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University of Calgary and University of Lethbridge celebrate launch of Southern Alberta Medical Program

A distinct need was identified, and through a forward-thinking, multi-partner approach, the [Southern Alberta Medical Program \(SAMP\)](#) was created to build physician capacity in rural and regional areas of southern Alberta. With its first cohort of students already in training, SAMP's vision of enhancing the availability of physicians in rural Alberta is now clearly in focus. Today, the southern Alberta community came together to officially launch this essential program.

One of two newly established Rural Medical Education Program Training Centres in Alberta, SAMP is a joint initiative between the Cumming School of Medicine at the University of Calgary and the University of Lethbridge. Through Government of Alberta funding support, the program aims to attract learners with strong connections to rural and regional communities.



Access to a family physician is incredibly challenging for many families in small- to mid-sized centres across Alberta — particularly for rural and Indigenous communities. Research shows that recruiting learners from rural and regional areas and training them in these locations leads to more doctors choosing rural practice.

“This new program is an important step in building Alberta’s physician workforce, expanding access to care and ensuring more Albertans can receive care closer to home,” says Justin Wright, Minister of Primary and Preventative Health Services.

Only a broad, committed collaborative approach could have achieved the formation of SAMP, and in addition to the relationship between the University of Lethbridge, University of Calgary and the Government of Alberta, key partnerships were developed with the Alberta Medical Association, the Rural Health Professions Action Plan (RhPAP) and rural communities throughout southern Alberta.

“So much work needed to be done behind the scenes to make this happen, and what I learned from participating in this process is how committed everyone is to this issue and how passionate people are to creating a meaningful solution to physician access,” says Dr. Richard Buck, associate dean, SAMP.

SAMP learners will follow the University of Calgary’s three-year undergraduate medical education curriculum, which focuses on generalism and patient-centeredness. Pre-clerkship learning during the first 18 months of training will take place primarily on the University of Lethbridge campus. Clerkship will then take place in rural communities across southern Alberta, as well as in Lethbridge and Medicine Hat, with Indigenous health, cultural safety and meaningful community engagement as important components of learner development.

“We are expanding opportunities for students to pursue medical education closer to home while gaining valuable experience in rural and regional communities across southern Alberta,” says Dr. Sandra Davidson, PhD, provost and vice-president (academic) at the University of Calgary. “This program is an important milestone for both institutions and for the communities we serve, and we are grateful to the Government of Alberta for its investment in a program that will create new pathways for students, support the development of the health-care workforce and improve access to care across the region.”

ULethbridge’s Dr. Michelle Helstein, provost and vice-president (academic) says the program will showcase the best of both institutions.

“SAMP is an excellent example of how collaboration can create meaningful impact for students and communities alike,” says Helstein. “By combining the strengths of our two institutions, alongside crucial provincial funding, we’re helping to expand access to medical education while foregrounding rural and regional practice to support a stronger and more sustainable health-care system in Alberta.”

There are 20 learners in the first SAMP student cohort, with capacity for up to 30 students in each successive year. Full program capacity will see approximately 90 learners undergoing training by 2029.

“This program has the potential to build long-term sustainable capacity for physicians eager to work in our city and in rural and regional areas of southern Alberta, and that’s why celebrating today’s launch is so significant,” says Lethbridge Mayor Blaine Hyggen. “This vision was a long time in the making and involved so many people advocating for our communities, it really is gratifying to see where we are today and the promise of what’s to come.”

About SAMP

- In January 2023, the Government of Alberta invested \$1 million in the Universities of Lethbridge, Calgary, Alberta and Northwest Polytechnic to support the feasibility study of rural medical education programs
- In April 2024, Alberta’s Advanced Education Minister announced capital and operational funding to establish two Rural Medical Education Program Training Centres (University of Lethbridge (SAMP) and Northwest Polytechnic in Grande Prairie (NAMP))

- In May 2024, ULEthbridge and the University of Calgary signed a Memorandum of Understanding to formalize the partnership and jointly deliver the medical training program
- The Cumming School of Medicine Class of 2029 (i.e. the class starting July 2026) consists of 190 students, with 170 training at the Calgary campus and 20 located at the Lethbridge campus as part of the Southern Alberta Medical Program.
- SAMP will admit up to 30 students annually, ensuring program growth is guided by a commitment to student success and a high-quality educational experience
- Over 50 physicians across southern Alberta are serving as preceptors and teaching medical learners in classrooms, community clinics or hospital settings

To view online: <https://www.ulethbridge.ca/unews/article/university-calgary-and-university-lethbridge-celebrate-launch-southern-alberta-medical>

PHOTO: Celebrating the launch of the Southern Alberta Medical Program are (L to R) MLA Chelsea Petrovic, UCalgary Provost and Vice-President (Academic) Dr. Sandra Davidson, MLA Nathan Neudorf, MLA Justin Wright, Lethbridge Mayor Blaine Hyggen, ULEthbridge President and Vice-Chancellor Dr. Digvir Jayas, MLA Rob Miyashiro, SAMP Associate Dean Dr. Richard Buck, ULEthbridge Provost and Vice-President (Academic) Dr. Michelle Helstein.

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Contact:

Trevor Kenney, Manager of Public Affairs
 403-329-2710
 403-360-7639 (cell)
trevor.kenney@uleth.ca
 @ULEthbridge

Our University's Blackfoot name is Iniskim, meaning Sacred Buffalo Stone. The University is located in traditional Blackfoot Confederacy territory. We honour the Blackfoot people and their traditional ways of knowing in caring for this land, as well as all Indigenous Peoples who have helped shape and continue to strengthen our University community.