

Belmont ECO Team
Climate Action Project Executive Summary

Title: Integrating Environmental Justice into Medical Education

Overview: Our Climate Action Project aims to address the lack of environmental justice teachings in medical education. Environmental justice (EJ) is the topic pertaining to how environmental crises disproportionately affect marginalized groups. Environmental injustices are becoming one of the strongest social health determinants, with minority populations disproportionately facing impacts on their health as a result. Given the worsening reality of climate change, it is likely that environmental injustices will continue to exacerbate alongside it, and it is imperative that the future generation of doctors are equipped to handle this in their clinical practice. To address this, we are collaborating with curriculum development faculty at the developing Frist College of Medicine at Belmont University on implementing an environmental justice curriculum, designed by us, into their medical school program.

Goals:

- To set up a meeting with faculty at the medical school who are involved in curriculum development to pitch our idea.
- To design a curriculum that highlights environmental justice (EJ), its impacts on human health, and ways for medical students to be equipped to best support affected patients as future doctors.
- To come to an agreement with medical school faculty that our curriculum will be implemented and that we would play a role in the implementation process.
- Have our environmental justice curriculum be ready for teaching from the very first inaugural medical school class, and years beyond.

Timeline:

- December
 - Met with Dr. Jennifer Thomas, who was Elma's cancer biology professor and dual-appointed at the medical school as a faculty member.
 - Introduced to some potential challenges to prepare for.
 - Was connected to her colleague Dr. Karen Lewis (see January below for details on her).
 - Was encouraged to reach out to the 2022 AAMC Conference Keynote Speaker, Dr. Renee Salas, for advice on our curriculum.
 - Began crafting an EJ curriculum.
- January
 - Met with Dr. Karen Lewis, director of the social justice curriculum of the medical school. Together, we agreed on the vision and came up with a plan for implementation.
 - We refined our EJ curriculum based on the needs of the medical school.
- February and March
 - Met with Dr. Karen Lewis, Dr. Alex Atkinson, and Dr. Jean Shelton to refine our EJ curriculum and finalize a game plan for implementation.
 - Met with Dr. Renee Salas, emergency medicine physician at Harvard/Massachusetts General Hospital and climate health expert, 2022 AAMC Keynote Speaker as mentioned earlier.
 - Obtained some great advice and guidance on what a climate health medical education curriculum should include, included this advice into the "Emerging Effects" bucket of our EJ curriculum.
 - Put on an event targeted at undergraduate students interested in health, called the "Teach-In for Climate Justice: Environmental Justice and Health."

Outcomes:

- Our EJ curriculum WILL be implemented into the medical school curriculum, in the following ways:
 - "Impact Week" Lecture – EJ lecture designed by us with a focus on environmental injustices in our home state of Tennessee. **See attached JPEG for lecture outline/details.**
 - Field Days during Medical School Orientation – Visits to communities of Tennessee impacted by environmental injustices during orientation week.

- Experiential Activities – Hands-on, microbiology-style laboratories with particulate matter strips and heat-tracking necklaces to see disparities in air quality/pollution hands-on.
- Co/Extracurricular Experiences – Opportunities for co- and extra-curricular service and research in the EJ field.
- Distinctions at Graduation – Opportunities for an EJ distinction at graduation with the granting of the medical degree, earned by substantial EJ-related co/extracurricular involvement.

Impact:

- Every medical student class of over 100 students, beginning from the first inaugural class in fall 2024, will be taught our curriculum through all its elements.
- Through the field days and experiential activities in our curriculum, the Middle Tennessee area will be positively impacted through the medical students going out into communities impacted by environmental injustices and serving them.
- Given the socially regressive history of Belmont University and how it has historically dropped the ball on issues relating to marginalized communities, our CAP being implemented is a huge, progressive step in the right direction towards making Belmont more of a champion for the underserved.

Potential for Ongoing Impact:

- Our first-of-its-kind EJ curriculum tailored for medical school harnesses the increasing importance of EJ education in medicine, and can create a ripple effect that encourages other medical schools to focus on EJ as well. This means thousands more future physicians across the nation who are equipped to deal with the health impacts of environmental injustices.
- At Belmont alone, each class has over 100 students, meaning that in just a ten-year period, that is around 1000 new physicians-in-training who are becoming experts in EJ and health.
- The creation of more physicians who are prepared to deal with environmental injustices and its health consequences means that the populations most impacted by these crises will have some of their burdens lifted through medical care that accounts for the way their environment impacts their health.

Challenges and Triumphs:

- Interfering with the Medical School Accreditation Process
 - Triumph – After meeting with Dr. Lewis the first time, she loved our idea so much that she found a way to work around the accreditation process to implement it. When the medical school is reviewed by the LCME (medical school licensing organization) for accreditation, our curriculum will be part of the medical school agenda submitted for accreditation. They believe our EJ curriculum will be an asset for this process!
- Getting the Right Connections
 - Triumph – We used our existing connections wisely to make our way up to the medical school. Knowing that my cancer biology professor was also dual appointed at the medical school, I set up a meeting with her to talk to her about our CAP and see if she can get us connected with the curriculum development faculty at the medical school. She did just that!
 - We also gained a lot of valuable perspectives, connections, and advice through Project Green Challenge and the speakers at the PGC finals. We are grateful to the PGC network.
- Convincing Medical School Faculty to Implement Our Ideas
 - Triumph – The faculty saw our facts and our passions and due to this authenticity were right on board with us, and saw how our CAP would be an asset to their medical school's curriculum.

Key Learnings and What We Are Most Proud Of:

- This was a very ambitious project with lots of obstacles along the way, including navigating the bureaucracy of medical licensing and getting powerful people to listen to us. By being ourselves and letting our passion and knowledge for EJ and medicine shine through, we were able to find the success we sought after and more.
- Find people who will advocate for you, and will help you and stand by you as you overcome barriers.
- Knowing that the implementation of our plan will continue to impact medical education in a profound way for years after this CAP is immensely meaningful to us.
- We proved that even in the face of powerful, bureaucratic institutions, student voices and passion can be a true agent and catalyst for change.