Hispanic students filling medical schools nationwide
By Kara Spak
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Anthony Acosta believes his late grandmother would have been a nurse or a doctor if she had the opportunity.

Moving to Chicago from Puerto Rico in the 1950s, she never made it to college but spent years reading medical textbooks he bought her as gifts.

Acosta, 30, is now living her dream, a dream he shares. A fourth-year medical student at the University of Illinois at Chicago, he is the first one in his immediate family to graduate from college.

When he finishes med school in the spring, he will have set another family milestone.

“I was exposed early on in the sciences,” said Acosta, who grew up in the Belmont-Cragin neighborhood. “I had a microscope when I was young.”

Acosta is part of a growing number of Hispanics who are applying to and enrolling in medical school. Since 2004, the number of Hispanic applicants to American medical schools has increased 22.9 percent, according to the Association of American Medical Colleges. There was a nearly 6 percent rise between 2010 and 2011, from 3,271 to 3,459.

The numbers of Hispanic applicants are still fairly low, though, when compared to the total 2011 applicant pool of 43,919. And while the numbers of Hispanic doctors are growing, the rate still falls short of matching the explosive growth of the Hispanic community in the United States.

Recognizing the changing makeup of the U.S. population, medical schools have subtly adjusted their approach to create doctors of every background who are more sensitive to the needs of the community at large. Many schools have shifted their admissions process, focusing on the entire student rather than simply grades and MCAT scores.

“Having a wealth of diversity helps all of us to learn to be better physicians,” said Dr. Michael Koller, chairman of the admissions committee at Loyola University Chicago’s Stritch School of Medicine. “It’s good for the class.”

Some schools, including Stritch, are reaching out to high school students in disadvantaged communities to let these students and their parents know that medicine is a viable career. Spanish-language classes are on the rise for young doctors in training, regardless of their ethnic background.

“For 30 or 40 years there have been intentional efforts at trying to make sure that all underrepresented populations understand that medicine is a wonderful career,” said Dr. Marc Nivet, AAMC’s chief diversity officer. “I think we are starting to gain some traction in the
Hispanic population. More than any other population there has been a steady growth trend in the community at large.”

In 2010, there were 418 Hispanic medical students enrolled in Illinois’ seven medical schools, 8.5 percent of the total statewide medical school enrollment of 4,886, according to the AAMC. More than half of Illinois’ Hispanic medical students attend UIC’s College of Medicine, where an outreach program that started in the 1960s, the Hispanic Center of Excellence in Medicine, is specifically geared toward the community.

“Many times because of fundamental issues in the education process there are students who don’t come to the table with many of the other opportunities other candidates have,” said Jorge Girotti, director of that center as well as UIC’s med school admissions. “We don’t want to admit anyone who does not have the ability to get through medical school but we have found out someone’s grades or test scores don’t tell the whole story. A physician has to have a strong knowledge of biological sciences. He also has to be able to relate to the patient.”

The aspiring doctor must also believe that, he or she, if academically qualified, can make it through the rigorous admissions process, four years of medical school where students often leave with substantial debt and three or more years of training as a resident. At UIC for the 2012 incoming class, for instance, the medical school received 7,400 applications for 300 spots.

“This is more than just about admissions,” Girotti said. “This is about making sure those who enter have the capacity and stamina to finish.”

For Girotti and his staff, it’s also about letting students — even those in high school — know that med school can be a reality. The Center runs Medicina Academy, a program in four Chicago high schools for aspiring Hispanic doctors and their parents, and Medicina Scholars, a program for college students at a number of campuses that helps connect them to mentors and resources.

Twenty percent of the students who have completed Medicina Scholars have gone on to medical school. Seventy two percent earned a college degree.

“Part of the goal is to give them a support system,” Girotti said.

Emma Olivera, 29, said as an undergraduate at UIC, her adviser told her she wouldn’t get into med school, a dream she’s held since childhood. Undeterred, she sought advice from Girotti’s center, where she was connected with med students with a similar background.

“It helped me stick with the dream,” Olivera said. “It’s not an easy process. I had access to medical students, students like me who struggled and didn’t have parents who were doctors. They’re like me and they made it. Why can’t I make it?”

Olivera is now a third-year medical student at the University of Illinois College of Medicine at Rockford. She is the national coordinator-elect of the Latino Medical School Association and fulfills the mentor role she found so valuable as an undergrad.

“I feel like anyone who is really motivated can get into med school if they stay motivated and have a support network,” she said. “The support network is so important.”
Sunny Gibson, director of diversity at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine, cautioned against assuming there is one mold for the diverse Hispanic community or doctor.

“The connection with the cultural pieces can come in lots of different forms,” she said. “There are students who grew up speaking Spanish in bilingual households. There are students who grew up in the suburbs and never spoke Spanish. Some students wouldn’t be able to serve the Hispanic population any better than you and me and some are focused on their identity as a means to address health care needs.”

Feinberg students work in a number of community clinics that provide both primary and specialized care in Spanish. Students of all ethnic backgrounds were so passionate about learning the language, they pushed for Spanish classes five years ago and also developed a Spanish-language handbook for medical students to use on the job.

“If you do speak some Spanish, it’s indicated to patients that you really are there to provide better care,” Gibson said. “It demonstrates a level of humility that the provider connects with the patient.”

Dayana Bermudez Hernandez is a 22-year-old, first-year medical student at Feinberg. Born in Colombia where her father is an obstetrician and gynecologist, she moved to Florida when she was 12.

“As long as I can remember I wanted to be in the health-care field,” she said. “I always knew I wanted to do it.”

She ultimately wants to enter a pediatric specialty field and believes her Spanish-language skills will help her practice effective medicine. She wants Hispanic patients to be part of her practice, but said doctoring to that specific community didn’t motivate her to get into medicine.

“You do not have to be Hispanic to have a relationship with a [Hispanic] patient,” she said.

Like Hernandez, Juan Bautista grew up with a father who was a doctor. Both Bautista’s parents are Mexican immigrants, and Bautista is now an obstetrics and gynecology resident in Fresno, Calif., working at clinics his father started to serve migrant farm workers and inner-city Latinos.

“You have to speak Spanish to work there,” said Bautista, 31, who graduated from Feinberg in the Class of 2011.

As Bautista made his way through medical school, he realized he wanted to be the kind of doctor his father is, working to provide quality health care to anyone, regardless of their ability to pay. He returned home to complete his training.

“We get patients that come to the clinic and didn’t have insurance or had huge copays — and not just the poor,” he said. “My dad would say ‘I’ll take care of you.’ Every time I was out in the community I would see people that know my dad. They would drop off tamales, vegetables, grapes — it was really cool. I realized I want what he’s built to continue.”