These awards consist of five scholarships given to outstanding students entering their third year of medical school who have shown leadership in efforts to eliminate inequities in medical education and health care and demonstrated leadership efforts in addressing educational, societal, and health care needs of minorities in the United States.

The 2014 Recipient

Maria Tobar
University of California, Los Angeles, David Geffen School of Medicine

Maria Tobar is a third-year medical student at the David Geffen School of Medicine at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), with a passion for serving underserved rural and urban communities in the United States and internationally. She plans to specialize in either family medicine or emergency medicine. Working in these fields, she is confident that she will build long-lasting, longitudinal relationships with patients and their families as they renew their commitments to health.

Maria’s keen interest in understanding the biological and social determinants of health led to her volunteering at homeless clinics in the United States and with indigenous populations in Colombia, Mexico, and the Dominican Republic. Being fluent in Spanish has been an invaluable tool in serving immigrant communities effectively. She helped push forward partnerships between the Latino Medical Student Association and the medical Spanish selective course to supplement resources available to students interested in achieving Spanish fluency.

As a UCLA Programs in Medical Education (PRIME) medical student, Maria will receive a five-year dual degree focused on addressing health care disparities in medically underserved populations. She currently works with vulnerable homeless, immigrant day laborers, and geriatric minority populations within LA County, developing chronic disease prevention tools specific to and sensitive of each culture. As a summer research fellow, she investigated how to culturally adapt physical activity, promoting interventions aimed at preventing stroke among older adult minority populations.

Maria also created a half marathon training/mentorship program between the Lennox School District and the UCLA graduate programs to provide inner-city kids with role models who understand the value of community in maintaining health and achieving personal and professional goals. She designed the program to include family members, neighbors, local businesses, and other members of the community so that in supporting the goals of the younger generations together, they strengthen Lennox as a whole.

Maria is passionate about supporting health through education as well as public policy. She tutored undergraduate students from disadvantaged backgrounds who are interested in careers in health through the Summer Medical and Dental Education Program, and she is currently a peer tutor for UCLA medical students. As part of her dual degree program, she will pursue a master of public policy in the fall of 2015.

Her commitment as a physician will be to deliver care to underserved communities in Southern California and abroad, empowering patients to be their own greatest advocates in health.
Frank Garrett Conyers, a third-year medical student at Harvard Medical School, was lucky to witness the power of social justice advocacy at a young age. He credits his upbringing for establishing his core interest in social justice and his undergraduate experience for cultivating his passion for it.

Garrett graduated summa cum laude from Morehouse College with a degree in biology. He served in leadership positions in several mentorship and education equity advocacy groups, such as the Black Family & Child Institute, 100 Black Men of Atlanta, and the Big Brother Program of Atlanta. It was at Morehouse that his interest in social justice intersected with his interest in medicine. Garrett quickly got involved in local Atlanta communities by initiating community outreach efforts surrounding health advocacy, proper nutrition, and stress management. He was awarded a position in the John H. Hopps Defense Research Scholars Program, a Department of Defense initiative to spur the growth of underrepresented minorities in science and research. During his time in school, he conducted basic science research around diseases that disproportionately affect minority populations. He presented his research at numerous national conferences and earned many research awards, including the Achievement Reward for College Scientists and the Fredrick E. Mapp Award in Biology. In addition, he was elected to the National Society of Collegiate Scholars, NASA’s Mission to Advance Research and Science Scholarship Program, and Phi Beta Kappa.

Upon entering medical school, Garrett immediately became involved with curricular reform and health disparities. He joined the “Race in the Curriculum Working Group,” which advocates for a more rigorous study of how health disparities arise in racial groups and how physicians can combat that trend, and also works with faculty to incorporate issues of race, ethnicity, and health inequities into the pre-clinical curriculum. Garrett has led the group in creating and presenting numerous lectures and small group learning sessions, with the goal of engaging students in these issues. He and a fellow classmate designed and facilitated a weeklong, student-led workshop for incoming medical students around the topic of the ‘isms’ (racism, classism, sexism, etc.) and how they affect the delivery of equitable health care.

Garrett also has shown a deep passion for physician workforce diversification. He mentors local premedical students through the Student National Medical Association, Health Professions Recruitment and Exposure Program, and Minority Association of Pre-medical Students. Still committed to serving the local community, Garrett helps test for HIV, serves as an HIV counselor, and develops health education workshops. Additionally, he has served as a junior clinician in Harvard’s student-faculty collaborative clinic and as president of the Harvard Medical School Black Health Organization and the Harvard Black Graduate Student Alliance. In addition, he is a member of the Harvard Partners Healthcare Cross-Cultural Care Committee, Harvard Medical School Multicultural Fellows Committee, and Harvard University Student Advocacy Group.

Garrett plans to pursue a master in public policy. He credits his success to being surrounded by dynamic, passionate people that all share a common desire to create a more righteous and just health care system.
As a native of Accra, Ghana, Ami Kumordzie first stepped onto American soil at the age of six. Although she and her family faced many hardships and disadvantages while growing up, including lack of health insurance and bankruptcy, she remained connected to those less fortunate in her community and dedicated herself to helping others gain the same opportunities she had been given. Despite the many challenges, Ami became the first in her immediate family to pursue a bachelor’s degree. She received a fully paid scholarship to Johns Hopkins University as a Bloomberg Scholar and graduated cum laude with a degree in biomedical engineering. She is now earning an M.D. from Stanford University School of Medicine.

Being only one of three African-American bioengineering majors, Ami became keenly aware of the major educational disparities in minority populations, particularly in math and science. These disparities were even more pronounced in local Baltimore communities. As vice president of the university’s National Society of Black Engineers, Ami organized weekend science outreach events for minority middle school girls. She founded the Great Space for Girls program, which uses space exploration to help girls see their potential for careers in math and science.

When Ami realized the power of educational enrichment in the lives of minority students, she continued her outreach through Stanford EXPLORE, a program that provides high school students with early exposure to careers in biomedical science. Because the substantial costs resulted in the program historically attracting students of upper socioeconomic status, Ami led an initiative to expand accessibility to low-income students by personally calling, emailing, and visiting schools throughout under resourced areas in East Palo Alto and San Jose. Her efforts led to a substantial increase in the number of disadvantaged students who attended the program with full funding.

Understanding the hurdles to increasing and retaining minority representation in health careers, Ami reached out to undergraduate minority students to provide them with the resources and mindset that helped her persevere. As a medical student, she led the Leland Scholars Program, an initiative that supports first-generation and low-income minority students pursuing science and engineering fields in their freshman year. Ami serves on the Student National Medical Association and Stanford’s Diversity Advisory Panel, where she reviews prospective medical student applications and advocates for underrepresented candidates. These efforts are aimed at building a pipeline for increased representation and retention of minority students.

Additionally, Ami sought ways to leverage technology to reduce educational disparities. This led to a collaboration with the Foundation for Learning Equality and Khan Academy to implement a novel platform that will enable access to medical education with minimal infrastructure. She is working on an inexpensive program called KA-Lite (“Kahn Academy Light”), on which interactive educational videos can be installed and distributed anywhere in the world. Ami along with her colleagues at the Foundation for Learning Academy implemented the project in Rwanda in December 2013. Her hope is that despite socioeconomic limitations, any student from inner-city Baltimore to rural Rwanda will have access to quality medical education. Ami’s work will continue to focus on breaking down barriers limiting minority access to education, particularly in science and health careers.
Alexa M. Mieses is a native New Yorker and current medical student at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, where she is pursuing a joint M.D./M.P.H. degree. She is passionate about incorporating her public health knowledge into patient care and hopes to make an impact beyond the confines of an exam room, working to resolve health disparities in her community.

Witnessing health disparities in her own neighborhood inspired Alexa to pursue a career in medicine. After graduating from the prestigious Bronx High School of Science, she pursued undergraduate studies at the City University of New York-City College (CCNY), graduating magna cum laude with a B.S. in biology and a minor in psychology in 2011.

At CCNY, Alexa was very active within the surrounding Harlem. She organized health fairs as secretary and then president of the Minority Association of Premedical Students (MAPS), which served more than 200 community members annually. Under her leadership, the group was awarded the 2011 National MAPS Chapter of the Year Award in recognition of its service. She tutored disadvantaged public school students in math and English language arts, and tutored at the college level as a CCNY peer tutor. As an exceptional student in the SEEK Program (an educational opportunity program for disadvantaged students), she also mentored SEEK students and co-taught the program’s freshman orientation course.

As part of the Jeannette K. Watson Fellowship, a competitive program for New York City undergraduates, Alexa taught biology at the Bronx Zoo, conducted HIV public policy research at Gay Men’s Health Crisis, and published an article about corrective rape and its public health impact. She spent three months in Santiago, Chile, completing needs-analysis work for a non-profit that works with at-risk youth.

At Mount Sinai, Alexa served as a clinic manager and Spanish interpreter for the student-run clinic. The clinic serves uninsured patients of East Harlem, many of whom are undocumented and do not speak English. Alexa recently became a chronic care student clinician, serving as the primary care provider to the clinic’s chronically ill patients. She also raised awareness about disparities in medical education as editor-in-chief of The Rossi, a medical education newsletter. To further promote the values of primary care, Alexa also served as co-president of the Family Medicine Interest Group (FMIG) from 2013 to 2014. In 2014, FMIG was awarded the AAFP Program of Excellence for its efforts.

Knowing that service alone cannot eliminate health disparities, Alexa conducted original neuroscience research for her thesis project at CCNY, for which she graduated with honors in biology and was awarded the Jonas Salk Award, the university’s highest scientific honor. After graduation, Alexa completed a full-time biomedical research fellowship at the National Institutes of Health-National Institute on Drug Abuse. At Mount Sinai, Alexa conducts clinical research about Phelan McDermid syndrome, an autism-related condition for which health disparities exist.

Alexa believes great mentorship helped her succeed and therefore is very passionate about mentoring others. She has worked with Mentoring in Medicine, Inc. since 2007 and works extensively with the Center for Multicultural and Community Affairs at Mount Sinai to mentor underrepresented minority premedical students. In 2013, in an effort to mentor on a larger scale, Alexa published her first book, The Heartbeat of Success, a medical school admissions guide for first-generation aspiring physicians. She also blogs regularly for Medscape/WebMD. She hopes to become a primary care physician-scholar and work with underserved communities similar to her own.
Adam J. Milam is a third-year medical student at Wayne State University School of Medicine (WSUSOM). After completing his degree in public health studies at the Johns Hopkins University Krieger School of Arts & Sciences, Adam attended graduate school to pursue education in public health and health disparities. While completing his master’s degree in health science, he interned with Maryland State Delegate Shawn Tarrant, assisting with all health and public health legislation. One of the bills helped to improve student enrollment in the Maryland Children’s Health Program by linking the application with the National School Lunch Program.

Adam completed his doctorate degree at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. His dissertation, which focused on alcohol outlets and behavioral outcomes in minors, found that 46 percent of young adults live within walking distance of an alcohol outlet, while only 13.1 percent have a grocery store within walking distance. His research on alcohol outlets has contributed to both local and state legislation aimed at reducing crime. For example, a recently passed bill prohibits underage purchases of any products from liquor stores.

Adam grew up in Baltimore, Md., where neighborhoods less than five miles apart have glaring differences in racial and economic composition, resulting in a 20-year gap in life expectancy. His passion to address health disparities began during his employment as a clinical technician in the emergency department (ED) of Johns Hopkins Hospital, where he witnessed patients who were gravely ill from preventable health conditions. Many relied on the ED for all of their medical needs, and their health often did not improve even with high-quality medical care. They could not afford their medication or did not have adequate housing. This experience, coupled with volunteer work for Project HEALTH (now Health Leads), a national student-run program that connects patients with resources (e.g., energy assistance) essential for healthy lifestyles, changed his educational trajectory. He volunteered for Project HEALTH for three years, providing resources to patients at two public clinics targeting low-income Hispanic and African-American patients.

As one of the few African-American male medical students at WSUSOM, Adam sought to identify ways to ensure that the enrollment of minority students grows. He has consistently been involved with mentorship activities and works closely with students. During his second year, he served as the internal vice president for the Black Medical Association. In this role, he oversaw the Reach Out to Youth Program (ROTY), an annual event that brings children age 7 to 11 and their parents to the WSUSOM campus to provide early exposure to medicine. He also led a grant application submission to the Student National Medical Association to expand ROTY to include high school students. The goal of the expanded program is to ensure that more students from Detroit Public Schools pursue education and careers in science and medicine. In the future, Adam hopes to return to Baltimore to combine clinical practice, research, and policy to address current racial and ethnic disparities and inequities in health. Adam has published 18 publications in peer-reviewed journals, with most research focusing on underserved and marginalized populations.