



ABOVE: Andrea Simmons and Robin Clay work with students and employees of all backgrounds to ensure diversity and inclusion at the School of Medicine.

RIGHT: Andrea Simmons serves as coordinator of the Mizzou MedPrep program, which helps underrepresented students become successful medical school applicants. Seung Ah Lee, pictured, completed the program and is now in her fourth year of medical school.

BY DIAMOND DIXON

Driving diversity

Simmons, Clay strive for inclusivity at School of Medicine

The mission of the MU School of Medicine is to improve the health of all people, especially Missourians, through exemplary education, research and patient-centered care. For Mizzou MedPrep coordinator Andrea Simmons, two phrases in the medical school's mission immediately stand out: "all people" and "patient-centered care."

"To me, those words mean that patients come first, all people matter and everyone should always be treated with respect," Simmons said.

Simmons, along with Robin Clay, diversity and inclusion recruitment coordinator at the School of Medicine, helps lead diversity and inclusion efforts at the school. Both believe diversity is important not only for society as a whole, but for medical schools due to the unique situations physicians encounter with patients of all backgrounds.

"Diversity is important for multiple reasons," Clay said. "Diversity helps produce better physicians for a global society. When you have a diverse group of peers, you can learn from each other. You also learn how to have potentially difficult conversations in a safe and productive environment."

The School of Medicine uses a patient-based learning curriculum in which students work in small groups and discuss how to best serve patients. In these groups, students are presented with scenarios about cultural differences and discuss how those differences factor into the treatment of patients.

"The patients whom our current medical students — and future doctors — encounter represent an array of backgrounds that are not limited to race, religion and gender, but also represent various cultures, experiences and communities," Simmons said. "A physician is someone a patient must be

vulnerable with. Patients have to share their personal information and trust that the doctor has their best interest at heart.”

Mizzou MedPrep is designed to help individuals explore health care careers and assist those interested in applying to medical school with the application process. The ultimate goal of the program is to help prepare students to become competitive medical school applicants.

While all students can participate in Mizzou MedPrep, underrepresented minority students, socio-economically disadvantaged students, students from rural areas and non-traditional students are particularly encouraged to participate.

“Robin and Andrea coordinate important initiatives for the School of Medicine,” said Rachel Brown, MD, associate dean for student programs and professional development at the School of Medicine. “Their work helps our education programs reach people we would not otherwise reach. They are great colleagues, and I am proud to have them as part of our team and as part of the face of the school.”

With more than 13 years of combined experience, Simmons has worked in varying student support roles, some of which specifically target underrepresented ethnic minority populations. Her approach always has been to address the needs of students, meeting them where they are and getting them to the next step of their goals.

“Robin and Andrea’s work is vital to ensuring that undergraduates are well informed about the steps needed to be successful in medical school,” said Warren Lockette, MD, senior associate dean for diversity and inclusion at the School of Medicine. “The warmth of their personalities and caring they display are especially appreciated by all of the students who have benefited from their knowledge, experience and guidance. Like our students embarking on medical careers, we faculty also are appreciative that Robin and Andrea are always willing

to go the extra mile to help students. Caring isn’t just about patients; it extends to all facets of our medical education programs.”

For Clay, his role as diversity and inclusion recruitment coordinator grants him access to prospective medical students from various different backgrounds. The MU Excellence in Learning Program is one such example.

“The MU Excellence in Learning Program exposes inner-city high school students from St. Louis to what life is like as an MU medical student,” Clay said. “The program gives students life-altering shadowing experiences, in addition to interactions with current medical students, undergraduate students and health care professionals.”

Clay also serves as an adviser for the Mizzou Minority Association of Pre-Health Students, a student organization in which issues concerning minority pre-med students are discussed.

Clay has worked in recruitment for the School of Medicine for more than four years. Prior to MU, Clay worked at Lincoln University in Jefferson City, where he successfully worked to increase the Hispanic population on the campus.

“My hope for the medical school is simple,” Clay said. “I hope for more representation of all marginalized and underrepresented groups, and more resources to ensure that every medical student feels included and proud to be a Tiger.”

While their titles and job duties may differ, their ultimate goal for the medical school couldn’t be more unified: to make the medical school a more diverse, inclusive learning environment for “all people.”

“My hopes for the medical school’s future in terms of diversity are very similar to my hopes for the country we live in,” Simmons said. “I hope each individual takes the time to make diversity matter. I hope that when someone sees an injustice, they speak up, even if the injustice wasn’t toward them. I hope that when someone speaks up, the other person acknowledges and learns from them, and makes an effort to grow.”

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