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A new model for medical schools

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A week or so ago, my wife and I drove from Santa Barbara to the University of California, Irvine, to attend a "White Coat" ceremony for the incoming class of medical students, including our son, at the UC Irvine Medical School.

It was a very impressive event and, as parents, we felt very proud of our son, as we were a couple of years earlier when our daughter graduated from law school. But what I also found impressive about the ceremony where these would-be doctors are initiated into their first step as doctors by receiving their white doctor's coat was how diverse the students were. Not only were more than half of the students women, but ethnically, the mix was likewise impressive.

As a scholar of Latinos in the United States, I paid particular attention to the number of new Latino medical students, including my son. Here again, I was impressed. A good percentage was Latinos. What is important here is that UC Irvine is ahead of the curve with respect to the number and percentage of Latinos in our medical schools. Nationally, only about 5 percent of all medical students in the country are Latinos, while the percentage of Latinos in the U.S. is about 16 percent. Many Latinos, especially immigrants, do not regularly see doctors, and some studies suggest this has to do with the lack of Latino physicians.

Latinos as a whole suffer from many illnesses, including an almost epidemic number of diabetic cases, and the lack of Latino doctors in Latino communities only compounds the problem. I recently received a small grant to begin oral histories with the few Latino physicians in the Santa Barbara area as a way of using their stories to encourage potential Latino medical students to apply and to go to medical schools. I am encouraged at the same time by the Irvine model, where clearly the medical school understands the importance of recruiting qualified Latinos to attend medical school and to challenge the national lack of Latino medical students. My hope is that other major medical schools will follow this model. Much of our nation's health could depend on this because by 2050, Latinos are project to represent one-third of the national population.

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