

# FSU's College of Medicine bestows honor on 121 freshmen students



**Byron Dobson**, Democrat senior writer 11:52 a.m. EDT August 14, 2016

*Future doctors are told to get to understand a patient beyond a medical diagnosis*



(Photo: Alvin McBean/Democrat)

Florida State University's Ruby Diamond Concert Hall seemed the perfect backdrop Friday night for the College of Medicine's Class of 2020.

With nearly every seat filled inside the iconic hall, 121 future doctors took one of the major steps in their journey during the traditional "white coat" ceremony for first-year medical students.

For many, those teenage aspirations to become a doctor were paying off.

Suddenly, it was for real.

In two weeks, they will be back in classes, where there is no room for failure.

Donning the white coat equates to "putting on the mantle of our profession, (and) not just going to school," FSU College of Medicine Dean John Fogarty said. "I have heard people say the white-coat ceremony means more than the actual graduation."

In one sense, the ceremony exuded a sense of purpose for the students – and for the proud parents and family members looking on. Each student walked on stage with the coat folded on the right arm before being greeted by a COM professor who helped place it on them neatly, as if they were sales associates at Nic's.

The class of 2020 is diverse — 68 women and 53 men, ranging in ages between 20 and 37. Fifteen-percent are Asian/Pacific Islander, 14 percent black and 9 percent Hispanic.

In keeping with the college's mission, Fogarty noted, 33 of the first-year students come from Florida Panhandle counties, while many are from rural areas.

Among the students was Tyra Brune, who graduated with a degree in biological sciences from FSU in 2014. She recently was elected class president, an honor she values. But, more importantly, she noted, was that her mother and siblings were in attendance, along with her pastor and his wife from Faith Chapel in Coral Springs.

"It means a lot," she said of receiving the coat. "I'm the first in my family to go to college. It's a very momentous occasion."

She comes from a low-income family; many of her relatives and neighbors struggle to get adequate medical care. Since high school, those circumstances have fueled her desire to become a doctor.

"When someone is not educated and doesn't understand medical terminology, it can be hard to get medical care," she said.

Throughout the ceremony, students were reminded of the school's mission. They were also congratulated for wanting to continue that mission of carrying out a "patient-first practice" in places where the sick are treated as people and not merely numbers. In rural and low-income areas, a successful holistic approach to practicing medicine means talking to patients and understanding their circumstances.

"The white coat, along with the stethoscope, is one of the most recognizable symbols of medicine," Fogarty told them. "While you should wear it with great pride, you must recognize that with this symbol comes great responsibility."

Helping to reinforce Fogarty's message was Dr. Rachel Bixler, a graduate of the college's Class of 2011.

She emphasized the importance of being skilled, being prepared and not forgetting to be human.

She talked about "being the only one in the room who knows a patient's results," of having to tell a cancer patient a biopsy was positive, or that a procedure didn't work.

“And that’s when our patient’s world stands still,” said Bixler, who practices in Port St. Joe. “The opposite is also true. When we are the ones holding the good news. When you are the only one who knows the mammogram is clean or that the biopsy is negative. In those conversations, speak carefully and with kindness. Know that your patient’s world can stand still even with good news.”

The educational culture described by Fogarty and by Bixler is what helped Stephanie Williams of St. Petersburg decide she wanted to study medicine at FSU.

She earned a bachelor’s degree from FSU in 2012, followed by a master’s degree in medical science from Indiana University’s School of Medicine.

“I love the mission of Florida State University,” she said, as her parents and others took pictures on the steps of Ruby Diamond.

“They really do care about the students personally and the physicians they are training to become,” she said. “They really focus on seeing a patient holistically for who they are and not just a patient.”

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