

CONNECTING PIPELINES TO PATHWAYS FOR HEALTH EQUITY

CHAMPIONS Program: Empowering and Motivating Youth in Community Health

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT CHICAGO

KEY POINTS

The CHAMPIONS Program (**C**hanging **H**ealth through **A**dvocacy & **eM**ployment **I**n **O**ur **N**eighborhoods) is a partnership between UI Health and Chicago high schools that empowers youth to become eligible for employment at UI Health in the near and longer term and increases exposure and motivation related to community health. Key highlights include:

- ✓ Paid summer internship, extending to volunteer opportunities and workforce development programming that broaden focus and interest in population health, including patient contact
- ✓ Exposure of youth to careers in health sciences
- ✓ Resources to empower youth as community and school advocates
- ✓ Partnership with Chicago Public Schools (CPS) Career and Technical Education Program (CTE) in Health Sciences and other Chicago-based high schools
- ✓ Highly engaged academic health center senior leadership and HR departments, who value recruiting a workforce that reflects the community served
- ✓ Alignment with UI community health needs assessments
- ✓ A system-wide program that is well-positioned within the academic health center organizational structure (e.g., part of office of Vice Chancellor for Health Affairs and Population Health Sciences Program) and engages health professions departments in its implementation



ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Meeting community need for youth education and workforce development opportunities to address structural and social barriers to health

In Chicago, major health disparities exist across ethnic groups, income levels, and education levels for common chronic conditions and access to care.¹ The 2019 UI Community Assessment of Needs revealed that community residents served by UI Health seek youth education and workforce

development opportunities to address structural and social barriers to health.

THE UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT CHICAGO APPROACH

Building a comprehensive pathway approach to implement programs and services to partner with the community and engage students at all levels, especially early outreach efforts to cultivate student interest beginning at the grade school level

The CHAMPIONS Program evolved from the CHAMPIONS NETWORK, which was originally established in 2016 and is described in detail in Heinert et al.² It was developed by emergency medicine, clinical, and preventive medicine leaders based on lessons learned from the Illinois Heart Rescue (ILHR) program. ILHR is a statewide collaborative that has engaged hospitals, community-based organizations, and schools throughout Illinois to teach cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) to improve cardiac arrest survival. By focusing CPR training efforts in underserved “hotspot” neighborhoods with high cardiac arrest burden and low bystander CPR rates, ILHR has more than tripled survival in some neighborhoods. School-based programs within ILHR highlight the power of high school student engagement to improve health outcomes in the community.



Program Goal to Empower Youth through Direct Experience and Accountability

The CHAMPIONS NETWORK is built upon previous programs. It brings opportunities for participation in an intensive health curriculum, close mentorship, and exposure to health careers to high school students. The unique components of the original CHAMPIONS NETWORK include a didactic and hands-on curriculum, real-life experience in an emergency department, and holding students accountable for dissemination of health knowledge. The students interact with patients in a clinical setting to facilitate primary care follow up. Heinert et al. describe in detail the first two years of the program and associated costs. Initially, costs were supported by the University of Illinois Hospital and Health Sciences System; in subsequent years the program received funding from two foundations. This permitted hiring a program manager and an evaluation manager, providing students with a stipend, as well as reimbursing transportation costs.

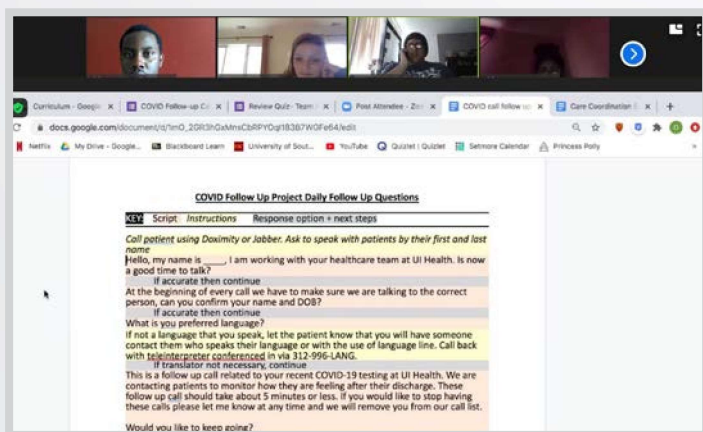


In 2018, CHAMPIONS NETWORK, working with the Population Health Science Program, provided critical support for the triennial [Community Health Needs Assessment \(CHNA\)](#). CHAMPIONS NETWORK participants collected 16 percent of the community resident surveys for Cook County’s harmonized CHNA through the Alliance for Health Equity (AHE), a collaboration of 35+ healthcare systems and seven public health departments.

Program Sustained by System-wide Alignment and Partnerships

The program subsequently has been sustained with a realignment of the program from the Emergency Department and the College of Medicine to the Vice Chancellor for Health Affairs and the Population Health Science Program (the program name changed to the current CHAMPIONS Program). In addition, it requires identifying CPS partners who value health profession training. This has been bolstered by CPS high schools that offer [Career and Technical Education in Health Sciences](#).

Infrastructure at UIC has been critical. Senior leaders engaged include: UI Health Chief Executive Officer, UI Health Chief Medical Officer, and Associate Vice Chancellor for Population Health Sciences. Additionally, the Chief Human Resources Officer and Director of Volunteer Services have very specific and key roles. This program is seen as providing a “pathway” to employment at UI Health. In the summer portion of the program, the students earn a stipend as they learn and as they provide a service to UI Health. During the school year they continue in the program as volunteers in the hospital’s Volunteer Services program. It is important to highlight that UI Health has a very active employee education program and employees are encouraged to seek additional training and degrees, with support from UI Health.



Faculty and Health Profession Support

Faculty and professional students from the health sciences colleges are engaged in multiple capacities with CHAMPIONS to: 1) introduce potential career pathways to the students through a speaker series; 2) deliver didactic and interactive curriculum on topics including community health and biology; 3) serve as team leads, supervisors, and mentors on student projects.

Pandemic Impact on Program: Adapting to Virtual

In 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the CHAMPIONS program adapted to a virtual program delivery model. The dual goals of workforce development and community health advocacy remained consistent. The students, supervised by medical students and advanced health science students, engaged in a COVID-19 patient follow-up internship. Post discharge, they called patients to conduct symptom tracking and social determinants of health screening. The community health project involved interviewing students’ personal networks to understand how the pandemic has impacted day-to-day life. More than 20 health sciences students and professionals were engaged in a virtual speaker series. Due to the need to rapidly shift to the virtual environment and to recruitment challenges, the summer 2020 cohort was smaller than in previous years.



¹ Silver, N. (2015). *The most diverse cities are often the most segregated*. Retrieved December 2020. <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/the-most-diverse-cities-are-often-the-most-segregated/>

² Heintz S, Del Rios M, Amirsoltani R et al. The CHAMPIONS NETWORK: Training Chicago High School Students as Health Advocates to Improve Health Equity. *Health Promotion Practice* 2019; 20 (1):57-66. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524839918757755>

RESULTS/OUTCOMES

- Across five summer cohorts, CHAMPIONS has engaged 18 schools (11 in summer 2020, four of which are CTE). There are 133 CHAMPIONS alumni.
- Each cohort of students was asked a series of questions regarding their health advocacy. Outcomes were similar for each cohort, 2016 through 2020, including an increase in the number of students who strongly agreed with the statement “I am confident in my abilities to reduce health problems in my community/school” from 20 percent of students pre-program to 67 percent post-program (RR=3.3; 95 CI: 1.3-8.5) for the virtual 2020 cohort (consistent with the averages from 2016, 2017, 2018).
- For the 2020 cohort pre-program, only 10 percent of students strongly agreed with the statement that they have a lot of first-hand experience with COVID management, compared to 67 percent of students who agreed with the statement after participating in the program.
- The “virtual program” allowed students flexibility in time and location, which they generally found beneficial, and permitted them to participate without encountering distance or transportation barriers.
- As the workforce development components of the program become more established, key metrics will include: number of students who applied to UI Health for jobs, number who interviewed at UI Health for jobs, and number who accept job offers and work at UI Health. Longitudinal data about CHAMPIONS alumni who pursue certifications and advanced degrees in the health sciences will also be tracked.

FOR MORE INFORMATION AND RELATED MATERIALS ABOUT THE CHAMPIONS PROGRAM

- Population Health Sciences Program at UIC. <https://vcha.uic.edu/units/population-health-sciences-program-phsp/>
- Community Assessment of Needs at University of Illinois. <https://hospital.uillinois.edu/about-ui-health/community-commitment/community-assessment-of-health-needs-ui-can>

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The AAHC Case Studies in *Connecting Pipelines to Pathways for Health Equity* are an initiative of the AAHC Chief Academic Officers executive leadership group in partnership with the AAHC Sullivan Alliance.