

Pioneering Class of 2024 Launches the Innovative NextGenMD Curriculum

No one could have anticipated that the Miller School of Medicine's ambitious, innovative new curriculum would be launched in the middle of a global pandemic. But the extraordinary challenges that reality presents did not detract from the excitement of the arrival of the first class to experience the NextGenMD curriculum – and in fact, the pioneers of the Class of 2024 know they will be significantly better prepared to respond to COVID-19, and to the public health challenges that follow it.

“This is truly a historic time in the annals of the Miller

School of Medicine because, for the very first time, we are hosting a virtual welcome,” Henri R. Ford, M.D., M.H.A., dean and chief academic officer of the Miller School, told the students. “Rest assured that the occasion is as momentous as ever. Your skills, dedication, commitment, and compassion are needed today more than ever before.



Dr. Hilit Mechaber takes a selfie with some members of the Class of 2024.

“Our new curriculum will equip you with the necessary tools to become transformational leaders who will shape the future of medicine, and champion discovery and its translation into clinical interventions to improve the health of humanity. Thanks to the incredibly hard work of the teams that developed this innovative curriculum, you will be uniquely prepared to respond to the challenges posed by COVID-19 and other future pandemics.”

A new focus on health system science is central to creating these leaders of the future of medicine, said Latha Chandran,

M.D., M.P.H., executive dean and founding chair of the Department of Medical Education. And in the new curriculum, every student will earn a second degree or choose a scholarly concentration pathway.

Both faculty and students are excited about the enhanced emphasis on mentorship built into NextGenMD. The students are divided into groups of eight or nine, and every student will have the same faculty physician as their mentor, known as a longitudinal clinical educator, for the full four years. “We’re truly focusing on the personal and professional development of every learner,” Dr. Chandran said.

“Despite the challenges, our students are going to uniquely learn about resiliency and dealing with the unknown,” said Gauri Agarwal, M.D., associate dean for clinical curriculum. “What gives me great confidence is that we’ve had such an incredible team. Hundreds of the best and brightest minds at our health system have been researching what has worked well around the country in order to design this curriculum, and melding those methods with our own ideas.”

Amar Deshpande, M.D., assistant dean for medical education and leader of the curriculum redesign, said some trepidation accompanies any big change. That was true of the creation of the Miller School’s M.D./M.P.H. program – which, 10 years later, is one of the largest, most respected programs in the country.

“Even though we’re in one of the most unprecedented times in modern health care, we’re extremely excited to launch NextGenMD,” Dr. Deshpande said.

“It feels like we’ve been working toward this moment for several years,” said Hilit F. Mechaber, M.D., associate dean for student services. “It’s finally coming to fruition. The excitement is still palpable, although it is quite different. It feels a little distant to not have all 200 students in front of us, but at the same time we tried our best to garner all that great energy that makes us who we are as a Miller School family.”

The new medical students are full of that energy, excited to begin what Dean Ford calls “the most noble, the most exciting, the most exhilarating, and the most fulfilling career anyone can pursue.”



“These are really unprecedented times, but this is it,” said student Andres Perez. “This is what we’ve been pursuing for the past 20-plus years, from little kids dreaming of being doctors to actually being here.”

Being at the Miller School now means mapping out an individualized learning experience and developing the skills

to become outstanding physicians, educators, advocates, and researchers, Dr. Chandran said.

That doesn't happen in big lectures, said Richard Weisman, Pharm.D., associate dean for admissions and enrollment. "Now we can take the material and put it together in a phenomenally compact and enriched format and then spend most of our time making sure that the students fully understand it," he said.

Though details of the clinical schedule are still being worked out because of COVID-19, earlier experiences with patients will make a huge difference for the Class of 2024. The new symptom-based curriculum "frees up the student to think more broadly across multiple organ systems about what could be happening with their patient," Dr. Agarwal said. "Our hope is that this type of learning will lead to more accurate diagnoses and better patient outcomes, which is the holy grail of any curricular innovation."

Dr. Chandran told the new class that the Miller School family is committed to helping them succeed. "I was impressed with the number of people who have been thoughtfully committed to making this a great experience for you," she said. "What we need from you is feedback – what worked, what didn't. We want to make it better, to become a top-notch institution in the country."

Dean Ford encouraged the students to be driven by "the relentless pursuit of excellence. You have signed up for lifelong learning in order to serve your patients." The foundational attributes of character, compassion, honesty and integrity are essential for success, the Dean said, as are the extensive support systems in place to help students when they

need it.

“On behalf of the entire faculty, I welcome each and every one of you to the Miller School of Medicine,” Dean Ford said. “Members of the great Class of 2024, you are the hope of humanity.”

“I look forward to meeting you in person on the other side of this pandemic.”