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Dr. Bruce Berg and Robert Meade: FSU's medical partnership

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Published: Thursday, October 23, 2014 at 1:00 a.m.

If you've driven by the distinctive pink building housing the Florida State University College of Medicine at Cocoanut Avenue and Second Street in downtown Sarasota, and tried to reconcile why a medical college would be located here -- and not aligned with a teaching hospital -- we hope this is helpful.

In the not so distant past, a statewide shortage of primary care physicians, particularly acute in Florida's rural areas, was recognized. Florida's population was growing but the number of primary care physicians was not. Further there was no incentive to establish rural primary care practices.

Enter FSU, which set out to create a primary care medicine program based in local communities. When first proposed, it was a radical idea. It had been 22 years since the last medical school in Florida was approved and medicine had changed.

Hands-on learning: FSU updated the traditional medical school model to add hands-on doctoring earlier in the process. Students complete their first two years in the traditional classroom and then leave Tallahassee to attend one of six regional campuses, like the one here in Sarasota. Formal learning continues through digitally delivered academics and runs parallel with the 1:1 clinical training.

What occurs during years three and four, when students are matched 1:1 with a physician, is accelerated growth. Let's be clear: Student development would not be successful without the strong support and commitment of the local medical community.

In Sarasota/Manatee, 330 physicians and six hospitals partner with us. From day one, students work alongside an experienced practitioner in a setting most patients prefer to receive their medical care, close to home where they have the support of family and friends.

Attracting Florida's brightest students: How does FSU attract Florida's best and brightest and then get them to stay? We know that a shortage of residency programs is a challenge -- some 60 percent of medical students leave the state. Historically, it has been difficult to get them to return. A new primary care residency program at Lee Memorial was launched this year and this is good news.

Reaching out to students with rural ties: Another effort to counter the out-migration and encourage rural practice is the focus on recruiting students with strong family ties to rural locations. FSU offers rural training sites in Immokalee and Marianna, and a clinical training site in Thomasville, Georgia. These are in addition to the six regional campuses located throughout Florida.

Creating community ties: FSU's Community Medicine short course is another first and unique way to expand knowledge by introducing students to the broader community. Students immerse themselves into a local nonprofit to gain an understanding of mission-based organizations and their role in meeting community

needs. This program is growing in unexpected ways. Doctors Hospital of Sarasota is the first institution to invite a fourth-year student to sit on its Board of Trustees.

Is it working?: The FSU model is successful, with the vast majority of students from Florida, representing a diverse background, composed of 38 percent minorities. While all medical schools are seeing large numbers of applicants, FSU received 5,256 applications for the Class of 2018; 322 were interviewed and 120 selected. FSU's first class graduated in 2005 and, to date, 193 physicians are now practicing, 61 percent of whom selected primary care and 56 percent of whom stayed in Florida, with 20 practicing in underserved communities.

Sarasota's support has contributed significantly to FSU's success and helps ensure access to well-trained and dedicated primary care physicians. Thank you to the medical practitioners and hospitals for providing a high-quality, patient-focused environment where our graduates can learn and practice the art and science of medicine.

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