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Historic \$1 billion donation makes NY med school tuition-free in perpetuity

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The Buzz This Week

The Albert Einstein College of Medicine, the medical school in New York City affiliated with Montefiore Health, has received a historic \$1 billion donation that will eliminate tuition fees for students at the institution.

This contribution comes from Dr. Ruth Gottesman, Chair of the Einstein Board of Trustees, Montefiore board member, Clinical Professor Emerita of Pediatrics, and long-standing member of the Einstein community. Her late husband, David Gottesman, was an early investor in Warren Buffett's Berkshire Hathaway and left behind a substantial fortune. Dr. Gottesman's gift is the largest ever for a medical school and makes Einstein the second tuition-free medical school in the country after NYU School of Medicine became tuition-free in 2018.

Starting in August, the medical school will be tuition-free in perpetuity for current and incoming students. The college, which enrolls about 1,000 students, will also reimburse tuition fees for current fourth-year students for their spring semester.

Einstein is located in the Bronx, New York's poorest borough and county with the worst health outcomes in New York State. With this shift to a tuition-free model, Einstein hopes to broaden the accessibility of medical education. It aims to attract a diverse array of students, breaking down financial barriers that often limit access to medical education.

As the medical community and prospective students celebrate this milestone, the implications of such a generous gift will likely resonate for years to come.

Why It Matters

The unprecedented donation to Albert Einstein College of Medicine signifies more than just financial relief for its students. It's a catalyst for reshaping medical education that has broad implications for student diversity, financial barriers, and physician wellbeing.

The removal of tuition fees at Einstein represents a significant step toward reducing the financial barriers to medical education. This is a critical factor, considering that 73% of medical school graduates have educational debt, owing more than \$250,000 on average.

Debt often influences career choices, such as practice location, and contributes to mental health issues. New York studies found that primary care physicians with less than \$100,000 in medical education debt were more likely to locate in health professional shortage areas than those with greater debt. Meanwhile, high levels of medical school debt among medical students have been linked to poorer mental well-being and negatively affect academic outcomes.

The lessening of financial pressure may also encourage a broader spectrum of students to consider a medical career, particularly those from under-represented communities. For instance, in the year following NYU School of Medicine's transition to a tuition-free model, applications from under-represented groups surged by 102%, with total applications increasing by 44%. Without the barrier of tuition, Einstein can also enhance its commitment to recruiting from under-represented communities. This is crucial, as it has been shown that racial and ethnic concordance between patients and healthcare providers is associated with improved patient experiences, especially in communities that historically lack access to quality healthcare.

Should more medical schools follow NYU and Einstein's lead in adopting tuition-free models, it's important to anticipate and manage potential unexpected results. Increased application volume could lead to greater selectivity in admissions. While heightened selectivity can elevate academic standards, it's important for institutions to also actively safeguard and promote diversity within their student body. Ensuring that the drive for academic excellence coexists with a commitment to diversity will be crucial for institutions aiming to broaden access to medical education while fostering an inclusive learning environment.

Einstein's transformation into a tuition-free institution is a monumental step toward a more equitable, diverse, and mentally resilient medical workforce. The healthcare industry can extract valuable insights and outcomes from tuition-free models as leaders seek to enhance inclusivity and resiliency.

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Floyd Pitts

Research Associate