

Higher ed board approves UH med school plan

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The Health 2 building on the UH campus serves as a temporary home to the College of Medicine for three planning years and the first two years of initial enrollment. The temporary facility would house the first two classes of 30 students in each class, as well as administrators, faculty, and staff. When the class size doubles to 60 students in 2022, a new building will be needed, the location of which is not yet

AUSTIN — The state’s regulatory higher education agency approved the University of Houston’s proposed medical school Thursday, the most fundamental hurdle to its bid to create the city’s first new school awarding degrees for doctors in nearly half a century.

The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board unanimously approved the UH proposal, which calls for a focus on training primary-care doctors, half of them minorities, to practice in underserved areas, a huge need in the state. UH hopes to enroll its first class in fall 2020.

“We’re hopeful this school will have a great impact, addressing the state shortage of primary-care doctors,” Renu Khator, UH’s president and chancellor, told the Chronicle after the vote. “It’s the right thing to do for Houston and Texas and a natural maturation of our existing health-care programs.”

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The Coordinating Board approval represents a major milestone in UH's bid to create a medical school, a long-time dream of the 91-year-old university. Regents last November committed to the creation of such a school, a linchpin of Khator's overall vision for UH, but school officials began meeting with Coordinating Board staff three years ago on how to fashion a winning proposal.

Proposed UH College of Medicine

The University of Houston will partner with the Hospital Corporation of America (HCA) Gulf Coast Division to create eight residency programs and more than 100 first-year slots by 2020.

UH plans to set tuition and fees at \$22,510 annually, which the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board says is "in line with existing Texas public medical schools."

An anonymous donation of \$3.2 million will cover tuition and fees for all four years for the entire inaugural class. Another gift will cover tuition and fees for all four years for 10 students in the second class.

Numerous Coordinating Board members praised the finished proposal for its unique approach to solving serious health-care problems. Texas ranks 47th out of 50 states in the ratio of primary-care doctors per person and state projections call for it to need another 6,260 such doctors by 2030.

Dr. Stephen Spann, the founding dean of the proposed UH school, says disparities are so bad in some parts of Houston that their health problems are "similar to those of Third World countries."

Khator said she will bring to UH regents in November a report of whether to build the school on campus or in the Texas Medical Center. A UH committee has not finished analyzing the options — it has narrowed the possibilities from four sites to two — but Khator said it has identified strong advantages to putting the school on campus. She said she has not decided yet whether she will recommend one location or just relay the strengths and weaknesses of both options.

Stuart Stedman, the Coordinating Board chairman, expressed a preference for the UH location, asking “how the school would serve the Third Ward if it’s in the TMC rather than on campus.” The Third Ward, a center of the city’s black community known for its health disparities, is located near the UH campus. Khator responded that whichever location UH picks, it would maintain a strong presence both on campus and in the medical center.

The board granted the approval, after about 40 minutes of discussion, on the condition that UH pursue scholarship and loan repayment programs to achieve its goal of having 50 percent of students come from minority populations. Khator and Spann said such efforts are already under way.

The Coordinating Board approval is one of three major hurdles the school faces. Still remaining are accreditation by the Liaison Committee on Medical Education and support by the Texas Legislature.

UH plans to submit application materials to the liaison committee in early December. That process typically takes no less than 10 months, Spann said.

Spann noted earlier this week that Coordinating Board approval is fundamentally important because it acts as a prerequisite for follow-up actions. UH can’t offer degrees without Coordinating Board approval and the Liaison Committee on Medical Education won’t accredit a new school that hasn’t already been approved by its state higher education regulatory body. Also, such approval is expected to influence the Legislature, from which UH plans to request \$40 million over 10 years.

Two state legislators praised the Coordinating Board decision Thursday.

“We are pleased the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board has approved the creation of the University of Houston’s College of Medicine,” Reps. Garnet Coleman, D-Houston, and Armando Walle, D-Houston, wrote in a joint statement that noted the area’s significant health disparities despite the presence of the TMC.

“UH is the right institution to reduce those persistent disparities because the College of Medicine will be able to integrate with the university’s existing health and health-related professions, colleges, and programs,” Coleman and Walle said.

William McKeon, president and CEO of the medical center also applauded the vote, predicting “the type of medical school the University of Houston is building — one that emphasizes

population health and primary care — will become a national model. Investment in this effort will pay dividends in communities across Houston, and beyond.”

The Coordinating Board approval was not unexpected given it was recently recommended by both staff and the board’s committee on academic and workforce success. That had not seemed such a sure thing earlier this year when Commissioner of Higher Education Ray Paredes, the head of the agency, warned at a meeting that “we’re expanding programs more quickly than resources from the state suggest we should.”

Paredes said little at the meeting about the proposed UH school. He noted he’d previously expressed concerns about expansion, but said “they have nothing to do with the UH proposal.” Before the vote, he asked Khator and Spann to respond to the committee recommendation that it pursue scholarship and loan repayment programs.

Paredes left directly after the meeting and could not be reached for comment.

The meeting was not without challenging questions. Coordinating Board members pressed UH officials on the likelihood it will reach its goal of 50 percent of its graduating students going into primary care when the national average is around 20 percent, given students can make two to three times more in specialty care. They asked if there are other schools where roughly half of students go into primary care.

Spann, a family physician, responded that it would be “cynical to say students only vote with their wallets.”

He touted three strategies that should boost UH numbers: predictors that an applicant will go into primary care, such as coming from a family of teachers or serving in the Peace Corps; a plan to create a culture of primary care that includes students spending at least half a day in such settings every week of their four years; and scholarships and loan repayment programs that reward students who choose primary care in underserved areas.

Spann and Khator cited the medical schools of Florida State, Florida International and Southern Illinois as places where large percentages of students go into primary care.

A UH medical school will make a crowded field, with Baylor College of Medicine and UT’s McGovern Medical School in the medical center; UT Medical Branch at Galveston 55 miles to the south and Texas A&M Medical School 100 miles to the north and pursuing more of a presence in the medical center. In addition, Sam Houston State University two months ago

received Coordinating Board approval to create a school of osteopathic medicine in Huntsville.

McGovern was the last medical college created in the city. Then known as the University of Texas Medical School at Houston, it began enrolling students in 1972.

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