (SOM) and School of Dental Medicine (SODM) graduating class of 2025. In the SOM, 23% of the graduating class are Health Career Opportunity Programs scholars, while 30% of the graduating class in the SODM are Health Career Opportunity Programs scholars.

We are also proud to report that 32% of the underrepresented SOM students and 37% of the underrepresented SODM students are Aetna HPPI pipeline students.

The Aetna HPPI programs, sponsored by the Department of Health Career Opportunity programs, continue to be recognized as a national model. In 1996, UConn Health, along with the Hartford School District, Central Connecticut State University, the University of Connecticut, and Wesleyan University, developed the Aetna HPPI in response to the Association of American Medical Colleges' Project 3000 By 2000 initiative. The Aetna HPPI programs have sent more than 1,200 participants to medical school, dental school, graduate school, or other health professional schools. The further success of the programs is evident in the number of physicians and dentists from diverse backgrounds who currently practice medicine and dentistry in Connecticut, or have embarked on careers in academic medicine or dental medicine.

We had 119 middle school, high school, and college students participate in our 2025 summer programs through the Aetna HPPI. During the 2025-2026 academic year, we anticipate approximately 300 students participating in our Aetna HPPI programs for middle school, high school, and college students. It is gratifying that the community recognizes the importance of these programs in promoting diversity in the health professions and has continued to support these efforts over the last 29 years.

I thank our faculty, staff, and students at UConn Health and partner institutions for their dedication and support. Additionally, we extend special thanks to our funders, including the John and Valerie Rowe Health Professions Scholars Program Endowment Fund, which supports several of our existing programmatic initiatives.

Marja Hurley, MD

UConn Board of Trustees Distinguished Professor
Professor of Medicine and Orthopaedic Surgery
Associate Dean of Health Career Opportunity Programs
Founding Director of Aetna Health Professions Partnership Initiative
UConn Schools of Medicine and Dental Medicine

A NOTE FROM DR. DANIELLE WATT



In my second year as Associate Director, I am excited about the accomplishments we have made as a department. We applaud the Doctors Academy instructors, peer counselors, mentors, staff, volunteers, guest speakers, parents and guardians, and participants for their commitment to ensure another successful program year. To highlight a few of the Doctors

Academy's key activities:

- The academic year began with a college panel featuring representatives from Connecticut colleges and universities, who discussed the admissions and financial aid process with participants and their parents.
- The entire Academy attended the first *Connecticut Black Men in White Coats Youth Summit* hosted by Saint Mary's Hospital, Trinity Health in Waterbury, CT, for a day filled with inspirational physician speakers and hands-on medical activities.
- We partnered with area universities and institutions (UConn Rescue, UConn School of Nursing, Central Connecticut State University, and The Jackson Laboratory for Genomic Medicine) to host our students for tours and lab experiences, giving them exposure to various careers in health care and biomedical research.
- These visits complemented mentoring sessions with health care and biomedical research professionals, UConn alumni, and Doctors Academy alumni who focused on tips for academic success, preparing for college, professional or graduate school, financial literacy, and career readiness.
- The academic year ended with a celebration honoring the graduating seniors, all of whom have been accepted to UConn and other four-year colleges.



- The summer program was improved through our partnership with the Connecticut Science Center, which offered hands-on STEM activities via the *Science Behind Pixar* interactive exhibit, where students explored the math, science, and computational ideas used in making animated movies.
- Furthermore, the rising Junior and Senior Doctors Academy students participated in rotational internships to gain insight into healthcare careers by observing UConn Health professionals in dental medicine, nursing, and respiratory services.

The Great Explorations In-school and After-school program continued at Jumoke Academy Honors SMaRT, Classical Magnet, Annie Fisher STEM Magnet School, and the Boys and Girls Clubs of Hartford Southwest Club, where students participated in six sessions focused on hands-on biology and chemistry activities. The High School Mini Medical and Dental School Program had over 96 students from 38 high schools in Hartford and New Haven counties. The program continues to grow each year with the virtual format and will remain online to expand our reach across the state, providing access and exposure to healthcare and research professionals. In addition to high school programs, we welcomed 70 summer students from across the U.S., including Puerto Rico, into our Pre-College Academic Enrichment Program, two college summer research programs, and the Medical and Dental Preparatory Program to support their educational and professional development.

I sincerely thank all our program participants, parents/guardians, department staff, UConn medical, dental, and graduate students, faculty, professional staff, volunteers, speakers, and institutional and community partners for contributing to the success of these programs. Special recognition goes to the members of the Student National Dental Association/Hispanic Student National Dental Association, Student National Medical Association, Latino Medical Student Association, Stop the Bleed Club, Doctors Academy alumni, Dr. Kathy Martin-Troy and her Central Connecticut State University staff, and Dr. Stephany Santos and her UConn College of Engineering Vergnano Institute for Inclusion staff for their support and partnership with our middle school, high school, and college programs.

Danielle Watt, Ph.D.

Associate Director of Health Career Opportunity Programs
UConn Schools of Medicine and Dental Medicine

CONGRATULATIONS FROM DR. GERALD BIRMINGHAM



I am glad to be part of a successful effort through the Aetna Health Professions Partnership Initiative, which emphasizes training and mentoring students to become qualified health professionals who will serve in underserved communities, especially in healthcare and well-being. This summer of 2025, I mentored a group of college students preparing for the Dental Admission

Test (DAT), which they must pass before applying to dental school. There were also students preparing for the Medical College Admission Test (MCAT) and others pursuing research opportunities in various labs, and they gave well-organized poster presentations of their work. To all the students, I offer my sincere congratulations.

As we celebrate their achievements, we must always be clear on the “why” behind pursuing these memorable events. The simple answer is to fulfill our wishes and desires for a wonderful life experience, serving ourselves and others in the communities we choose to work in.

I sincerely thank Dr. Hurley and her support staff for their efforts in numerous programs, including Great Explorations, the Jumpstart Program, the Junior Doctors Academy, and the Senior Doctors Academy. These programs secure an academic foundation for these students to excel in college and predoctoral institutions. So, as we celebrate today, let us remain committed to the necessary outcome of the mission to create more healthcare providers to serve and uplift our communities.

I want to thank all our students for their continued focus and hard work, as well as the professional staff members, institutional partners, and community partners for their ongoing support, which helps make these programs successful each year.

Gerald Birmingham, DMD, MPH, MS, MAGD

Assistant Clinical Professor, General Dentistry
Assistant Director of Health Career Opportunity Programs
UConn School of Dental Medicine



GREETINGS FROM DR. KERRY-ANN STEWART



It has been a pleasure serving as an Assistant Director for the Department of Health Career Opportunity Programs. It has been gratifying to witness the growth and development of participants in the middle school, high school, and college programs as they aspire to become physicians, dentists, biomedical scientists, and other health professionals. It has also been extremely rewarding to see the

graduates of the Aetna HPPI Senior Doctors Academy go on to attend distinguished colleges and universities, including UConn. Additionally, it has been a proud moment to hear from the Aetna HPPI college pathway participants who have been accepted to medical school, dental school, or graduate programs.

This academic year, we have continued to strengthen our pathway programs by expanding mentorship opportunities for pre-medical and pre-dental undergraduate students. We have maintained close collaborations with student organizations, scholar programs, and learning communities at the UConn Storrs campus. The department's ongoing involvement at partner colleges and universities, along with regional and national conferences, has been key in recruiting talented students to the UConn Schools of Medicine and Dental Medicine through both in-person and virtual informational and professional development sessions. It is also exciting to connect with students interested in research during



UConn's annual Research Connections event and at career fairs at other Connecticut colleges. Additionally, we resumed our annual Bridge to the Future Health Career Pathways Mentoring Conference as an in-person event, providing opportunities for participants to engage with our medical, dental, and graduate students at a poster symposium.

This year has been very enriching, and I am excited about the future of our middle school, high school, college, and graduate students, as well as those pursuing professional studies. We are pleased to offer participants in the Aetna HPPI Doctors Academy the opportunity to explore new areas of health sciences and medicine through hands-on activities and mentorship. Additionally, participants in the High School Mini Medical/Dental School Program were introduced to new advances in medicine, dental medicine, and biomedical research at UConn Health.

During the 2025 summer enrichment programs, participants in the Medical/Dental Preparatory Program made significant progress as they prepared for the Medical College Admission Test (MCAT) or the Dental Admission Test (DAT). It was also wonderful to see the outstanding research presentations given by the participants of the High School Student Research Apprentice Program, as well as the college participants in the Summer Research Fellowship Program and the Health Disparities Clinical Summer Research Fellowship Program.

I thank the UConn Health and Greater Hartford communities for their continued support of the Aetna HPPI pathway participants. We are also very grateful to the medical, dental, and graduate students who have graciously given their time to mentor students as they prepare for college or health profession schools, as well as the faculty and community organizations who host students to conduct research projects.

Kerry-Ann Stewart, Ph.D.

Assistant Director of Health Career Opportunity Programs
Assistant Professor of Public Health Sciences
UConn Schools of Medicine and Dental Medicine

ROSELEEN ALMENORD, MD

Physician, Medical Student, Mentor



Dr. Roseleen Almenord graduated from the UConn School of Medicine in May 2025.

Dr. Almenord attended Georgia State University in Atlanta, Georgia, for her undergraduate education, and earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Biology in 2019.

Dr. Almenord had the idea that she wanted to work in healthcare since she was in elementary school. She later

attended a magnet school focused on medical sciences during her high school years. However, the decision to become a physician was affirmed during her time in college. As an undergraduate student, she volunteered in hospitals' NICU and emergency rooms, which allowed her to see healthcare from the physicians' perspective; while also exploring local hospitals during her study abroad experience in Athens, Greece. Notably, Dr. Almenord adds, "I had the opportunity to shadow at a nonprofit clinic that provides comprehensive care and disease management classes to underserved populations. It was impactful to see the many barriers to care that patients faced and how physicians and professionals help patients overcome them."

To further develop her skills as a primary care provider, Dr. Almenord is currently attending a 3-year residency program in family medicine at Delaware Valley Community Health in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Her ultimate goal is to continue working in and advocating for underserved populations, whether here in the United States or abroad.

Dr. Almenord became involved with the Department of Health Career Opportunity Programs as a participant in the 2019 Medical/Dental Preparatory Program- MCAT Preparation. "I learned of Health Career Opportunity Programs in 2019 after expressing to a friend that I needed help studying for the MCAT. Coincidentally, she participated in the MCAT preparatory program the year prior and suggested that I apply. I got accepted and have been involved with Health Career Opportunity Programs ever since," shares Dr. Almenord.

Dr. Almenord has enjoyed many experiences through the Department of Health Career Opportunity Programs. One of her favorite experiences was participating in the 2021 Medical/Dental

Preparatory Program Track II-Basic Medical Sciences Program, before matriculating into medical school. "It really helped ease my concerns about starting a new school and exposed me to some of the topics I would soon learn about during the school year. It also allowed me to meet new friends and build lasting connections," emphasizes Dr. Almenord. After completing the first year of medical school, Dr. Almenord would continue to participate in the Basic Medical Sciences Program as the tutor for the 2022 summer program. She saw the role of the tutor as being impactful and a way to help the future first year medical and dental students transition into the school through the program. In addition to being a program tutor, Dr. Almenord was a program mentor for the Doctors Academy, in which she appreciated seeing the development of her high school students on their personal and professional paths.

Furthermore, Dr. Almenord also enjoyed her participation in the UConn chapter of the Student National Medical Association. Through the chapter's signature event, *Culture Shock*, she had the benefit of coordinating the activities with UConn and local businesses, while creating a welcoming environment for her fellow medical and dental students to be able to share their cultures and traditions with their peers.

Dr. Almenord leaves the following words of advice and encouragement to the younger generation of aspiring health professionals: "I would like to remind people to not be afraid to ask classmates, faculty, or anyone for help when you need it. In most cases, you are not the only person struggling. The longer you delay, whether because you are nervous or embarrassed, the harder you may make it for yourself in the future. However, classmates and faculty are more than willing to help you, so take advantage of opportunities afforded to you. Be confident and don't be afraid to advocate for yourself."

EDDYSON ALTIDOR, DMD

Dentist, Dental Student, Mentor



Dr. Eddyson Altidor graduated from the UConn School of Dental Medicine in May 2025. During his undergraduate studies at the University of Rochester in Rochester, New York, Dr. Altidor majored in Biology and minored in Business, and in 2021, he earned a Bachelor of Arts degree.

Dr. Altidor's initial thoughts about a career in dentistry occurred when he was in high school. He recalls, "In high school, my school hosted a college fair, and as I was leaving, one of the speakers called me back and said, 'Hey, you didn't ask any questions today.' That conversation led to her inviting me to shadow her over the summer, an opportunity I accepted—and it completely changed my life." Dr. Altidor did not initially think much about the dental profession until he had this experience, which later helped him reflect more on oral health issues. During college, he learned more about preventive care and gained more experience in dentistry.

With Dr. Altidor's interest in preventive care, he believed that pediatric dentistry would be a good fit for his future career endeavors. He is currently enrolled in a 2-year residency program in pediatric dentistry at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio. After completing his residency, Dr. Altidor plans to return to Connecticut to work in private practice while also engaging in part-time academia work.

Dr. Altidor became involved with the Department of Health Career Opportunity Programs during his undergraduate studies while looking for resources to study for the DAT and get more experience in dentistry. In the summer of 2019, he participated in the Medical/Dental Preparatory Program-DAT Preparation. Realizing the benefits of the program and having heard about the experiences of other undergraduate students, as well as dental students, he wanted to be involved with Health Career Opportunity Programs for the long term. He later participated in the 2021 Medical/Dental Preparatory Program Track II-Basic Medical Sciences Program. He saw this opportunity as pivotal to entering dental school, as it not only helped him with the material but also helped him to become more prepared and more confident for professional school.

One of Dr. Altidor's most memorable experiences with the Health Career Opportunity Programs was working with a team to design suturing clinics in collaboration with the UConn chapter of the Student National Dental Association (SNDA) for high school participants in the Doctors Academy. This enabled Dr. Altidor and SNDA members to help students "realize their potential" and see that they can also work in healthcare. Additionally, Dr. Altidor has appreciated the opportunity to network with peers and alumni through mentoring dinners and events, as well as opportunities to meet prospective dental students.

"Always remember why you started. Keeping your original motivation in mind will help you stay focused and push through challenges."

Dr. Altidor leaves the following words of advice and encouragement for the younger generation of aspiring health professionals: "Always remember why you started. Keeping your original motivation in mind will help you stay focused and push through challenges. Difficulties are inevitable, but the key is to keep moving forward."

PATRICK BOGUI, MD

Physician, Medical Student, Mentor



Dr. Patrick Bogui graduated from the UConn School of Medicine in May 2025.

Dr. Bogui attended Oakwood University in Huntsville, Alabama, where he earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Biology in 2019.

Dr. Bogui began forging his path toward a career in medicine during his high school years. “At the age of 14, I moved to Côte d’Ivoire,

the country where my family is originally from. There, I attended a British school system that differed from the one in the USA, as it focused on preparing students for their future careers from the start of high school. While I didn’t immediately know which path to take, I spent a lot of time reflecting on my interests. It was clear that I had always loved science, but it was the loss of my grandfather to medical complications that truly sparked my desire to pursue medicine,” he explains.

Currently, Dr. Bogui is attending a 3-year emergency medicine residency at UConn School of Medicine in Farmington, Connecticut.

Dr. Bogui was formally introduced to the Department of Health Career Opportunity Programs on his interview day for the School of Medicine. However, he was first introduced to the Department through conversations with friends and peers from Oakwood University who had participated in programs over the summers.

During his time in medical school, two experiences with the Health Career Opportunity Programs stand out to him in particular. The first would be the annual dinners, where the medical and dental students gather to reflect on the past year and connect with doctors from various specialties, creating opportunities for networking, mentorship, and guidance. “The exposure, connections, and career advice shared at these dinners are invaluable. In 2024, I even got to join a fellow student, Dedrian Barrett, and provide live musical entertainment as a violin/saxophone duo at this dinner, and that was extremely fun!” he exclaims. The second experience was his participation in a college and career fair held at the Boys and Girls Clubs of Hartford in 2023. “There, I had the opportunity to engage with high school students interested in pursuing careers in

healthcare, offering them a relatable perspective on the profession and highlighting the programs that Health Career Opportunity Programs has to offer,” Dr. Bogui explains.

“I had the opportunity to engage with high school students interested in pursuing careers in healthcare, offering them a relatable perspective on the profession and highlighting the programs that Health Career Opportunity Programs has to offer.”

Dr. Bogui offers these words of advice and encouragement to the younger generation of students interested in the health profession: “First and foremost, I would affirm these students for considering a career in what I believe to be one of the greatest professions in the world. Medicine is a career that demands a great deal, but I would encourage these students by reminding them that it is far from impossible. The unique experiences they bring to the table will not only enrich their own journey but will also have a direct and positive impact on the patients they serve.”

DESIREE DEAR, MD

Physician, Medical Student, Mentor



Dr. Desiree Dear graduated from the UConn School of Medicine in May 2025.

Dr. Dear attended the University of Connecticut in Storrs, Connecticut, where she graduated in 2018 with a Bachelor of Science in Molecular and Cellular Biology.

From a young age, Dr. Dear knew she wanted to become a physician. Growing up, she had a close family member

who battled a chronic illness, which gave her early exposure to the healthcare system. “I witnessed the profound impact that compassionate and knowledgeable physicians could have—not just on patients, but on their families as well. That experience sparked my curiosity about medicine, and as I got older, my love for science and problem-solving reinforced my desire to pursue this path,” she shares. What truly solidified her decision to pursue a career in medicine was her passion for lifelong learning and a desire to serve others. “Medicine is one of the few fields where you have the privilege of continuously expanding your knowledge while directly improving the lives of others. That combination made it clear to me that this was the career I wanted to dedicate my life to,” she continues. Ultimately, when she came to UConn School of Medicine, she knew that she was committed to service and outreach, particularly to underserved communities.

Currently, Dr. Dear is completing a 5-year otolaryngology–head and neck surgery residency at UConn School of Medicine in Farmington, Connecticut. She also plans to incorporate instructing and mentoring medical students and residents in an academic setting into her future career goals.

During her undergraduate studies, Dr. Dear became aware of the Department of Health Career Opportunity Programs and its resources as a member and then vice president of the UConn chapter of the Minority Association of Premedical Students (MAPS). Through this student organization, she visited the UConn Health campus to meet with faculty and staff from the Health Career Opportunity Programs and connected with enrolled medical students.

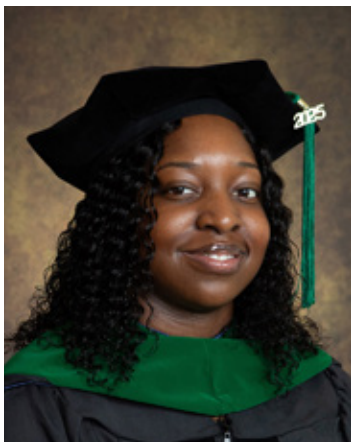
As a medical student participating in the department’s programs and events, as well as the UConn chapter of the Student National Medical Association, Dr. Dear explains, “I became involved with the Health Career Opportunity Programs (HCOP) because I wanted to provide the kind of mentorship that I wish I had when I was on my journey to medicine. Navigating the pre-medical path can be overwhelming, especially for students from underrepresented backgrounds who may not have access to the same guidance or resources as their peers. HCOP is committed to bridging that gap, ensuring that students have the support, knowledge, and opportunities they need to succeed. What drew me to the program was its deep sense of purpose, which creates a pipeline for future healthcare leaders by fostering mentorship, community, and opportunity. I saw the impact HCOP had on students, and I wanted to be part of that mission, helping to inspire and uplift the next generation of medical professionals.”

Dr. Dear’s most meaningful Health Career Opportunity Programs experience was mentoring a class of students in the Doctors Academy Program over a four-year period. “It has been incredibly rewarding to watch them grow, from freshmen curious about medicine to high school seniors confidently making plans for their futures and getting accepted into college. Being part of their development, helping them navigate challenges, and celebrating their achievements has reinforced my passion for mentorship and education. These relationships have not only allowed me to contribute to their success but have also helped me grow as a mentor, educator, and future physician. Seeing their determination and resilience has been inspiring, and I look forward to continuing to support and uplift aspiring healthcare professionals,” she expounds.

Dr. Dear leaves the following words of advice and encouragement to the younger generation of students interested in health professions: “My biggest piece of advice is never to give up. The road to a career in healthcare is not easy; it requires dedication, perseverance, and a strong sense of resilience. There will be moments of doubt and obstacles along the way, but if you are passionate about serving others and making a difference, then you won’t be deterred from accomplishing your goals. Surround yourself with mentors, seek out opportunities to grow, and don’t be afraid to ask for help when you need it. The journey may be challenging, but it is incredibly rewarding when you remain committed to your purpose. You belong in this space, and with hard work and determination, you can achieve your dreams.”

DANIELLA DENNIS, MD

Physician, Medical Student, Mentor



Dr. Daniella Dennis graduated from the UConn School of Medicine in May 2025.

Dr. Dennis attended Central Connecticut State University in New Britain, Connecticut, and earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Biomolecular Sciences in 2018. In addition to her major, Dr. Dennis also completed a minor in Community Engagement.

It was during elementary school that Dr. Dennis decided she wanted to pursue a healthcare career. Her interest was further developed when she would often accompany her mother, a certified nursing assistant, to her job at a rehabilitation center after school. “Being around healthcare professionals, including physicians, sparked my interest,” she recounts. During her high school years at New Britain High School, she enrolled in the Health Academy—a program designed for students interested in healthcare. This educational experience was when she truly realized that pursuing a career in medicine was her passion. “This program helped shape my college trajectory, where I focused on a pre-medical track. Between my freshman and sophomore years of college, I participated in a summer internship at Columbia University, which provided mentorship for pre-medical and pre-dental students. It was through these experiences, working closely with physicians in various specialties, that I was inspired to continue pursuing a career in medicine,” shares Dr. Dennis.

Dr. Dennis is currently completing a 3-year emergency medicine residency at UConn School of Medicine in Farmington, Connecticut. Her interests lie in sports medicine and critical care, and she hopes to complete a fellowship in these areas and eventually specialize.

Since her time in college, Dr. Dennis has been involved with the Department of Health Career Opportunity Programs. Her exposure to the department and its programs began in 2017. She participated in the Medical/Dental Preparatory Program-MCAT Preparation, the Health Disparities Clinical Summer Research Fellowship Program, and the Summer Research Fellowship Program for three summers. In 2021, she transitioned to the Medical/Dental Preparatory Program Track II-Basic Medical Sciences Program before entering medical school. “Through these programs, I gained the confidence,

knowledge, and mentorship that were essential in helping me get into medical school. One of the things I promised myself when I got into medical school was to pay it forward. These programs have been vital to my success, and I wanted to participate in them to give back, provide inspiration, and offer guidance just as these programs did for me,” explains Dr. Dennis.

Dr. Dennis recalls many great experiences with the Health Career Opportunity Programs, but one that stands out to her was serving as a mentor for the Doctor Academy on Saturdays. Being involved in this program reminded her of her own high school days, when she looked up to pre-medical and pre-dental students as inspirations. “Being able to guide these students, help them make decisions about their future, and answer their questions about medical school was incredibly fulfilling. I absolutely love working with youth, adolescents, and children, and being able to give back in this way was a powerful experience,” shares Dr. Dennis.

In addition to her dedication to the Doctors Academy program, Dr. Dennis was also actively involved with the Student National Medical Association (SNMA), serving as the UConn chapter secretary in 2022. Her experiences with SNMA helped cultivate a community that connected her with other students, creating a “home” environment for students from underrepresented backgrounds. She also appreciated the collaborations with the Latino Medical Student Association and her medical and dental student peers, during which they celebrated each other’s cultures and traditions at the annual *Culture Shock* event.

Dr. Dennis offers the following words of advice and encouragement to the younger generation of students interested in health professions: “Always stay curious. Ask questions and constantly seek opportunities for growth. One key piece of advice I received and would echo is that you can never have too many mentors, especially in the field of medicine. You’ll quickly realize that mentorship is crucial for advancing into different specialties and navigating the journey of medicine. There’s always something to learn from those around you, and it’s important to remain humble and ask for help when needed.”

AMANDA HERNÁNDEZ RODRÍGUEZ, MD

Physician, Medical Student, Mentor



Dr. Amanda Hernández Rodríguez graduated from the UConn School of Medicine in May 2025.

Dr. Hernández Rodríguez completed her undergraduate studies at the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras Campus in San Juan, Puerto Rico, in 2021, earning a Bachelor of Science degree in Chemistry.

Dr. Hernández Rodríguez developed an interest in

healthcare between the ages of 11 and 12, after an experience that required treatment at an orthopedic office. “Their compassion and ability to calm me down during a painful time left a lasting impression on me,” she recalls. Soon after this initial exposure to a healthcare setting, her older cousin, a pre-medical student at the time, also mentored her and shared her experiences throughout medical school and residency. “I remember being fascinated by all the stories she would tell me, and her guidance kept my passion for medicine alive. Without her influence, I might not be preparing to graduate from medical school and getting ready to start residency,” shares Dr. Hernández Rodríguez affectionately.

Currently, Dr. Hernández Rodríguez is completing a 4-year residency program in obstetrics and gynecology at Nuvance Health Consortium in Danbury, Connecticut. “I’m passionate about the educational role physicians have in empowering women in this field. It is gratifying to have the opportunity to build meaningful relationships with patients and support them through some of the most significant moments of their lives,” she explains. Additionally, Dr. Hernández Rodríguez’s passion for education motivates her to want to be involved in teaching and mentoring future medical students.

Dr. Hernández Rodríguez’s involvement with Health Career Opportunity Programs began in the summer of 2020, following a recommendation from a friend who had previously participated in the Medical/Dental Preparatory Program-MCAT Preparation. “She spoke highly of the program’s supportive and welcoming environment, which motivated me to apply. My experience participating in the Medical/Dental Preparatory Program was incredible because of the collaborative atmosphere and inspiring lectures I encountered, which is what made me fall in love with

UConn. After getting to know many of the faculty and staff, I knew UConn would be a great fit for me. Since then, I have loved participating in all of Health Career Opportunity Programs’ events to help contribute and mentor the future generations of students interested in the healthcare field,” describes Dr. Hernández Rodríguez.

One of Dr. Hernández Rodríguez’s best Health Career Opportunity Programs experiences was serving as a mentor for the Junior and Senior Doctors Academy class for two academic years, from 2021 to 2023. “I am passionate about mentoring and understand the significant impact a mentor can have on a student’s journey. Working with 11th-grade students and then again with them as high school seniors was incredibly rewarding. I appreciated the opportunity to meet with them weekly throughout the school year, offering lectures and guidance to help them pursue their healthcare aspirations. It was truly fulfilling to support them through their academic and professional growth,” states Dr. Hernández Rodríguez.

Another aspect of mentoring she enjoyed was participating in the Bridge to the Future Health Career Pathways Mentoring Conference, which helped undergraduate students on their pre-medical journeys through student panels and tours of the medical school. It was rewarding for her to see a mentee from the Senior Doctors Academy, now a college sophomore, participating in the conference.

Dr. Hernández Rodríguez’s emphasis on mentorship was also noted through her roles in the UConn chapter of the Latino Medical Student Association. One particular event sponsored by the Latino Medical Student Association and Health Career Opportunity Programs is the *Dine and Social*, where medical students network with medical faculty, community physicians, and medical residents. In her final year of medical school, she was excited to serve as a mentor to the members of the first-, second-, and third-year medical classes during this event.

Dr. Hernández Rodríguez leaves the following words of advice and encouragement to the younger generation of students interested in health professions: “Remain persistent, passionate, and open to new opportunities. It will be a challenging journey, but it will also be filled with wonder and rewarding experiences. Don’t hesitate to seek guidance from mentors because they can help you overcome obstacles and offer valuable perspectives. Also, never forget to surround yourself with a supportive community, whether it be friends, family, or peers. Their encouragement will help you stay motivated, focused, and they will be there to remind you of the importance of enjoying the journey along the way.”

MYCHAEL MCKEEVER, DMD

Dentist, Dental Student, Mentor



Dr. Mychael McKeever graduated from the UConn School of Dental Medicine in May 2025.

Dr. McKeever attended Norfolk State University in Norfolk, Virginia, where she was also a Dozoretz National Institute for Mathematics and Applied Sciences scholar. In 2021, she earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Biology on the pre-professional track, with a minor in Chemistry.

Early in her high school years, Dr. McKeever decided she wanted to become a dentist. “At the age of 15, after experiencing barriers to dental care and realizing my lack of knowledge about oral health, I became fascinated by dentistry both as a profession and a way to make a difference. I saw firsthand how access to dental care impacts lives, and that experience sparked my passion for the field,” she explains.

Dr. McKeever is currently participating in a 1-year general practice residency program at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, Virginia.

In 2019, during her sophomore year of undergraduate studies, Dr. McKeever became involved with the Department of Health Career Opportunity Programs after learning about the Medical/Dental Preparatory Program-DAT Preparation from a mentor who had previously participated. As a UConn dental student, Dr. McKeever remained actively engaged with the department’s programs and events. “During dental school, Health Career Opportunity Programs became an invaluable support system, especially as an underrepresented student transitioning from an HBCU. The program provided mentorship, resources, and a sense of community that helped me navigate my path. It also opened doors to volunteer opportunities, allowing me to inspire and guide younger students interested in careers in medicine and science,” she shares.

Dr. McKeever’s most meaningful Health Career Opportunity Programs experience was mentoring tenth-grade students in the Jumpstart program of the Doctors Academy. Walking alongside them through high school, offering guidance, and watching them grow was incredibly rewarding. When they started applying to

college and receiving their acceptances, it felt surreal—it was a full-circle moment that reinforced the power of mentorship and representation,” she explains.

“I saw firsthand how access to dental care impacts lives, and that experience sparked my passion for the field.”

Dr. McKeever offers these words of advice and encouragement to the younger generation of aspiring health professionals: “To students pursuing careers in healthcare, perseverance is key. The road ahead will not always be easy—you will face obstacles, setbacks, and moments of doubt. Finding a support system can help you navigate the trials. Every challenge is an opportunity to grow. If you fall, get back up. Keep pushing forward, stay committed to your goals, and never lose sight of the impact you can make. Your journey is just as important as the destination.”

SAMUEL PADILLA ABREU, MD

Physician, Medical Student, Mentor



Dr. Samuel Padilla Abreu graduated from the UConn School of Medicine in May 2025.

Dr. Padilla Abreu attended the University of Puerto Rico in Aguadilla, Puerto Rico, for his undergraduate studies, and in 2021, he earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Biology with a concentration in Biomedical Sciences.

At the age of 15, Dr. Padilla Abreu decided to pursue a career in medicine. Growing up, he witnessed firsthand the shortage of medical professionals in his region, which led to long journeys and wait times for his family's medical appointments. "The situation was even more dire following natural disasters, where access to healthcare became even more limited. These experiences fueled my passion to become a physician and help address these gaps in medical care," he explains. During college, he continued to prepare for a career in medicine by taking courses in biomedical sciences.

Currently, Dr. Padilla Abreu is enrolled in a 4-year residency program in anesthesiology at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston, Massachusetts. After completing his residency, he is considering a fellowship and possibly further specializing in anesthesiology. His long-term goal is to return to Puerto Rico to better serve the island's residents.

Dr. Padilla Abreu was introduced to the Health Career Opportunity Programs through a friend who had been accepted to dental school. "Inspired by their experience, I decided to apply for the 2020 Medical/Dental Preparatory Program-MCAT Preparation. It turned out to be one of the best decisions I made, as I had the opportunity to connect with amazing people at UConn. The support I received during that summer made me feel more confident and motivated, and ultimately reinforced my desire to pursue a career in medicine and join UConn for medical school," shares Dr. Padilla Abreu.

Dr. Padilla Abreu has many memorable experiences with the Department of Health Career Opportunity Programs. He appreciates the opportunity to connect with other incoming medical students through his participation in the Medical/Dental Preparatory Program, specifically the Track II-Basic Medical

Sciences Program, before matriculating at the UConn School of Medicine. "Moving to [another part of the] United States for the first time was nerve-wracking, and I was anxious about everything. However, that day, I met the people who would become my support system over the next four years. We became like family, and they were instrumental in keeping me grounded and sane during medical school. Shoutout to Team 25 (his classmates of the Class of 2025)!" he exclaims.

"These experiences fueled my passion to become a physician and help address these gaps in medical care."

Dr. Padilla Abreu also enjoyed his time mentoring the high school student participants of the Doctors Academy. It was gratifying for him to help them pursue their interests in health careers. Additionally, Dr. Padilla Abreu was also extensively involved with the UConn chapter of the Latino Medical Student Association. He has fond memories of connecting with other students from Puerto Rico and sharing culture and traditions with other medical and dental students during the annual *Culture Shock* event hosted by the Student National Medical Association.

Dr. Padilla Abreu offers the following words of advice and encouragement to the younger generation of students interested in health professions: "Take things one step at a time. It's easy to get overwhelmed by the long road ahead, but focusing on the present moment, taking care of yourself, and tackling immediate tasks will help you stay on track. Remember to enjoy the journey and embrace each challenge along the way, as it will make you stronger and more prepared for your future career."

NINA PENABAD, DMD

Dentist, Dental Student, Mentor



Dr. Nina Penabad graduated from the UConn School of Dental Medicine in May 2025.

Dr. Penabad attended Florida International University in Miami, Florida, and in 2020 she graduated from the Honors College with a Bachelor of Science degree in Biological Sciences.

Dr. Penabad developed an interest in and exposure to dentistry through her

mother and decided to fully pursue a career in dentistry during her sophomore year of college. Through her experiences shadowing at dental clinics, she was able to see patient interactions, dentists' autonomy, and the depth of procedures. Initially, she thought she would pursue a career as a physician or a nurse, as she had also volunteered in hospital settings. However, after her introduction to the field of dentistry, she decided to pursue additional dental opportunities and became increasingly immersed in the career.

Currently, Dr. Penabad is attending a 2-year pediatric dentistry residency at UConn School of Dental Medicine in Farmington, Connecticut. Her goal is to become a board-certified pediatric dentist and work in a hospital setting. She intends to work in Connecticut after completing her residency and then possibly pursue a private practice.

Dr. Penabad was introduced to the Health Career Opportunity Programs during her interview day at the UConn School of Dental Medicine, which was one of the factors that made UConn her school of choice. She appreciated meeting Dr. Hurley and knowing that there were students of similar backgrounds speaking about their experiences. She saw a "vivacious" community, where she could feel comfortable. Over the years, as a dental student, she found her experience with Health Career Opportunity Programs [HCOP] to be invaluable. "I became involved with HCOP programming because there are some things I wish I had had access to when I was in middle or high school. Personally, I only engaged in similar activities when I was already in college and actively pursuing a career in the

health profession. The thought that I could even have a small role in helping someone believe that they can become a health professional in the future, regardless of economic status or background, is something I find to be extremely rewarding and important," shares Dr. Penabad.

Dr. Penabad's best Health Career Opportunity Programs experience was participating in the many receptions, programs, and events that brought students, residents, and faculty together as one community. Through these opportunities, Dr. Penabad was able to find her "niche" at UConn and in Connecticut and make life-long relationships with her peers and colleagues that she will take with her into the future. "It fills me with pride because I truly believe that our Health Career Opportunity Programs students are some of the best there are to offer to the health professions through their humility, work ethic, intellect, and care," she further states.

Through mentoring opportunities, Dr. Penabad has enjoyed giving personal advice on her educational journey and pursuit of a health career by participating in panels for summer college programs. She sees these opportunities as impactful for college students, as they can see medical and dental students who have gone through similar experiences. She has also had the benefit of helping high school students in the Doctors Academy see the dental profession from a different perspective by providing them with suturing clinics and mock cases with the UConn chapters of the Student National Dental Association/Hispanic Student Dental Association and the Latino Medical Student Association.

Dr. Penabad leaves the following words of advice and encouragement to the younger generation of students interested in the health professions: "Do not allow people to dissuade you from seeking a job in healthcare if it's truly what you want to do. As a high school student, it is important to think about your future beyond high school or college. A second, more practical piece of advice is, don't attend an expensive undergraduate program if it will be fully funded by student loans. Graduate school is expensive, and scholarships may not be as readily available, so don't saddle yourself with unnecessary student loan debt. Think about your fiscal responsibility while in your undergraduate studies and apply to as many scholarships as possible to help you better prepare for health professions schools."

2025 BRIDGE MENTORING AWARDS

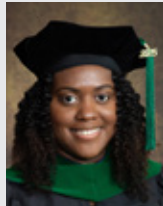
The Department of Health Career Opportunity Programs recognized three dental students and four medical students for their continued participation and involvement in the Aetna HPPI Programs with the Bridge Mentoring Award. The 2025 recipients were: Roseleen Almenord, MD, family medicine residency, Delaware Valley Community Health, Philadelphia, PA; Eddyson Altidor, DMD, pediatric dentistry residency, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, OH; Desiree Dear, MD, otolaryngology residency, University of Connecticut School of Medicine, Farmington, CT; Amanda Hernandez Rodriguez, MD, obstetrics and gynecology residency, NuVance Health Consortium, Danbury, CT; Mychael McKeever, DMD, general practice residency, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA; Samuel Padilla Abreu, MD, anesthesiology residency, MGB Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, MA; and Nina Penabad, DMD, pediatric dentistry residency, University of Connecticut, Farmington, CT.



Roseleen Almenord, MD



Eddyson Altidor, DMD



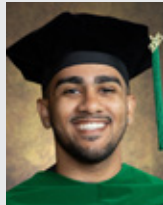
Desiree Dear, MD



Amanda Hernandez Rodriguez, MD



Mychael McKeever, DMD



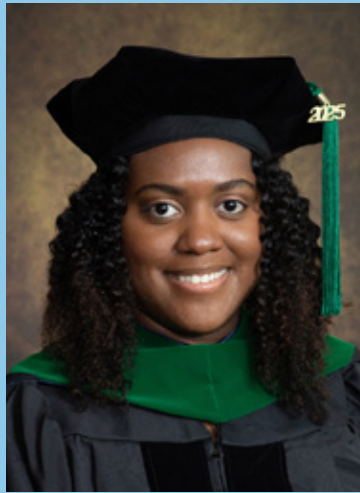
Samuel Padilla Abreu, MD



Nina Penabad, DMD

2025 OUTSTANDING STUDENT AWARD

The Department of Health Career Opportunity Programs recognized a member of the Class of 2025 for outstanding performance throughout their professional education. The 2025 recipient was Desiree Dear, MD, otolaryngology residency, University of Connecticut School of Medicine, Farmington, CT.



Desiree Dear, MD



The Department of Health Career Opportunity Programs is pleased to recognize Desiree Dear, MD, for Outstanding Service.

CONGRATULATIONS TO OUR MENTORS AND PAST PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS

2025 UConn Medical, Dental, and Graduate School Graduates

Stephanie Akosa, MD
Roseleen Almenord, MD
Eddyson Altidor, DMD
Frank Amaefuna, DMD
Sarah Anderson, MD
Dedrian Barrett, DMD
Khaoula Ben Haj Frej, MD
Cristal Bruce, DMD
Sulaikha Buuh, MD

Erin Cova, MD
Desiree Dear, MD
Daniella Dennis, MD
Zoe Garvey, MD
Alexandria Gonzalez, MD
Ava Gorneault, DMD
Amanda Hernandez Rodriguez, MD
Emily Lopez Santa, MD, MPH
Mychael McKeever, DMD

Juan Mitchell, DMD
Nujuma Moussa, MD
Samuel Padilla Abreu, MD
Nina Penabad, DMD
Pedro Piedra Prieto, DMD
Ireoluwatomiwa Opayemi, MD, MPH
Tania Skendridis, DMD
Isiah Sumler, DMD
Abigail Tulchinsky, MD

CONGRATULATIONS TO OUR 2025 COMMENCEMENT SPEAKER FOR UCONN SCHOOL OF MEDICINE!



Commencement Student Speaker Spotlight: Daniella Dennis

*Excerpt of article written by
Lauren Woods, UConn Health*

Dennis is an MD candidate in the UConn School of Medicine and a student speaker for UConn Health's 54th Commencement on May 12, 2025.

UConn School of Medicine's Daniella Dennis is a graduating fourth-year medical student and commencement student speaker for the Class of 2025. (Tina Encarnacion/UConn Health photo)

STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS 2025 EXEMPLARY SERVICE AWARDS

The Department of Health Career Opportunity Programs and the UConn Chapters of the Latino Medical Student Association (LMSA), Student National Medical Association (SNMA), and Student National Dental Association/Hispanic Student Dental Association (SNDA/HSDA) recognized medical and dental student members of the Class of 2025 for their exemplary service. The LMSA recipient was Amanda Hernandez Rodriguez, MD, obstetrics and gynecology residency, Nuvance Health Consortium, Danbury, CT. The SNMA recipients were Sarah Anderson, MD, internal medicine-preliminary residency, University of Connecticut School of Medicine, Farmington, CT, then neurology residency, Virginia Commonwealth University Health, Richmond, VA, and Desiree Dear, MD, otolaryngology residency, University of Connecticut School of Medicine, Farmington, CT. The SNDA/HSDA recipients were Eddyson Altidor, DMD, pediatric dentistry residency, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, OH, and Mychael McKeever, DMD, general practice residency, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA.



LMSA Award presented by MD/PhD student and Chapter Co-President, Reinier Gonzalez Heredia, to Amanda Hernandez Rodriguez, MD.



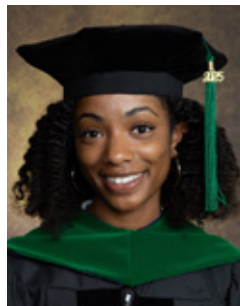
SNMA Award presented by medical students and Chapter Co-Presidents, Marc Merriman and Edith Oteng, to Sarah Anderson, MD, and Desiree Dear, MD.



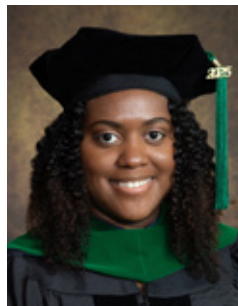
SNDA/HSDA Award presented by dental student and Chapter Co-President, Princess Stark, to Eddyson Altidor, DMD, and Mychael McKeever, DMD.



Amanda Hernandez Rodriguez, MD



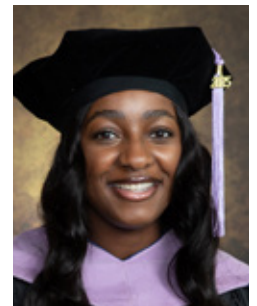
Sarah Anderson, MD



Desiree Dear, MD



Eddyson Altidor, DMD



Mychael McKeever, DMD

SENIOR DOCTORS ACADEMY GRADUATING CLASS OF 2025



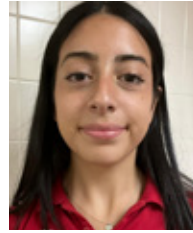
Safia Ali
University of Hartford



Sunita Amiri
Central Connecticut State University



Gabrielle Bridgewater
The Ohio State University



Valeria Buzzigoli
University of Connecticut



Maham Chaudhary
University of Connecticut



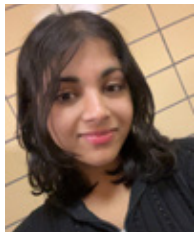
Sabra Dewar
Quinnipiac University



Alec-Raive Gordon
University of Connecticut



Anousha Hashim
University of Connecticut



Meera Kannan
Hofstra University



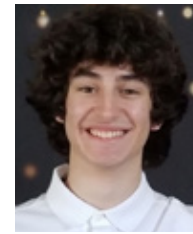
Jeneika Lugg
University of Connecticut



Elissa Matthews
Howard University



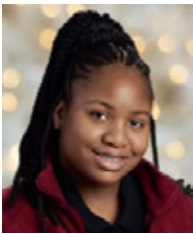
Tyler McGraw
Boston College



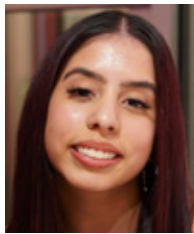
Marko Paxi
Quinnipiac University



Xavier Rosario
Gateway Community College/University of Hartford



Genesis Rowe
Spelman College



Genesis Sanclemente
Manchester Community College



Javel Stewart
University of Connecticut



Sama Thapa
University of Massachusetts-Lowell



Kaelyn Williams
University of Connecticut



The Class of 2025 Senior Doctors Academy graduated 19 Connecticut high school students at its Closing Ceremony on the evening of May 14, 2025. Graduates are pictured here with keynote speaker Ebony Jackson-Shaheed, MPH and Dr. Marja Hurley (Photo by John Atashian).

THE JOHN AND VALERIE ROWE SCHOLARSHIP



John Rowe, MD and Valerie Rowe, Ph.D.

The Department of Health Career Opportunity Programs provides John and Valerie Rowe Scholarships in the form of book awards to Senior Doctors Academy students from the Aetna HPPI Doctors Academy who will enroll as freshmen at UConn. Dr. John Rowe and Dr. Valerie Rowe are long-time donors to UConn, supporting students and institutional advancement.

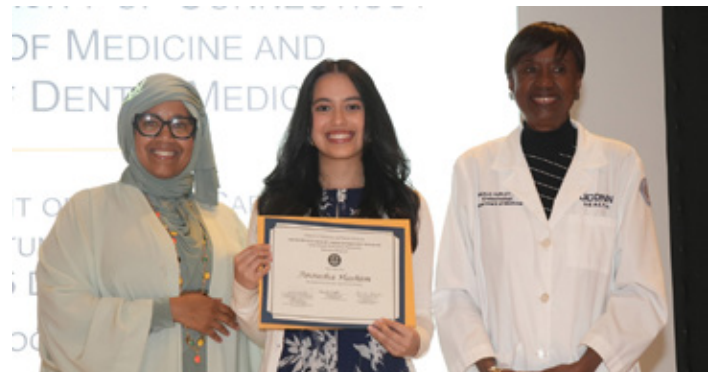
The Rowe Health Professions Scholars Program Endowment has helped hundreds of students from diverse backgrounds succeed in UConn’s undergraduate, medical, and graduate programs through scholarships, academic support, and experiential opportunities.

Dr. John Rowe is a professor of health policy and aging at Columbia University and a former chairman and CEO of Aetna, Inc. He previously served as Chairman of the UConn Board of Trustees and the UConn Health Board of Directors. Dr. John Rowe was awarded the Carole and Ray Neag Medal of Honor in 2012 for his remarkable contributions to medicine and UConn Health. Dr. Valerie Rowe is a retired clinical associate professor at the Graduate School of Education at Fordham University.

Dr. Marja Hurley, UConn Board of Trustees Distinguished Professor, professor of medicine and orthopedic surgery, associate dean for Health Career Opportunity Programs, and founding director of Aetna Health Professions Partnership Initiative, awarded Valeria Buzzigoli and Anousha Hashim the 2025 John and Valerie Rowe Scholarships.



City of Hartford’s Ebony Jackson-Shaheed, MPH, director of Health & Human Services and Dr. Marja Hurley with the 2025 Rowe Scholarship Award Recipient, Valeria Buzzigoli



City of Hartford’s Ebony Jackson-Shaheed, MPH, director of Health & Human Services and Dr. Marja Hurley with the 2025 Rowe Scholarship Award Recipient, Anousha Hashim

BOAKE L. PLESSY, PH.D. SCHOLARSHIP



Boake L. Plessy, PhD

In honor of Dr. Boake Plessy’s contributions, UConn Health has established a scholarship fund to support educational enhancement for students who participated in the Aetna HPPI Doctors Academy and plan to continue their education at the postsecondary level. The Friends of the Department of Health Career Opportunity Programs –

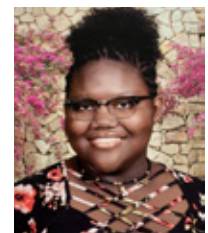
2025 Boake L. Plessy, PhD Scholarships were awarded to Maham Chaudhary, Alec-Raive Gordon, and Javel Stewart at the Academic Year Closing and Recognition Ceremony. All three award recipients are attending UConn this Fall. To contribute to the Boake L. Plessy, PhD Scholarship Fund or for more information about philanthropy to support the Health Career Opportunity Programs at UConn Health, please visit health.uconn.edu/hcop.



Maham Chaudhary
University of Connecticut



Alec-Raive Gordon
University of Connecticut



Javel Stewart
University of Connecticut

GREAT EXPLORATIONS

Great Explorations is an enrichment program designed to provide extracurricular activities in Math, Science, and Language Arts for sixth- to eighth-grade middle school students. A total of 101 students who participated in the Great Explorations Program in the 2024-2025 academic year were enrolled in one of three middle schools: Annie Fisher STEM Magnet School, Classical Magnet School, and Jumoke Academy Honors SMaRT, or the Boys and Girls Clubs of Hartford Southwest Club.

Great Explorations offers a four-week summer academic enrichment program for rising eighth-grade students and a Saturday Academy for current eighth-graders, both held at the UConn Health campus. During the 2024-2025 academic year, six



students participated in the program, while seven students took part in the summer of 2025. Throughout the 2024-2025 academic year, they met with dental students to learn more about careers in dentistry. Additionally, Great Explorations students toured the Simulation Center with medical and dental students at UConn Health to participate in a clinical skills workshop. During the summer, the students visited the Connecticut Science Center to explore exhibits and took part in an art therapy exhibition that allowed them to express their “identity, growth, and emotional insight” through artistic means and “creative self-reflection” with masks, stones, or crystal globe balls.



PARENTAL SEMINAR SERIES

The Aetna Health Professions Partnership Initiative’s Parental Seminar Series allows our Doctors Academy students and parents to learn more about important health issues affecting their community and tips to prepare for college. Parents are asked to submit a survey on the topics they are most interested in learning about, and the series of lectures is then tailored to their needs. The 2024-2025 Parental Seminar Series began with a panel on college admissions and financial aid. The panel included Raena Beetham, director of admissions marketing and events, Eastern Connecticut State University; Victoria Connors, manager of admissions, University of Hartford; Jayson Hodge, associate director of special programs, University of Connecticut; and Alick Letang, associate director of admissions, Central Connecticut State University. Additionally, the Parental Seminar Series included presentations on different health topics.



Iyanna Liles, MD

Dr. Iyanna Liles, an obstetrician and gynecologist with Women’s Health Connecticut, presented on the topic of breast cancer.



Oladipo Cole, MD

Another topic of interest was sickle cell disease, presented by Dr. Oladipo Cole, an assistant professor of medicine in the Division of Hematology and Oncology at UConn Health, and associate director of the Connecticut Bleeding Disorders Center and the New England Sickle Cell Institute.



Basma Essawy, DDS

The seminar series also included a presentation on oral health given by Dr. Basma Essawy, clinical assistant professor, Department of General Dentistry at UConn Health.

AETNA HPPI DOCTORS ACADEMY

The Aetna Health Professions Partnership Initiative Doctors Academy (Aetna HPPI Doctors Academy) is designed to provide mentoring and educational opportunities that may otherwise not be available to many Connecticut middle and high school students. The Aetna HPPI Doctors Academy consists of the Jumpstart 9 and 10 programs, and the Junior and Senior Doctors Academies. The purpose of these programs is to provide access and prepare students interested in health professions who come from backgrounds where they are the first in their family to earn a four-year degree or come from modest family means. Students participating in the Aetna HPPI Doctors Academy are typically recruited from Hartford-area schools and aspire to become physicians, dentists, biomedical research scientists, pharmacists, nurses, and other healthcare professionals.

The Aetna HPPI Doctors Academy consists of two main components: the summer program and the academic-year program. Both are designed to advance students' academic skill levels in Math, Science, and English. The programs also promote personal growth through extracurricular experiences designed to help students develop the skills necessary to succeed in the PSAT and SAT exams. A total of 56 high school students participated in the Aetna HPPI Doctors Academy program during the 2024-2025 academic year, and 40 students participated in the program during the summer of 2025.

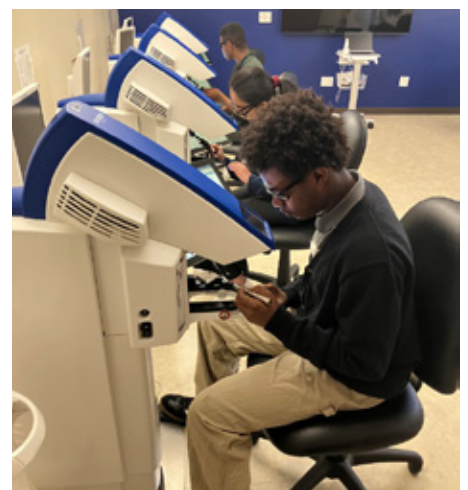
During the 2024-2025 academic year, the Aetna HPPI Doctors Academy participated in mentoring activities focused on clinical skills, relevant health topics, scientific research, and college preparation. These mentoring activities were hosted by medical and dental students in the UConn chapters of Black Men in White Coats and the Student National Dental Association, undergraduate students in the UConn Special Program in Medicine, and community physicians and scientists. Additionally, members of the Doctors Academy took part in a mentorship program with practicing health professionals and scientists hosted by Dr. Brendan Dolan, a general dentist and alumnus of the UConn School of Dental Medicine. Students were further exposed to health professions at UConn Health through participation in the STOP the BLEED program, a CPR training course, the Connecticut Junior Science and Humanities Symposium, and the Inspiring Women in Engineering and Medicine program.

The high school students took enrichment trips during the 2024-2025 academic year to Dunkin Park in Hartford for the Black Doctors Day event, the Palace Theater and the UConn campus



in Waterbury for the inaugural Black Men in White Coats Youth Summit, the Jackson Laboratory for Genomic Medicine, Central Connecticut State University's Biomolecular Sciences Department, and the Biomedical Science Careers Program in Boston, Massachusetts, to learn more about health and STEM fields from professionals, faculty, and graduate students. In the summer of 2025, high school students from the Doctors Academy participated in clinical tours and rotations at UConn Health, visited the Connecticut Science Center, and toured the UConn Storrs campus.





UCONN HEALTH HELPING BUILD CONNECTICUT YOUTHS' FUTURE CAREERS IN HEALTH AND SCIENCE

2024 Bridge to the Future Health Career Pathways Mentoring Conference Returns In-Person

Approximately 100 high school and college students had the opportunity to engage with UConn Health faculty, staff, medical, dental, and graduate students in a series of activities designed to raise awareness about health and biomedical science careers, as well as the admissions process for medical, dental, and graduate schools.

On October 19, the 2024 Bridge to the Future Health Career Pathways Mentoring Conference made its return. Since 2019, the event has been held virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The event was hosted by Dr. Marja Hurley, UConn Board of Trustees Distinguished Professor, professor of medicine and orthopedic surgery, and associate dean of the Health Career Opportunity Programs.



Connecticut youth learning how to take blood pressure at the 2024 Bridge to the Future Health Career Pathways Mentoring Conference at UConn Health on October 19, 2024 (Photo by John Atashian).

This year's conference was organized by the Department of Health Career Opportunity Programs (HCOP), the UConn Chapters of the Student National Medical Association (SNMA), the Latino Medical Student Association (LMSA), and the Student National Dental Association/ Hispanic Student Dental Association (SNDA/HSDA).

The keynote speaker was Dr. Nurudeen Osumah, a UConn Health HCOP Pathway participant and a 2022 graduate of the UConn School of Medicine, who is currently an Emergency Medicine resident at UConn Health. He spoke to the students about the impact of participating in a multitude of UConn Health HCOP preparatory programs and his personal journey through college and medical school.

Enrichment activities at the event for high school students included a "Road to Success" panel with Doctors Academy alumni, presentations, and interactive activities on medical Spanish, taking



Keynote speaker Dr. Nurudeen Osumah with Dr. Marja Hurley (Photo by John Atashian).

a patient history, and clinical skills focused on blood pressure, suturing, surgical knots, and lumbar puncture, conducted by members of LMSA and SNMA.

The college students attended a research poster symposium featuring currently enrolled UConn medical, dental, and graduate student presenters to learn about biomedical research opportunities. They also participated in an enrichment seminar to learn about the admissions process for graduate and medical school programs offered at UConn Health.

For college students specifically interested in dental medicine, a Dental Impressions Workshop led by Jaelon Blandburg, third-year dental student, and Dr. Gerald Birmingham, clinical assistant professor in General Dentistry, and assistant director of the Department of Health Career Opportunity Programs, focused on a series of information sessions which included careers in dental medicine and a hands-on activity for taking dental impressions.

Additionally, college students interested in medicine participated in a breakout session on medical patient history and case studies led by Dr. Lenworth Ellis, assistant professor of medicine and interim chief of the Division of Occupational & Environmental Medicine, along with Professor Hurley and medical students.

The college program concluded with a "Road to Success" scholar-athlete panel, moderated by Khaoula Ben Haj Frej, a fourth-year medical student, and Jaelon Blandburg, a third-year dental student. Currently enrolled students from the Schools of Medicine and Dental Medicine shared personal anecdotes, their experiences as college student athletes, and their progress through their respective schools. They answered questions about the successes and challenges they faced on their journey.

Keynote Speaker



Nurudeen Osumah, MD, MBA, is an alumnus of the University of Connecticut School of Medicine Class of 2022. He grew up in West Haven, Connecticut, and graduated from Quinnipiac University in 2016 with a degree in Biomedical Science. Dr. Osumah is currently a third-year emergency medicine resident at UConn. His passion for enhancing clinical

learning environments within the medical community has been a driving force throughout his career. He has actively participated in a multitude of preparatory programs offered by the Department of Health Career Opportunity Programs, including the Summer Research Fellowship Program in the summer of 2014, the Health Disparities Clinical Summer Research Fellowship Program in the summer of 2015, and the Medical/Dental Preparatory Program Biomedical Sciences Component in the summer of 2017.

While in medical school, Dr. Osumah also served as an MCAT tutor for the Medical/Dental Preparatory Program and a mentor for the Saturday Doctors Academy, demonstrating his dedication to fostering educational growth. He was also involved in his Student National Medical Association's chapter, where he served as both a chapter and regional treasurer.

During residency, Dr. Osumah co-chaired UConn's Resident Fellow Forum, where he worked to identify concerns and propose effective solutions to enhance the clinical learning environment across all academic sites and residency programs. Additionally, Dr. Osumah is a member of the UConn Diversity Oversight Committee, which plays a role in the recruitment, graduation, and retention of diverse candidates in residency programs. In his free time, Dr. Osumah enjoys learning about astronomy, watching soccer as a Chelsea fan, and spending time with family and friends.



PATHWAYS INFORMATIONAL SESSIONS

The Department of Health Career Opportunity Programs hosted its Pathways Informational Sessions and Panels at the start of 2025. The purpose of these sessions is to invite premedical and pre-dental undergraduate students preparing for admission to medical or dental school to learn about the Department’s college pathway programs and to gain insight from the experiences of enrolled UConn medical, dental, and graduate students. The sessions took place virtually on January 15 and January 30 with undergraduate students from UConn Storrs and colleges and universities across the country. Participants gained valuable tips on preparing for medical and dental school admissions, as well as resources for navigating the medical and dental school application process.

The Pathways Informational Sessions began with greetings and an introduction by Dr. Marja Hurley, UConn Board of Trustees Distinguished Professor, professor of Medicine and Orthopedics, associate dean, and director of Health Career Opportunity Programs. The sessions also included breakout sessions with UConn Health student panelists and ended with an open Q&A discussion.

The Department of Health Career Opportunity Programs also hosted its Pathways Research Symposium on January 27. The symposium took place virtually with clinical and biomedical research presentations given by UConn medical students.

HIGH SCHOOL MINI MEDICAL/DENTAL SCHOOL SEMINAR SERIES

The High School Mini Medical/Dental School Seminar Series offers eight weekly lectures and demonstrations, presented by faculty members from the UConn Schools of Medicine and Dental Medicine. The 2025 seminar series, held virtually, covered topics in medicine, dental medicine, and biomedical research. Ninety-six Connecticut high school juniors and seniors participated in the 2025 program. Participants are selected by their school guidance counselors or science teachers. All students have shown a strong interest in pursuing careers in medicine, dental medicine, or the biological

sciences. The last session of the program included a presentation on UConn Undergraduate Admissions and the Special Programs by Jayson Hodge, associate director of Special Programs at UConn, with student reflections given by Special Program in Medicine participants, Claire Murphy and Joshua Akosa, and Special Program in Dental Medicine participant, Kaila Lujambio. For more information on the High School Mini Medical/Dental School Seminar Series, contact Anastasia Rollins at 860-679-3484 or rollins@uchc.edu.

2025 High School Mini Medical/Dental School Seminar Series Speakers and Topics



Jenna Bartley, PhD
Aging Research



Liisa Kuhn, PhD
Biomaterials Research



Ian McNeill, MD, MS
Neurosurgery



Akua Sarfo, MD, PhD
Dermatology



Hardeep Singh, MD
Orthopaedic Surgery



Belachew Tessema, MD
Otolaryngology



Flavio Uribe, DMD, MDentSc
Orthodontics

2024-2025 ACADEMIC YEAR CLOSING AND RECOGNITION CEREMONY

Keynote Speaker



Director Ebony Jackson-Shaheed, MPH, is an experienced and respected public health leader, educator, and researcher in Connecticut. Currently, she serves as the Director of Health & Human Services for the City of Hartford and as an Adjunct Professor at the University of Bridgeport’s Master of Public Health Program. Her mission is to promote an environment that fosters healthy lifestyles and prevents adverse health outcomes. Her prior tenure was with the City of Bridgeport as the Director of Health & Social Services.

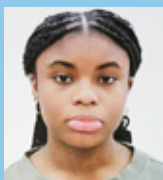
Director Jackson-Shaheed is a neuroepidemiologist and public health executive with over 10 years of experience in public health. She received a Master of Public Health in Epidemiology from the State University of New York Downstate Medical Center School of Public Health. She has completed her Post-Graduate Fellowship at Yale University School of Medicine, specializing in Neurology, and her research focus has been on Neurological and Psychiatric disorders within the veteran population. She is a published scientific author, with her work appearing in Journals such as JAMA Psychiatry, Neurology Clinical Practice, Heliyon, Neuropsychiatric Disease and Treatment, and Pediatric Neurology.

In addition, she serves on various state and university boards and committees. Director Jackson-Shaheed has expanded and promoted health equity, enhanced social services, and prioritized and instituted research labs in her health departments. She enjoys spending time with her family, gardening, and genealogy.

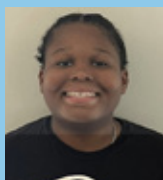
This Academic Year Closing and Recognition Ceremony marked the culmination of a very positive academic year enrichment experience for middle and high school students from the Greater Hartford area who participated in the Great Explorations, Jumpstart, and Junior and Senior Doctors Academies. The evening’s festivities also included Special Recognition Awards to acknowledge the hard work and dedication of participants in these programs. The recipients of these awards were: Fareedah Obajinmi and Noah Smith of Great Explorations; Sofia Buzzigoli of Jumpstart 9; Yusef Hashim and Riya Taman of Jumpstart 10; and Mohammed Ali, Daniel Anton Bernard, and David Delgado of the Junior Doctors

Academy. Additionally, the family of Chase Jones, a student participating in the Doctors Academy, was recognized for their participation in the 2024-2025 Parental Seminar Series. All Senior Doctors Academy graduates are furthering their education at colleges and universities, with seven enrolling at UConn. Valeria Buzzigoli and Anousha Hashim were each awarded the John and Valerie Rowe Scholarship Award, and Maham Chaudhary, Alec-Raive Gordon, and Javel Stewart were each awarded the Friends of the Department of Health Career Opportunity Programs – Boake L. Plessy, Ph.D. Scholarship Award.

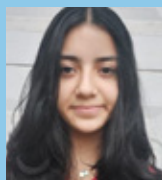
2024-2025 Doctors Academy Recognition Awards Recipients



Fareedah Obajinmi



Noah Smith



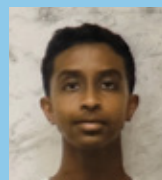
Sofia Buzzigoli



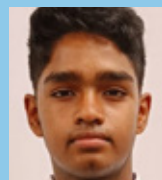
Yusef Hashim



Riya Taman



Mohammed Ali



Daniel Anton Bernard



David Delgado

'DOCTORS ACADEMY' GRADUATES WIN COLLEGE SCHOLARSHIPS. CONNECTICUT HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS GRADUATED ON MAY 14 FROM THE HEALTH CAREER OPPORTUNITY PROGRAMS OF UCONN HEALTH

By Lauren Woods, UConn School of Medicine

Connecticut High School Seniors graduated on May 14 from the Health Career Opportunity Programs of UConn Health

Nineteen Senior Doctor Academy graduates in the Class of 2025, on May 14, received their honorary white coats and diplomas from the Health Career Opportunity Programs (HCOP) at UConn Health.



Senior Doctors Academy graduates accepted their diplomas from keynote speaker the City of Hartford's Ebony Jackson-Shaheed, MPH and Dr. Marja Hurley (Photo by John Atashian).

At this year's Academic Year Closing and Annual Recognition Ceremony, the keynote speaker was City of Hartford's Ebony Jackson-Shaheed, MPH, director of Health & Human Services.

Also, the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving generously presented a grant of \$15,000 in support of the HCOP programs.

The Doctors Academy is part of the highly successful Health Career Opportunity Programs (HCOP), founded over two decades ago by physician-scientist Dr. Marja Hurley. Through this program, middle school and high school students from all backgrounds receive in-depth education in the health sciences and career path mentorship on Saturdays and during the summer. The Doctors Academy is one of 14 Health Career Opportunity Programs that are part of the Aetna Health Professions Partnership Initiative (HPPI).

Meet the Doctors Academy Graduates

"I am looking forward to pursuing a career in genetics and surgery," says Class of 2025 Doctors Academy graduate Javel Stewart, 18, of Hartford, who has been part of HCOP since the 8th grade.

"The idea of being able to help people fight illness and disease inspired me to enter medicine. I became interested in HCOP's great explorations program after a school guidance counselor

recommended it to me as she knew I was interested in medicine," recalls Stewart.

"My favorite part of HCOP was being able to meet and connect with like-minded peers."

After graduating from Classical Magnet School this spring, Stewart looks forward to attending UConn.

"I am very excited to go to UConn this fall, and I'm looking forward to all the new knowledge I will gain," Stewart exclaims.

Stewart is the winner of a large Hartford Promise Scholarship, the newly established UConn Freedman Award established by UConn Health Board of Director Joel Freedman, and the Friends of the Department of Health Career Opportunity Programs – Boake L. Plessey, Ph.D., Scholarship.

"I am very excited to have received scholarships to UConn in addition to the Hartford Promise Scholarship," she happily shares.

And Stewart's words of wisdom for other young people wishing to follow in her footsteps to also pursue future careers in medicine: "Some advice to the Connecticut youth is to never give up. You may not see the results right away, but trust the process. Keep asking questions, keep showing up for yourself, and don't be afraid to aim high."

"One of the most meaningful communities I'm a part of is the Health Careers Opportunity Program (HCOP)," heartwarmingly shared Class of 2025 Doctors Academy graduate Jeneika Lugg, 18, of Hartford, who is originally from Jamaica.



Connecticut high school seniors celebrating their successful graduation from the Senior Doctors Academy of the Health Career Opportunities Programs (HCOP) of UConn Health on May 14, 2025 (Photo by John Atashian).

Now a senior at Achievement First Hartford Academy, she joined the Doctors Academy back in the 9th grade. “This community is especially meaningful to me because it feels like a family. It is a welcoming environment where no one feels excluded, and everyone is respected for who they are.”

Lugg will be attending UConn Hartford in the fall. She is enrolled in the special Verto Huskies Pathway, a program that provides high-achieving students the opportunity to study abroad with Verto Education, and then seamlessly transfer to UConn for the remainder of their college experience.

“This fall, I’m very excited to go to UConn, and I’m happy to be given the opportunity to go study abroad for my first semester in Spain through Verto Education. This is very exciting for me since I’m being introduced to a new culture, language, food, and people,” says Lugg.

At UConn, Lugg hopes to study biological sciences or areas of neuroscience, and also explore her longtime interest in art.

Lugg is also an excited recipient of the large Hartford Promise Scholarship, as well as a Jacob L. and Lewis Fox Scholarship.

“I was awarded the Hartford Promise Scholarship and Fox Scholarship. I was excited for this because it allowed a better affordability for school,” says a very thankful Lugg.

Lugg also applauds the HCOP program for providing her with a great educational experience.

“When I first heard about HCOP, I was eager to join, especially with my interest in the medical field. The program has not only expanded my academic knowledge but also provided a deeper understanding of medicine in the real world. It has equipped me with valuable skills in public speaking, research, and medical practices, while offering opportunities to learn from doctors and their personal journeys,” she says.

Lugg adds, “What I love most about this program is how it consistently encourages us to pursue our dreams. The staff fosters an open-minded approach, urging us to reach for the stars and beyond. They are like a supportive family, cheering for our growth and success, always wanting the best for us. The students, too, contribute to this sense of community, as we all share similar goals and support one another, making it feel more like a team than a competition.”

Lugg’s advice to other Connecticut youth like her: “Keep striving, keep pushing, and know that no dream is too big not to reach. It might seem a lot or impossible, but in the end, you will be amazed by the great results and accomplishments.”



Class of 2025 Graduates of the Senior Doctors Academy celebrating at HCOP’s annual Closing Ceremony (Photo by John Atashian).

Like Stewart and Lugg, all the successful Senior Doctors Academy graduates in the Class of 2025 are following in the footsteps of hundreds and hundreds of successful HCOP graduates.

Dr. Marja Hurley and her very dedicated HCOP team are very proud of all the graduating students and share a special thank you to the parents who get the students up on Saturdays to get to the program.

“I am so proud of this year’s graduating class and thankful for all the support of their parents. We are also especially grateful to the Hartford Foundation, the City of Hartford, and to all the generous scholarships bestowed on our amazing students this year,” says Hurley. “Congratulations to all our talented students.”

UConn School of Medicine Dean Dr. Bruce T. Liang shared during the event, “A special thanks to the amazing leadership of Dr. Marja Hurley, along with her talented HCOP team, for making the Doctors Academy and all the successful HCOP Programs of the Aetna Health Professions Partnership Initiative possible. Your hard work is keeping these programs thriving to new heights and always inspiring the next generation of youth and future doctors.”

Liang added, “I wanted to share a heartwarming congratulations with all our graduates, and with your supportive families. We are all so proud of your inspiring academic success, and tireless commitment and determination that you have demonstrated. Whether you are dreaming of becoming a future physician, dentist, or scientist, you are well on your way! And UConn is so grateful to be part of your journey! Make sure to come back and join our healthcare workforce.”

Congratulations to the Class of 2025 graduates of the Great Explorations, Jumpstart, and Junior and Senior Doctors Academy!

HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT RESEARCH APPRENTICE PROGRAM

Fourteen students had the opportunity to participate in a research team and learn laboratory techniques in the 2025 High School Student Research Apprentice Program. As part of the 2025 program, eight students commuted daily to Central Connecticut State University, and six students commuted daily to the UConn Health campus for their research projects. Students also engaged in enrichment activities at UConn Health in areas of medicine, dental medicine, and the biomedical sciences through presentations, clinical simulations, and tours. At the end of the summer, the students presented their research results orally and in poster form during a special research symposium.



PRE-COLLEGE ENRICHMENT PROGRAM

The Pre-College Enrichment Program is a residential enrichment program primarily for incoming students at UConn. Designed to provide solid development of scientific, mathematical, communications, problem-solving, and test-taking skills, it is intended to enhance the preparedness of college freshmen. The program allows students to experience life on a college campus at UConn Storrs before matriculating in the fall. Students participate in the academic track (completion of educational courses) in collaboration with the UConn College of Engineering BRIDGE Program at Storrs.

This past summer, eight incoming college freshmen participated in the Pre-College Academic Enrichment Program along with ten BRIDGE Program participants. The students also participated in numerous enrichment activities at UConn Health, including tours of the facility, virtual anatomy labs, professional development seminars, and clinical simulations. The Pre-College Academic Enrichment Program participants also engaged in industry tours in biomedical, engineering, and healthcare technology at Medtronic, North Haven, CT, and Unilever, Trumbull, CT.

The Pre-College Academic Enrichment Program participants also engaged in a seminar focused on medical, dental, and research specialties at UConn Health with Dr. Marja Hurley, UConn Board of Trustees Distinguished Professor, professor of Medicine and Orthopedic Surgery, associate dean, Health Career Opportunity Programs, founding director, Aetna Health Professions Partnership Initiative; Dr. Gerald Birmingham, clinical assistant professor of general Dentistry and assistant director of Health Career Opportunity Programs; and Dr. Vanessa Scanlon, assistant professor, Center for Regenerative Medicine and Skeletal Biology.



HEALTH DISPARITIES CLINICAL SUMMER RESEARCH FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM

The Health Disparities Clinical Summer Research Fellowship Program is an eight-week clinical enrichment experience designed for rising college sophomores, juniors, seniors, or recent graduates. Twelve students participated in the summer 2025 program. The program aims to provide the following: clinical research and enrichment experiences; an introduction to health disparities across cultures; principles of clinical medicine; public health issues and interventions; and an overview of cultural definitions with discussions of specific techniques for working with diverse populations in community settings. All participants completed a research project and presented a poster with their results at the end of the program.

The research and community sites that participated in the 2025 program were: Connecticut Dental Health Partnership, Family Medicine Center, Asylum Hill; Hispanic Health Council; UConn Department of Public Health Sciences; UConn Extension Urban & Community Forestry Program; UConn Husky Nutrition & Sport; UConn School of Pharmacy; University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities; and The Greater Hartford Family Advocacy Center, Trinity Health of New England.



MEDICAL/DENTAL PREPARATORY PROGRAM

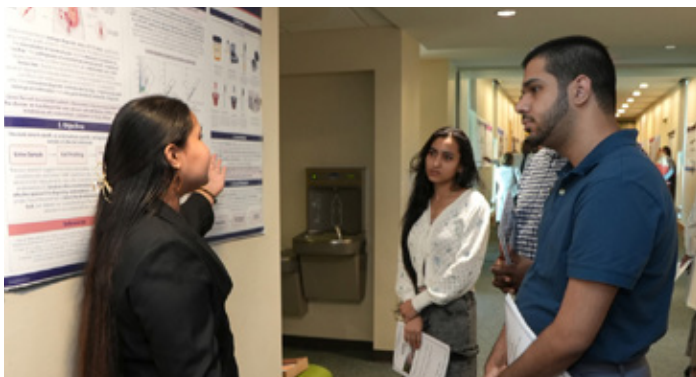
Medical/Dental Preparatory Program students, including participants in the Aetna Health Professions Pathway, are selected from various universities across the United States to develop academic skills for admission to medical or dental schools. Participants prepare for either the Medical College Admission Test (MCAT) or the Dental Admission Test (DAT).

During the seven-week summer 2025 program, a total of 22 college students and recent graduates took part in test-taking strategies, seminars, workshops, and other enrichment activities. Additionally, students in the program gained clinical experience with practicing physicians, dentists, or healthcare professionals at UConn Health or an affiliated clinic or medical center, and attended clinical tours and presentations.



SUMMER RESEARCH FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM

The Summer Research Fellowship Program is an eight-week research enrichment experience designed for college sophomores, juniors, seniors, and recent graduates interested in a career in medicine, dental medicine, or biomedical research. It is also open to applicants who have completed some college coursework in biology and chemistry, preferably including organic chemistry. Each student is assigned a faculty sponsor, who develops and provides suitable project descriptions. The student contacts their faculty sponsor in April or May to develop a research protocol. Students dedicate approximately 40 hours per week to their research project. Fifteen students participated in the summer 2025 program. At the end of the summer, the students presented their research results in poster form during a special research symposium.



INCOMING UCONN MEDICAL STUDENTS GET HANDS-ON SUMMER RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

By Lauren Woods, UConn School of Medicine

For the first time, the Health Career Opportunities Program of UConn Health offered matriculating UConn medical students summer research opportunities.

This summer, four soon-to-be medical students in UConn School of Medicine’s Class of 2029 had the inaugural opportunity to participate in the longstanding Summer Research Fellowship Program of the Health Career Opportunity Programs.

This is the first time we have ever had incoming medical students join our summer research program,” said Dr. Marja Hurley, founding director and associate dean of the Health Career Opportunity Programs (HCOP) and its Aetna Health Professions Partnership Initiative. “This is a great opportunity for the new medical students to make some connections and maybe even decide to later go back and do more research in the faculty mentor’s lab.”

The incoming members of the Class of 2029 were thrilled to present their summer research posters outside the Academic

Rotunda on July 17 and cannot wait for medical school at UConn!

Bria Slater, 22, hails from Atlanta, Georgia, and believes attending UConn medical school is meant to be.

“It’s fate. UConn came out of the blue,” applauded Slater of the medical school’s communication outreach, and she is already bleeding UConn blue even before medical school officially starts in August.

“UConn is a very supportive environment, and where faculty will have your back. That sealed the deal,” says Slater about her decision to choose UConn School of Medicine. “I’m excited to be a part of this community! I’m looking forward to meeting my peers.”

Slater’s summer research experience at UConn was “amazing,” she exclaimed in the exciting neuroscience research lab of Feliks Trakhtenberg, Ph.D., assistant professor in the Department of Neuroscience.

Her research focused on further testing as a local treatment of

a promising developed fibronectin (Fn)-based peptide in mice to promote possible axon regeneration for spinal cord injury. Trakhtenberg's Lab has previously shown that the peptide promotes axon regeneration in injured optic nerves of mice.

Slater looks forward to pursuing her interest in neurology, concluding, "I can see myself doing this for the rest of my career."

Sophia Fernandes, 25, from Lincoln, Rhode Island, is entering the SOM Class of 2029. She was paired for her summer research experience with Dr. Dyanne Tappin, assistant professor of Obstetrics and Gynecology.

"I've had a great summer research experience. Dr. Tappin has been a great resource," says Fernandes. "I have had an interest in maternal health disparities. Black women are two times more susceptible to Perinatal Mood and Anxiety Disorders. I had no idea before doing this research!"

Her summer research identified gaps in access to Perinatal Mental Health care in Hartford County and made recommendations for care improvements, especially for those in minority communities.

She is excited to get underway at the School of Medicine as a medical student.

"I chose UConn for its supportive environment and HCOP. It's such a good resource," Fernandes stated.

Christopher Morales, 23, of Derby, Connecticut, is also soon entering the School of Medicine Class 2029 and is already feeling at home at UConn's medical school.

"I love this place," says Morales. "I found a medical school where I already feel comfortable. Everyone here is wonderful!"

Morales first learned about HCOP's opportunities during his medical school interview process.

"I was an immediate yes," he says to attending UConn. "I love the medical school's programming of team-based learning and early patient care experiences in the CLIC program. I love working with patients." In fact, Morales worked in the ophthalmology care field for two years before attending medical school.

His mother immigrated to the U.S. from Brazil, and Morales is proudly the first generation in his family to graduate from college and now to go on to medical school.

"I never thought I would be here," says Morales. "I am very grateful."

He looks forward to donning his medical school white coat on Friday, August 22, at the traditional White Coat Ceremony held for new medical students at UConn School of Medicine.

Morales loves exploring everything about the central nervous system and knows he wants to be a teaching physician someday, so UConn's academic medical center is a "perfect fit" for him to learn.



Four incoming Class of 2029 UConn medical students celebrating their exciting preview to UConn Health thanks to their summer research experience, including Bria Slater (center-front row), and (back row) Sophia Fernandes, Christopher Morales, and Dany Skaf with some of their dedicated UConn Health faculty mentors - OB/GYN Dr. Dyanne Tappin (left front) and neuroscientist Alice Burghard (front right). (John Atashian Photo/ UConn Health - July 17, 2025).

His summer research mentor is Alice Burghard, Ph.D., assistant professor of Neuroscience, who also enjoyed mentoring Morales and says, "I'm very happy about the study findings."

In mouse models, Morales examined the age and sex differences when it comes to susceptibility to hearing loss due to sound exposure. Interestingly, he found that young females were the most resilient to noise exposure.

"It's surreal, I'm excited," says Dany Skaf, 25, from Florida, about getting ready to attend UConn for medical school.

UConn's medical school has been on his radar. During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, his in-person HCOP summer research program experience transitioned to a virtual format due to pandemic concerns.

But he finally had his chance to participate in the HCOP summer research program in person, working in the lab of Dr. Francesco Celi, Chair of the Department of Medicine and an endocrinology physician-scientist. In Celi's Lab this summer, Skaf helped successfully create a Fibroblast Growth Factor 2 Flox AdipoCre mice colony for further study of the key protein, performed genotype testing, and further explored the protein's impact on metabolism, especially for diabetes, as the protein increases one's likelihood of developing diabetes.

"I hope to continue working on this research. Hopefully, this research opens the door to potentially help improve insulin resistance and prevent diseases like diabetes and obesity," says Skaf.

Congratulations to all the student summer researchers and presenters in both the Summer Research Fellowship Program and the Health Disparities Clinical Summer Research Fellowship Program.

SUMMER ENRICHMENT COLLEGE PROGRAMS SEMINAR SERIES

Students enrolled in the Summer Enrichment College Programs (Medical/Dental Preparatory Program, Summer Research Fellowship Program, and Health Disparities Clinical Summer Research Fellowship Program) enjoyed a series of seminars on Tuesday and Wednesday afternoons and Monday evenings from June 2 through July 9, 2025. The Summer Series was led by 15 UConn Health faculty members, as well as UConn medical, dental, and graduate students. Topics included medical and dental

specialties, professionalism, public health, and basic science and translational research. Participating students appreciated the personal anecdotes and reflections shared by faculty and enrolled UConn Health students. They engaged in each seminar by communicating directly with faculty and enrolled students, obtaining insights into medicine, dentistry, public health, and biomedical sciences, and finding new mentors.

2025 Medical and Dental Seminar Series Speakers and Topics



Thomas Agresta, MD, MBI
AI in Healthcare



Kwame Amankwah, MD, MSc, FACS, FSVS, RPVI
Vascular Surgery



Angela Bermúdez-Millán, PhD, MPH
Household Food Insecurity



Gerald Birmingham, DMD, MPH, MS, MAGD
General Dentistry



Stacey Brown, PhD
Cultural Competency



Ketan Bulsara, MD, MBA
Neurosurgery



Kai Clarke, MS PhD Candidate
Bone Research



Oladipo Cole, MD
Sickle Cell Disease



Eliane Dutra, DDS, MSD, PhD
Craniofacial Morphogenesis and Cartilage Function



Lenworth Ellis, MD
Professionalism



Grethel Millington, DMD
Prosthodontics



Gualberto Ruano, MD, PhD
Personalized Medicine



Akua Sarfo, MD, PhD
Dermatology



Tannin Schmidt, PhD
Basic and Translational Research



Flavio Uribe, DMD, MDentSc
Orthodontics



Beiyan Zhou, PhD
Immunology Research for Human Disease

2025 SUMMER ENRICHMENT CLOSING CEREMONY

Keynote Speaker



Gregory M. Jones, MBA, is a finance, mergers and acquisitions, and corporate strategy executive with over 30 years of experience assisting public and privately held manufacturing, utilities, and healthcare companies grow their businesses through joint ventures, mergers, and acquisitions, and organically via capital raising and effective deployment of internal capital. He is a member

of the Eversource Energy Board of Directors and serves on the Audit and Governance, Environmental, and Social Responsibility committees. Eversource Energy (NYSE: ES) has a market capitalization of \$25 billion and transmits and delivers electricity and natural gas, and supplies water to approximately 4 million customers in Connecticut, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire.

He is an expert in finance, strategy development and execution, and capital raising for Fortune 500 service and manufacturing companies. As an investment banker and corporate finance executive, he has completed financings, raised and underwritten debt capital, and executed mergers and acquisitions (M&A) transactions exceeding \$2 billion. At United Technologies/Pratt & Whitney, he was responsible for strategic planning and business development for Space Propulsion, Military Engines, and the Power Systems Business Units. He was the general manager and president of the corporate new ventures group, responsible for commercializing and licensing new technologies into new and complementary businesses, opening new markets to existing businesses.

He is the Vice President of Strategy and Planning for Corporate Social Responsibility, Community Health, and Engagement at Hartford Healthcare, where he is responsible for developing programs that address the social determinants of health. He is the executive lead for the Hartford Region's Equity Solutions Group, focused on identifying issues and developing solutions related to patient and staff challenges around diversity, equity, and inclusion. He is the co-chair of the supplier diversity council for the system. Throughout his career, he has been successful in helping companies connect their products and services to communities with social sensitivity, directly translating social conscience into improved profitability.



He was a founder and leader of Employee Resource Groups at United Technologies Corporation in 2002 and served as the chairman of the company's first affinity group, the African American Affinity Group. He served on the Hartford Hospital Board of Directors for six years. He has been a member of the Board of Directors for the Greater Hartford Community Foundation (The Travelers Championship PGA Golf Tournament) since 2012. He is the Co-Chair and Executive Director of The Summer Executive Workshop-Black Economic Forum, an annual collaboration on Martha's Vineyard with McKinsey and Company, The Executive Leadership Council, and the Beta Iota Boule of Sigma Pi Phi Fraternity, Inc. to address and develop strategies to address economic issues and the racial wealth gap. He is the founder and chairman of the Legacy Foundation of Hartford, a philanthropic organization focused on addressing disparities in education and healthcare.

He earned an MBA from the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, a Master's in Public Management from Carnegie Mellon University, and a Bachelor of Science in Accounting from Morgan State University.

Dental Alumnus Speaker



Prince N. Morgan, DMD, is an alumnus of the University of Connecticut School of Dental Medicine Class of 2008. Dr. Prince Morgan was born and raised in Manchester, Jamaica. He pursued higher education in the United States, completing his undergraduate studies at Benedict College, where he was awarded a Bachelor of Science in Biology summa cum laude, and his Doctoral Degree in Dental Medicine from the University of Connecticut School of Dental Medicine. Dr. Morgan participated in the Medical/Dental Preparatory Program Basic Medical Sciences component sponsored by UConn Health's Department of Health Career Opportunity Programs before entering dental school. He pursued a General Practice Residency at Bronx Lebanon Hospital, where he also served as chief resident. Dr. Morgan currently splits his time between private practice and a faculty position at St. Barnabas Hospital's General Practice residency. Dr. Morgan has held several leadership positions, including Dental Director of the Charter Oak Health Center, Clinical Site Director, and GPR Director at BronxCare Health System (formerly Bronx Lebanon Hospital). His passion lies in cosmetic



dentistry and dental education. Dr. Morgan aims to improve oral healthcare within lower socioeconomic communities. Outside of dentistry, Dr. Morgan loves exploring cultures through music, food, and history. You can find him on weekends perusing exhibitions and/or exploring the various food spots the city has to offer.

Faculty Recognition Award

The Department of Health Career Opportunity Programs recognized **Donna Paoella, DMD**, associate dean for admissions at UConn School of Dental Medicine, with the 2025 Outstanding Faculty Recognition Award for her outstanding and exceptional service at the Aetna Health Professions Partnership Initiative during the 2025 Summer Enrichment Programs Closing Ceremony. The program acknowledged Dr. Paoella's dedication and efforts in the training of future dentists and other health professionals in the Aetna HPPI pathway through seminars and dental activities over the years in the High School Mini Medical/Dental School Seminar Series, High School Student Research Apprentice Program, Aetna HPPI Doctors Academy, and Medical/Dental Preparatory Program.



STUDENT NATIONAL MEDICAL ASSOCIATION—UConn HEALTH CHAPTER CULTURE SHOCK EVENT

Each year, the UConn chapter of the Student National Medical Association (SNMA) hosts *Culture Shock*, a school-wide event supported by the Department of Health Career Opportunity Programs. The event’s purpose is to celebrate the cultural diversity of the UConn Health community through performances, fashion, music, dance, and other artistic presentations, bringing together medical and dental students and faculty. Participants enjoy a wide array of local and international cuisine, thanks to generous donations from many restaurants.

This past year, *Culture Shock* was held on December 7 in UConn Health’s Keller Auditorium. The event included a night of “music, food, fashion, and fun” to benefit She Leads Justice, a non-profit organization that “addresses racial and gender inequities and advances the rights, opportunities, and status of women across the state of Connecticut through community-centered grassroots advocacy, direct client services, and policy advocacy.” SNMA is a nationally run student organization whose mission is to “support current and future underrepresented minority medical students, to address the needs of underserved communities, and to increase the number of clinically excellent, culturally and socially conscious physicians.”



STUDENT NATIONAL MEDICAL ASSOCIATION – UCONN HEALTH CHAPTER HOSTS UCONN MAPS CHAPTER

The Minority Association of Pre-Medical Students (MAPS) is the premedical undergraduate and postbaccalaureate section of the Student National Medical Association (SNMA). The UConn MAPS chapter at Storrs aims to increase diversity within the health professions and ultimately eliminate health disparities. The Department of Health Career Opportunity Programs supports the MAPS chapter by providing resources, programs, and skills to premedical students, helping them become competitive applicants for medical school.

The UConn SNMA Chapter and the Department of Health Career Opportunity Programs hosted the undergraduate members of the UConn MAPS chapter for an enrichment visit at UConn Health on April 12, 2025. The event commenced with opening remarks from Dr. Marja Hurley, a UConn Board of Trustees Distinguished Professor, professor of medicine and orthopaedic surgery, associate dean of Health Career Opportunity Programs, and founding director of Aetna Health Professions Partnership Initiative. During the day, MAPS members had the opportunity to engage in workshops on anatomy and clinical skills led by SNMA members, which included a mock team-based learning session. MAPS members also attended a tour of the UConn Health facility.



The day's activities also included mentorship and networking opportunities during a student panel, where medical and dental students spoke about their personal journeys to their respective professional schools.

LATINO MEDICAL STUDENT ASSOCIATION—UCONN HEALTH CHAPTER DINE AND SOCIAL EVENT

The Latino Medical Student Association (LMSA) hosts *Dine and Social*, an event to unite medical students and professionals for an evening of food, networking, raffles, and more. The 2025 event, sponsored by the Department of Health Career Opportunity Programs, took place on April 3 at the Elbow Room in West Hartford, CT. The event welcomed all students, trainees, and attendings dedicated to the Latinx community. The *Dine and Social* is designed to provide an informal setting for networking and mentoring among attending physicians, residents, and students. The purpose of UConn LMSA is to “address the health needs of the Latino community, as well as to promote the interests and support of those students who identify themselves as Latino students of the University of Connecticut School of Medicine through social, cultural, educational, political, and other activities.” LMSA is a national organization whose mission is to “unite and empower current and future physicians through service, mentorship, and education to advocate for the improved health of the Hispanic and Latina/o/x community in the United States.”



DENTAL STUDENTS HONOR HISPANIC HERITAGE

By Courtney Chandler, UConn School of Dental Medicine

A month of community service and celebrating Hispanic culture

Students in the UConn Chapter of the Student National Dental Association/Hispanic Student Dental Association (SNDA/HSDA) have been celebrating the vibrant culture and significant contributions of the Hispanic community during Hispanic Heritage Month.

“I believe recognizing Hispanic Heritage Month is essential to celebrating the rich cultural contributions of the Hispanic and Latinx communities,” said co-president and third-year student Jaelon Blandburg. “It’s a time to honor the diverse traditions that have shaped our society and to promote greater understanding and inclusion. By acknowledging this heritage, we not only recognize past achievements but also inspire future generations to continue making an impact in fields like healthcare and education.”

Hispanic Heritage Month is observed from September 15 through October 15 annually. This year, students packed the month with several cultural activities, such as a salsa dance night, a “Wear Your Colors” day, and an empanada sale in the dental student lounge. The students also hosted educational workshops on medical Spanish and alebrijes, which are colorful Mexican folk art sculptures.

Co-president and third-year student Princess Stark said, “I was really happy with how both our Empanada Sale and Salsa Night turned out! They were great ways to celebrate Hispanic culture and bring people together. Whether people were enjoying the food or learning new dance moves, it was all about appreciating the traditions that make our campus more inclusive.”

To honor Hispanic Heritage Month, the students also got involved in the community with several service opportunities. In Windsor, the students partnered with the Hispanic Dental Association and local hygienists for Colgate’s Bright Smiles Bright Future education program to deliver oral health screenings and education.

“As an SNDA/HSDA member, I had the opportunity to work alongside Colgate to screen, educate, and interact with young children about the benefits of maintaining good oral health hygiene practices. By actively volunteering in the community, we can increase the awareness and prevention of oral health diseases,” said first-year student Ted Pasquette.



Third-year students Stephen Ogarekpe, Ekene Nnadika, and Princess Stark, and second-year students Lorens Carrasquillo and Bryson Christian perform head and neck screenings at the Healthy Living Fair in Norwich in honor of Hispanic Heritage Month.

In Norwich, the students performed head and neck cancer screenings at the Healthy Living Festival. “SNDA/HSDA provides wonderful opportunities to use the knowledge and skills that we cultivate at the School of Dental Medicine to benefit the community,” said Bryson Christian, a second-year student. “At the Healthy Living Festival, I had the chance to provide head, neck, and oral screenings. We identified some suspicious skin changes and many oral health concerns, and we were able to guide these patients to resources to address their issues before they develop more dangerous complications.”

Dr. Sarita Arteaga, associate dean for students, reflected on the importance of student participation in Hispanic Heritage Month. “Hispanic Heritage Month is vital for dental and medical students because it highlights the cultural richness and diversity that shape patient care,” said Arteaga. “By celebrating this heritage, future health care professionals gain deeper insight into the unique challenges and strengths within Hispanic communities, empowering them to provide more compassionate, culturally competent care. Through all of these various events over the month, we have been able to continue learning outside of the classroom.”

UCONN MEDICAL STUDENT BECOMES REGION VII DIRECTOR FOR STUDENT NATIONAL MEDICAL ASSOCIATION'S BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Combined Reports

Meet Olasubomi Ayomini "Mini" Ajayi of UConn School of Medicine.

Third-year medical student Olasubomi Ayomini "Mini" Ajayi of UConn School of Medicine has been appointed Region VII Director for the National Board of Directors of the Student National Medical Association (SNMA).

Ajayi was named to the position of Region VII Director at the 2025 SNMA Annual Medical Education Conference (AMEC) held in April. The conference is consistently the largest gathering of underrepresented minority medical students in the nation at any time of the year. Each year, this conference is attended by medical students and professionals for a wide range of educational and networking events.

"I am honored to take on this role after years of dedication to SNMA in various capacities. As Region VII Director, I look forward to strengthening connections across our New England chapters, supporting student development, and creating opportunities that empower the next generation of physicians to thrive—even in a time when it can feel difficult to exist in the field of medicine," says Ajayi. "My hope is that SNMA continues to serve as a safe space where minority medical students feel seen, supported, and empowered as they journey through medicine."

UConn School of Medicine's Ajayi is originally from Northern New Jersey. Her educational journey began at the University of Connecticut, where she earned her Bachelor of Science in Allied Health Sciences as an Honors Scholar.

Her Nigerian heritage and upbringing have instilled in her a deep sense of responsibility to leave a positive impact on her community. Ajayi is an active member of her local SNMA chapter and previously served as a voting student member on the 2024-25 UConn School of Medicine Admissions Committee. Her commitment to community service extends to volunteering at numerous free clinics and engaging in community-based research and global health initiatives focused on food access and barriers to preventive health screenings. Additionally, Ajayi contributes her leadership skills as the co-advocacy chair for the UConn chapter of the American Medical Association and as a Health Career Opportunity Programs (HCOP) mentor.

Ajayi was also a successful participant in the HCOP Health Disparities Fellowship and MCAT Prep Programs while attending UConn as an undergraduate. HCOP of UConn Health is where the young people of Connecticut from all backgrounds can receive in-depth education in the health sciences and career path mentorship. HCOP is home to 14 different programs of the Aetna Health Professions Partnership Initiative (HPPI).

"We are so proud of Mini being selected for this high honor on the SNMA National leadership team. This is a very noteworthy achievement," shared Physician-Scientist Dr. Marja Hurley, founder and longtime director of HCOP at UConn Health who also serves as the faculty advisor for UConn's SNMA student chapter. Hurley founded UConn Health's SNMA chapter more than 30 years ago.

While Ajayi has a range of clinical interests, she is passionate about serving underresourced communities through research and advocacy and mentoring aspiring minority healthcare professionals. Her hobbies include playing basketball, traveling, karaoke, reading, journaling, and going for walks, activities that balance her professional pursuits with personal well-being and joy.

Founded in 1964 by medical students from Howard University College of Medicine and Meharry Medical College, the Student National Medical Association (SNMA) is the nation's oldest and largest independent, student-run organization focused on the needs and concerns of medical students of color. Organized with chapters across the nation, the SNMA membership includes over 7,800 medical students, pre-medical students, and physicians.



Olasubomi Ayomini "Mini" Ajayi is a third-year medical student at UConn School of Medicine.

UConn Schools of Medicine and Dental Medicine Alumni Speaker Seminar Series

The Department of Health Career Opportunity Programs, together with the Student National Medical Association (SNMA), Student National Dental Association (SNDA)/Hispanic Student Dental Association (HSDA), and the Latino Medical Student Association (LMSA), coordinate the UConn Schools of Medicine and Dental Medicine Alumni Speaker Seminar Series events. This series offers current UConn medical and dental students from the Department of Health Career Opportunity Programs the opportunity to learn more about various topics and experiences from alumni currently working in the healthcare profession. During the seminars, medical and dental students can engage in open conversations with the alumni guest speakers. Students ask questions, and the alumni guest speakers give information and advice on the topic chosen during the event.

The UConn Schools of Medicine and Dental Medicine 2024-2025 Alumni Seminar was held virtually on Monday, April 28, 2025. The seminar focused on the topic “Beyond the Match: Winning at Residency Life.” The alumni guest speakers were Faith Crittenden, MD, MPH, and Anthony Perez-Pino, DMD. Dr. Crittenden is a pediatric endocrinology fellow at Yale New Haven Children’s Hospital in New Haven, Connecticut. Dr. Perez-Pino is a PGY1 orthodontics resident at Montefiore Medical Center/Albert Einstein College of Medicine in the Bronx, New York.

Guest Speakers



Faith Crittenden, MD, MPH
Pediatric Endocrinology



Anthony Perez-Pino, DMD
Orthodontics

HEALTH CAREER OPPORTUNITY PROGRAMS MEDICAL AND DENTAL STUDENTS

The Department of Health Career Opportunity Programs plays an integral role in recruiting students from across the country to UConn Schools of Medicine and Dental Medicine and providing support for currently enrolled medical and dental students. At the beginning of each academic year, the department hosts a reception to welcome the first-year class. The 2024 Welcome Reception for the Class of 2028 was held on October 17 at UConn Health. This was an opportunity for first-year medical and dental students to learn more about department resources, support services, and programs, along with UConn student organizations such as the Student National Medical Association (SNMA), the Latino Medical Student Association (LMSA), and the Student National Dental Association/ Hispanic Student Dental Association (SNDA/ HSDA). The medical and dental Class of 2028 was also invited to a reception on December 8 at the Rockledge Grille in West Hartford, where they had the opportunity to meet other classes of medical and dental students, as well as UConn Health alumni and faculty.

Over the four years of academic training, Health Career Opportunity Programs' medical and dental students can participate in seminars based on their career interests; engage with the broader community; coordinate hands-on activities for younger students; interact with visiting students, faculty, and community leaders; and mentor and tutor Aetna HPPI middle school, high school, and college students. The monthly Newslines, compiled and distributed by the department, also keeps students informed about externships, fellowships, conferences, scholarships, and residency programs for which they are eligible. A key component of the department's mission is to foster mentorship among current medical and dental students by alumni of the UConn Schools of Medicine and Dental Medicine, as well as by current faculty, to provide them with further guidance for their professional training. In doing so, a Health Career Opportunity Programs Alumni Seminar Series was established to cover various topics, including professional and personal life balance, as well as technological advances in medicine and dentistry.

Additionally, the department continues to support the professional and cultural events of SNMA, LMSA, and SNDA/HSDA chapters and encourages student leadership at the university, regional, and national levels. These student organizations remain at the forefront of student life at UConn Health and the greater community. During the 2024-2025 academic year, members of SNMA, LMSA, and SNDA/HSDA participated in networking and profession development events; led panels, workshops, and tours with premedical/predental college students; volunteered at health screenings and community events; led cultural activities; met



with middle and high school students to discuss health careers; and organized hands-on health activities for participants of the Saturday Doctors Academy programs.

The Department of Health Career Opportunity Programs also celebrates the accomplishments of the UConn Medical and Dental Class of 2025. The 2025 Graduation Celebration was held on May 4 at the Rockledge Grille in West Hartford. Dr. Marja Hurley and members of the Health Career Opportunity Programs wished the graduates continued success as they begin their residency programs and professional training. They expressed that it has been an honor to see the graduates' achievements as they continue to positively impact patient care, education, and research.





CT HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS PUBLISH THEIR ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE RESEARCH PERFORMED AT UCONN SCHOOL OF MEDICINE

Excerpts of an article written by Lauren Woods, UConn School of Medicine

Two high school seniors are the first authors of a new AI study published in one of the top journals for systems biology.

Two Connecticut high school seniors, Meera Kannan and Gabrielle Bridgewater, have published their study findings on “Leveraging public AI tools to explore systems biology resources in mathematical modeling” this month in the journal NPJ Systems Biology and Applications.

They conducted their research at the UConn School of Medicine in the Laboratory of Dr. Michael Blinov as part of their Health Career Opportunity Programs experience.

“NPJ Systems Biology and Applications is one of the top journals in systems biology,” shares their proud mentor and senior study author, Michael Blinov, Ph.D., associate professor of Genetics and Genome Sciences at the Center for Cell Analysis and Modeling at UConn School of Medicine. “The application of AI tools in biology is a rapidly evolving and exciting field. This is a great achievement for these high school students, and they deserve it through their hard work.”

“Thank you very much, Dr. Blinov, for your many years of dedication to hosting our Health Career Opportunity Programs High School students in your research laboratory. The fact that these two high school students are co-first authors on a manuscript from research conducted in your Lab and presenting their research at the CT Junior Science and Humanities Symposium at UConn Health is phenomenal,” shared Dr. Marja Hurley, UConn Board of Trustees Distinguished Professor and professor of medicine and orthopaedic surgery at UConn School of Medicine. Hurley is founder and associate dean of the Health Career Opportunity Programs at UConn Health.

“I’m very excited to share our findings with a larger group of people. I hope this will spur more exploration of the intersection of AI with other fields of medicine,” says Kannan.

“I am extremely excited to present our findings and share our hard work with the larger science community. I know our research is already published and out there for anyone who wants to read it, but getting to speak about it still feels so special,” says Bridgewater.

Blinov truly enjoys working with the eager-to-learn, dedicated, and hardworking HCOP students at the UConn School of Medicine.

“Over the years, my HCOP students have played an essential role in many of my projects. My experiences with high school students have been very positive, and in this particular case, these two students were fortunate that their chosen study topic led to a quick success story,” Blinov says.

He finds it incredibly rewarding to see the gratitude and success of his past high school HCOP program students, many of whom have gone on to have successful health care careers at places such as Yale, Cornell, and UConn.

Meet the Study Co-Authors

Lead co-author Meera Kannan, 18, is a senior at South Windsor High School. She hopes to become a future physician.

“It’s very exciting to be published. I was motivated to explore how AI could have a positive impact and make systems biology more accessible for students like me. I hope to continue working with Dr. Blinov and other professors at UConn in the future,” says Kannan.

Kannan credits HCOP for opening her mind further to both innovative medicine and research.

“I first heard about HCOP during a tour of UConn in my sophomore year. I was very interested in their mission as well as in conducting research, so I decided to apply. I think this program helped reveal the creativity behind medicine and taught me a lot about the impact of scientific innovation,” she says.

Kannan hopes to conduct more research in a variety of fields to broaden her horizons.

Lead co-author Gabrielle Bridgewater, 17, is a senior at Tolland High School and also wants to be a future doctor.

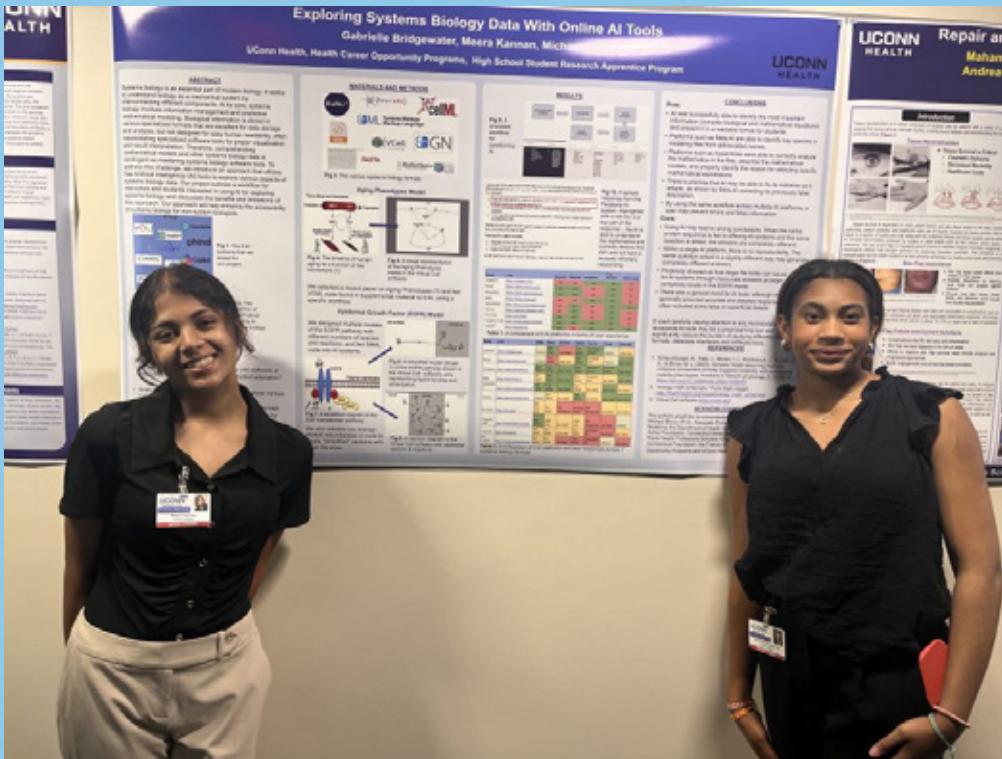
“Being a published author and getting to conduct my own study is definitely the most exciting thing I’ve ever done and my proudest accomplishment to date,” Bridgewater exclaims. “It’s honestly also really motivating because it makes me so excited for what’s next, and it really feels like the sky is the limit.”

“We chose to study AI because it’s a field that’s rapidly expanding and relevant to kids our age. When our peers have questions, most of them look to AI to answer them, so we wanted to see how useful it could be for students who are interested in learning more about

systems biology (like ourselves). It’s a relatively niche field, which means that in many cases, AI might be the most accessible tool to use if they want to educate themselves on the subject. We wanted to understand just how reliable a tool it is, and its potential for studying systems biology,” she says.

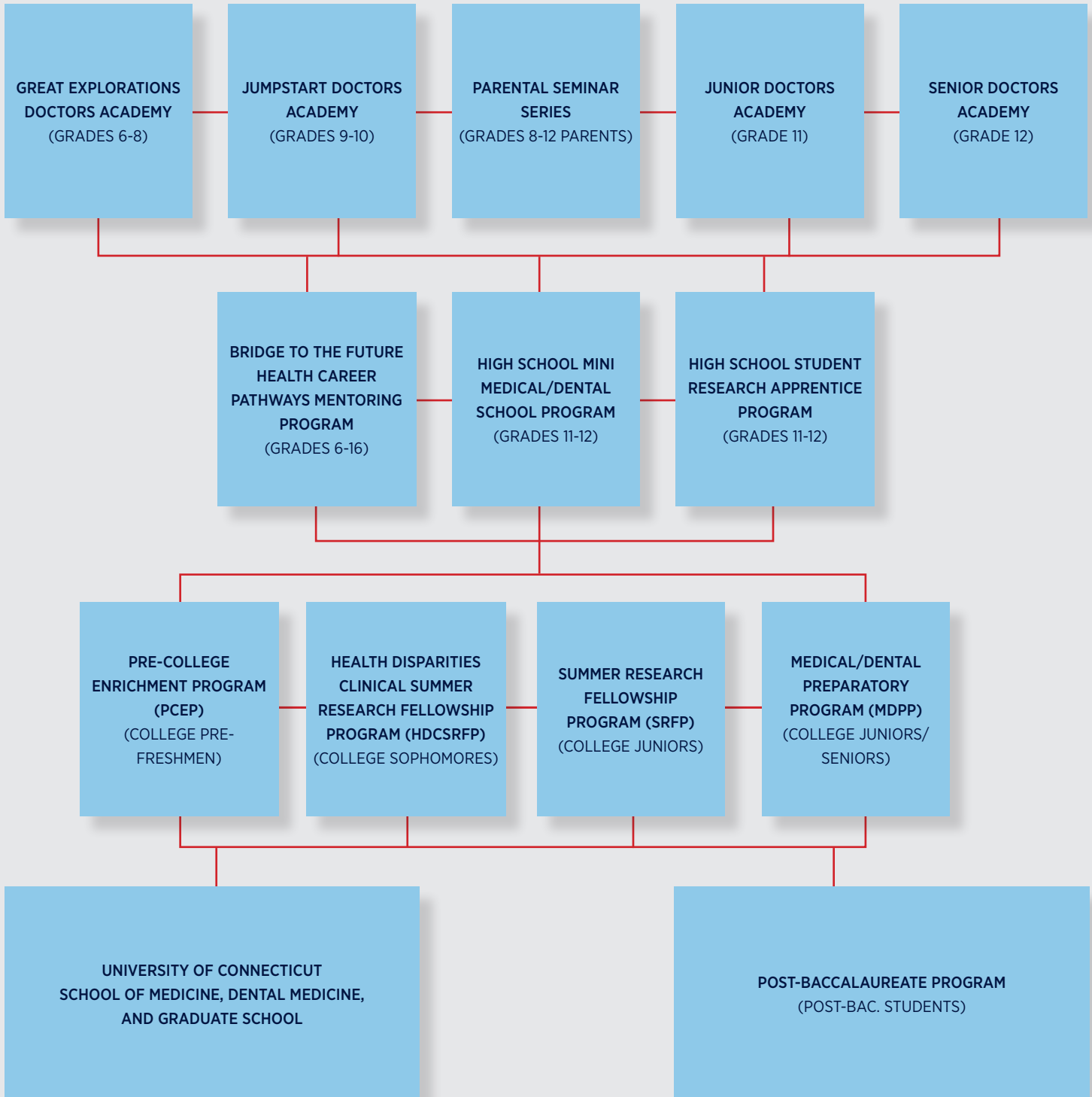
“My experience with HCOP definitely solidified my passion for pursuing a career as a physician. It also sparked my interest in possibly going down the MD/PhD route, which is a path I wasn’t previously aware of. I know I want to continue conducting research, gaining exposure to the health sciences, and exploring the intersection of AI and systems biology,” concludes Bridgewater.

Meet the Study Co-Authors



Two Connecticut high school seniors, Meera Kannan and Gabrielle Bridgewater, are already accomplished scientific study co-authors about the application of AI tools in biology.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE PATHWAY PROGRAMS,
VISIT US AT: [HEALTH.UCONN.EDU/HCOP/](https://health.uconn.edu/hcop/)



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For more information about the Pathway Programs, visit us at
health.uconn.edu/hcop/

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UConn Health Outpatient Pavilion