



## **Perspective / Opinion**

# **Eight Years In: An Update from MCW-Central Wisconsin**

By Lisa Grill Dodson, MD

*Dr. Dodson, the inaugural dean at MCW-Central Wisconsin, shares the measurable impact that the campus has had on the region and students ...*

I arrived in Central Wisconsin in 2014 to start MCW-Central Wisconsin without so much as a place to sit or a single clinical preceptor on the roster, so it feels amazing and a bit surreal to be writing about our successes and challenges eight years on. MCW-CW is graduating our fourth class next month which means that some of our earliest graduates (2019) are finishing residency and will be able to return to the area to practice this summer and fall. After eight years of measuring inputs and outputs, we are finally beginning to see some of our outcomes.

We set out to accomplish several things:

- Admit students with connections to the region and interest in (and aptitude for) primary care and psychiatry careers
- Train them in a community-engaged environment
- Help them develop the skill set to practice in smaller and less well-resourced environments
- Keep them connected to the communities we serve

The regional campuses were a new concept for MCW and the state of Wisconsin and were not initially universally accepted as a necessary strategy. Over time, our proponents have multiplied, and our detractors have decreased, and I like to think that the work that we are doing to provide northern and central Wisconsin with well-trained MCW doctors is now widely accepted as an appropriate mission for MCW. It will be years before the full effect of the campuses can be assessed, but the early indicators are promising. As our first graduates return later this year, we will soon start to see how well this worked.

The MCW regional campuses attract several thousand applicants each year. We admit a group of twenty students to MCW-CW that look just a bit different from the MCW student population. Through targeted admissions we matriculate more students from Wisconsin and more students from non-urban areas, including students who are “place-bound” and would not have the opportunity to pursue a medical education without the regional campuses. We encourage students to explore primary care careers in an environment where they can see excellent primary care and specialty physicians caring for whole communities. Our students spend time with community mentors and both MCW and community-based faculty committed to changing the health of communities from both inside and outside of the exam room. Many of them complete MCW’s rigorous curriculum in three years on an accelerated pathway that requires even more of them than most medical students.

MCW-CW students complete Scholarly Pathway projects that have now impacted fourteen counties and thousands of lives in north central Wisconsin, including multiple projects that have now become sustained through partnership with MCW and the community. One sustained project now impacts all middle schoolers in a local school district with curriculum and support for better mental health and wellness. Another led to the founding of the only free clinic in Marathon County. All of them lead to physicians with an enhanced skill set in improving the health of the community.

In a region of the state with more than 50% of primary care physicians over the age of fifty-five, MCW-CW students may well represent one of the major bright spots in recruiting a sustainable physician workforce for north central Wisconsin and surrounding areas. More than 50% of MCW-CW graduates report that they plan to practice in communities of less than 50,000 (GQ data, 2019-2021), compared to 10% of all MCW students and significantly less than 10% of all US medical students. Nearly 70% of MCW-CW graduates have entered residencies in primary care specialties or psychiatry, compared to less than 40% of US MD graduates nationwide (NRMP data).

As our graduates begin to return to north central Wisconsin to assume clinical and leadership roles, I have never been prouder of them, of our student and campus community, our community faculty, and of the many faculty and staff at MCW who have made MCW-CW possible. Everyone deserves great medical care, regardless of their zip code, and I am honored to have been a part of the MCW team who envisioned and carried out the efforts to ensure that the benefits of MCW are available to Wisconsin residents statewide, well into the future.

*Lisa Grill Dodson, MD, is the founding dean of MCW-Central Wisconsin and holds the Sentry Deanship. She is a Professor in the Department of Family and Community Medicine, and an advocate for all things rural.*