



A Gift and a Challenge: William T. Schleyer, DU '73, Hon. '06

William T. Schleyer, DU '73, Hon. '06, is one of those rare people who, upon recognizing a problem, seek to correct it at its core. Schleyer, now retired from leading roles in the communications industry, remains an active force in the Drexel community. Inspired by what he sees as a social injustice, combined with an appreciation for the College of Medicine, Schleyer created a tuition reimbursement program to benefit primary care physicians practicing in Philadelphia. It is both a gift and a challenge – one he fully expects Drexel alumni will rise to and meet.

The Schleyer Family Matching Gift Challenge for Scholarships in Medicine addresses what Schleyer identifies as two looming problems: a lack of access to healthcare in urban areas and the crushing debt confronting newly minted physicians.

Schleyer first became interested in healthcare when his middle son entered medical school. Learning more about the industry, he became very concerned that urban “access to healthcare is bad and is getting worse.” In addition, unemployment is high and income levels are not rising with inflation. “Given the reimbursement rate for Medicaid, and given the large preponderance of Medicaid recipients in inner-city markets, it will make the economics of being a [primary care] physician very difficult,” he assesses. “You can become a general practitioner on the Main Line and do okay, because you’re getting a lot of insurance reimbursement. But if you go into the inner city where it’s usually a Medicaid population, then being a general practitioner [makes] the economics significantly different.”

That economic notion introduces his second reason for creating the Matching Gift Challenge. Medical school students face a tremendous amount of debt upon graduating. “The debt load is so large now for kids coming out of medical school. It’s a massive problem we have to solve,” Schleyer insists. “We have to provide means for them to not make [professional] choices based on what specialties pay. General practitioners are probably the lowest paid [specialty].”

Schleyer has yoked these two problems together in an attempt to remedy them both. He believes that debt-laden students are reluctant to become general practitioners. In addition, “There’s going to be a real shortage of healthcare providers in urban areas.” To this end, he wanted “to try and do something, albeit very small, to help at least the city of Philadelphia area.” The Schleyer Family Matching Gift Challenge for Scholarships in Medicine provides debt relief to students who become primary care physicians in Philadelphia.



Schleyer was particularly motivated to use the College of Medicine as the vehicle for his generosity because two of his sons are enrolled at the College. He sees their experience as incredibly positive. "A lot of the faculty and administration – I can't say enough about them," he observes. "They're terrific people. They're very focused on the students. The feedback I get from my kids has been incredible: how passionate they are, educating them in a way that they'll be the very best they can be. When you hear from your kids, 'These are great people, and they have this very difficult mission,' it inspires one to try and do something to help out."

By having some of their school debt forgiven, Schleyer hopes graduates will be led to seriously consider becoming general practitioners in Philadelphia. He modestly says, "Two million dollars doesn't solve a lot of problems, but to the extent that you can leverage that and give more money through a matching program, you've improved the reach of the concept."

Indeed, Schleyer hopes individuals as well as corporations will be inspired by this challenge and generously give to the scholarship. He says he and his wife have always been interested in philanthropy. It's part of their mindset to "take some of the resources we have and put them back into efforts to help other people." Urban healthcare is one of those critical areas of need.

"There will always be a multi-tiered level of healthcare service provided to citizens in this country. There will never be a level playing field," he surmises. "Anything we can do as individuals to narrow those imbalances would be a positive thing." The problem is daunting and will not be easily solved. Yet the Matching Gift Challenge is a step in the right direction. Schleyer says, "There will always be some that are underserved. It's going to take private initiatives, whether it be individuals, corporations, or intact services to help level the playing field. For those of us that are lucky, we should have an interest in helping out our fellow Americans."

The College of Medicine is fortunate that Schleyer has identified it as a vehicle for achieving his altruistic ends. The city of Philadelphia will ultimately benefit from additional well-trained primary care physicians. Drexel's graduating physicians will similarly benefit from both debt forgiveness and the freedom to make vocational choices that are less influenced by economics. Schleyer explains, "One of the reasons we gave this gift was because of how strong the faculty is, and how strong the administration is, and how committed they are to the students. The student experience is very, very positive at Drexel. When people come into contact with that, it makes them want to help."

To learn about contributing to the Schleyer Family Matching Gift Challenge for Scholarships in Medicine, please contact John Zabinski at jjz@drexel.edu or 215-255-7343.