

Andy Feinstein: Working to fill a vital need in our community, state

By ANDY FEINSTEIN

November 14, 2021 at 7:00 a.m.

The University of Northern Colorado was established as a normal school in 1889 in response to a need for educators across Colorado in its earliest years of statehood.

Over the decades that followed, our mission expanded as our community and state grew and changed. While our roots remain strong as a leader in preparing teachers and school administrators, we have diversified our academic portfolio to include programs that prepare students to be leaders in a variety of fields in service of the common good.

Today, we find ourselves positioned to meet another critical challenge that will shape the health, strength, and growth of Greeley, Weld County, and the state for many years to come.

There is a startling shortage of doctors in Colorado; only 34.6% of the state's need for physicians is currently met according to the U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration. Physician shortages are already negatively affecting access to care, a problem felt most acutely in rural communities.

The problem will only get worse as doctors retire and the state's population continues to grow. The two existing medical education programs in Colorado cannot produce enough new doctors to meet current and future demand. In fact, they have to turn away thousands of applicants.

The hospital systems in our community called on us to act and over the last few months we have been exploring the development of an osteopathic medical school at UNC.

You may recall that we explored starting an osteopathic medical school several years ago and wonder what is different about this current effort. The university's earlier planning was for a partnership with a for-profit entity, which may not have been in our best interest.

In contrast, our current plans are that a new medical school in Greeley would be operated by UNC as a not-for-profit enterprise. That means rather than having investors and shareholders reap the rewards, the beneficiaries will be the people who live and work in our communities and state.

This approach will allow us to reinvest in academic programs like Nursing that further expand our capacity to directly influence the health and strength of communities across Colorado. We learned a lot from that first attempt, too, and have taken a thoughtful and measured approach in our outreach and planning—consulting with healthcare leaders, local and state officials, and seeking input from our university community.

This is an exciting opportunity for UNC, but also for Greeley, Weld County, and Colorado. A recent feasibility study conducted by Tripp Umbach, a leading firm in medical education consulting, validated the demand for new physicians and expanded capacity for medical education; it also assessed economic impact and the capacity and commitment of healthcare providers to support clinical placements.

I shared the results with our Board of Trustees Friday and they authorized us to proceed with the process of hiring a founding dean to lead continued planning pending statutory authority from the state and begin the application process for accreditation.

We are excited to continue pursuing this project in partnership with and in service to our community. I look forward to keeping you engaged as we move forward.

We are still in the early stages and there are several gates to pass in order for a new medical school to come to fruition, but are making great progress. I hope you are as excited as I am about the extraordinarily positive impact opening an osteopathic medical school would have on improving access to healthcare in our community, region, and state, as well as what it will do to expand educational pathways for Colorado students who dream to be doctors.

— Andy Feinstein is president of the University of Northern Colorado