Fighting Back Against the Growing Health Care Crisis in Sonoma County
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For the last two academic years, SSU has strongly supported a campus community initiative on the very substantial health care crisis growing in our county. The Provost’s Office, the Psychology Department and the School of Social Sciences acted as the primary sponsors during the first year; the Provost’s Office and the School of Science and Technology were primary sponsors for the second year. The seriousness of the crisis has been described by Healdsburg resident Gilbert Ojeda, Director of the California Program on Access to Care, University of California Office of the President:

“Sonoma County is ‘ground zero’ for California changing health care industry. We have seen physician groups dissolve and physicians leave the County, employers and individuals scrambling to respond to the closure of one of the area’s two dominant health plans, communities struggling to preserve their local hospitals through parcel taxes and local control, and consumers and their advocates joining with public and private organizations to have a dialogue. But now, the community finds insurance premium annual increases of up to 30 percent or more and dramatic cuts to government health services due to state and local deficits…. What we do in Sonoma County could very well have implications for every county and region in the state.”

First two academic years - During the SSU Initiative’s first two years, it has hosted three significant conferences on campus which have attracted wideranging interest and support. This period of work has focused, first, on analyzing how we got to this terrible point, second, on where precisely we as a community are now, third, where we are heading, if we do informed planning and action and if we do not, and, fourth, how we can analyze, communicate, and negotiate our way forward. The Initiative conferences, monthly campus meetings for interested faculty and students, campus-community outreach dialogue with a number of community organizations, development and operation of a SSU health care crisis educational website, discussions of increasing dialogue among campus health care studies, and analytic sessions have provided the foundation on which next steps can be built.

Spring 2004 conference rationale - Preparations for the most recent SSU health care crisis conference, Spring 2004, and the meeting itself focused on what is now being done constructively in our County, on what primary steps forward are most needed, and on identifying primary stakeholders who must work together to create improvements.

Spring 2004 conference co-sponsorship – Our Spring 2004 conference attracted co-sponsorship by five SSU Schools, six Departments, and three other campus organizations, plus ten contributing community partners, including such major
Sonoma County institutions as the Community Foundation Sonoma County, Kaiser Foundation Health Plan, the Central Labor Council, and, by extension, the Association of California Health Care Districts.

**Initiative plans for the new academic year 2004-2005** - The Spring 2004 conference concluded with a call for a major follow up planning meeting which is now scheduled for the SSU Commons on Monday evening, October 4th, from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. Two sub-committees are preparing proposals for plans of action to be presented at that meeting which will also encourage stakeholder dialogue in concrete planning for the year.

What are some of the community and campus benefits that the Initiative can accomplish with continued funding?

- In its work thus far, the Initiative has already identified literally fifty methods each of which, if appropriately fitted to local conditions and implemented with the agreement of the parties, could save significant costs and improve the quality of service to Sonoma County residents.

- Consultant Tom Moore and UC researcher Gil Ojeda call for the creation of an Initiative “Data Project”, which, among other benefits, can, in consultant Moore’s words, “document the sources of health care costs in [the] community”. These can clarify and target key areas for improvement.

- The Initiative can take one of the important leads in facilitating movement on the imperative that stakeholder organizations and individuals increase dialogue and planning, as Adele says, “by bringing together purchasers of health insurance, providers of health services, labor representatives, academics, government officials, community organizers”, and others. As consultant Tom Moore states, “we also know from considerable research and experience that cost variations are also driven by utilization patterns and barriers to appropriate care...[Experience] vividly demonstrate(s) the power of combining purchasers with intermediaries when bargaining with providers....Alliances with other purchasers are essential to closing the price differential[s]....”

- The Initiative can be a key co-facilitator of the opportunity for Sonoma County, as Adele Amodeo MPH states, “to be a prototype for planning and creating a healthy community”.

- Further, the Initiative can help the parties become more aware of possibilities on how to further fundamental re-thinking how to approach the crisis. As George Flores, MD, MPH, states: “By leveraging healthy public policy with sound medical and public health policy and practice that emphasizes prevention and targets the most vulnerable, the crisis in
downstream health care can be alleviated…(by) upstream health action in Sonoma County."

• This planning work can lead to Sonoma County organizations and those with significant Sonoma County constituencies becoming leaders together, as consultant Moore states, in the “development of community based purchasing coalitions that negotiate directly with local providers to assure reasonable costs and acceptable quality.”

• All in all, Sonoma County organizations can create the drive which can lead, in the words of the Initiative’s Spring 1993 Conference, to “Lowering Health Care Costs, Completing Health Care Access”.