



# Medicine as a Calling

## A Study into the Motivations and Barriers of BUCOM Students' Interest in Practicing Medicine in Underserved Communities

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### Background

Over 100 million Americans live in Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSAs), regions with insufficient healthcare providers. Programs like the National Health Service Corps (NHSC) offer financial incentives to increase access to care in these regions, but both short-term recruitment and long-term retention remain challenges.<sup>1</sup> Research suggests financial incentives encourage initial service, but retention depends on factors such as work-life balance, professional growth, and mission.<sup>2,3</sup>

Baptist University College of Osteopathic Medicine (BUCOM) is a faith-based school in Memphis, TN, that emphasizes Christian values, as reflected in its motto, "Your career is your calling." With a commitment to service, BUCOM prioritizes training for primary care in underserved areas and integrates service projects into their curriculum. This study examines the response on the perspective, motivation and barriers of faith-based BUCOM students' to serving in HPSAs.

### Hypothesis and Aims

**Hypothesis:** Medical students at BUCOM will report that non-financial factors, including faith-based mission alignment, service orientation, and perceived professional purpose, are significant predictors of interest in practicing in underserved communities.

This study has the following aims:

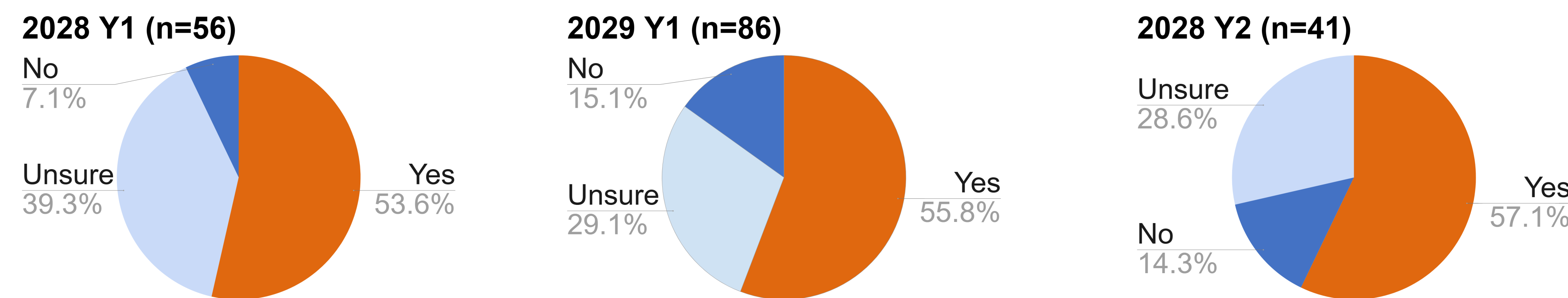
**Aim 1:** to assess the barriers and motivations that influence BUCOM students' interest in practicing in underserved communities.

**Aim 2:** to understand how medical students at a faith-based institution perceive financial and non-financial incentives in shaping their career choices and whether faith-based education plays a role in fostering commitment to the underserved.

### Results

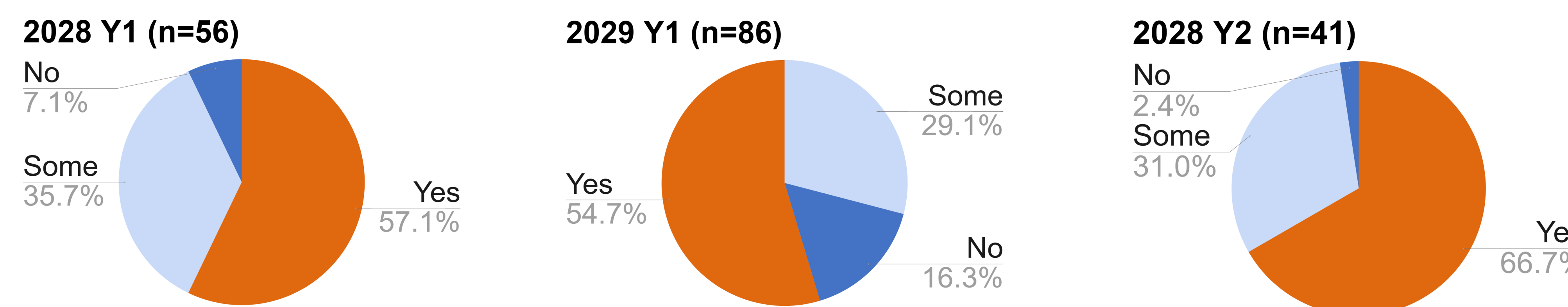
A total of 184 responses have been collected across three student cohorts. Across all years surveyed, 54–57% of students indicated they intend to practice in underserved areas, more than double the U.S. national of 27% of medical student indicating their interest.

#### Intent to Practice in a Medically Underserved Area



**Figure 1.** Across all three cohorts, a majority of students reported "yes" when asked about their intent to practice in a medically underserved area, with responses remaining fairly consistent by class year (2028 Y1: 53.6%, 2028 Y2: 57.1%, 2029 Y1: 55.8%). A minority in each cohort remained "unsure" (29.1%–39.3%), while relatively few students selected "no" (7.1%–15.1%). Taken together, these findings suggest broad interest in underserved practice among BUCOM students, alongside a meaningful group whose intentions are still being formed.

#### BUCOM Faith Based Influence to Serve



**Figure 2.** Most students across cohorts reported that BUCOM's faith-based mission influences their willingness to serve, with "yes" as the most common response in each group (2028 Y1: 57.1%, 2028 Y2: 66.7%, 2029 Y1: 54.7%). An additional proportion selected "some" influence (29.1%–35.7%), while relatively few reported "no" influence in the 2028 cohorts (2.4%–7.1%), though this was somewhat higher in the 2029 Y1 cohort (16.3%). Overall, the findings suggest that BUCOM's faith-based identity is perceived by many students as an important factor shaping their willingness to serve in areas of need.

Financial incentives emerged as the most frequently selected motivator for practicing in an underserved area, with work-life balance consistently ranking as the leading non-financial factor. Faith-based mission and relational support were also commonly identified as meaningful motivators. In contrast, the most prominent perceived barriers to long-term retention were burnout and workload strain, followed by insufficient resources and concerns about family integration.

### Discussion

- BUCOM students, trained in a faith-based institution, report twice the national average commitment to underserved care (53.6% vs 27%)<sup>4</sup>. (**Figure 1**)
- Loan repayment was the most frequently cited motivator, but many students emphasized non-financial drivers (faith-based mission, work-life balance, and professional purpose) as other motivators.
- BUCOM's faith-based mission influenced students' willingness to serve: 57.1% "influenced" and 35.7% "somewhat influenced." (**Figure 2**)
- Findings support the idea that institutional values and mission messaging can shape career intentions toward underserved practice.
- The results support national literature indicating that mission alignment, identity, and professional fulfillment predict retention in underserved settings better than financial incentives alone.<sup>5,6,7</sup>
- Integrating mission-driven messaging, structured service-learning, and early underserved exposure may build a more sustainable workforce committed to underserved communities.

### Conclusion

Faith-based osteopathic medical schools may help extend osteopathic distinctiveness into Tennessee communities with the greatest need. By clarifying the motivations and barriers shaping students' interest in underserved practice and long-term retention, these findings offer actionable priorities that align with TOMA's mission to protect, promote, and support the distinct philosophy and practice of osteopathic medicine for the benefit of both the profession and the people of Tennessee. Priorities include strengthening training in sustainable practice models, advocating for structural supports that reduce burnout, and advancing research on system-level strategies that improve retention. *Together, these steps can help grow a resilient osteopathic workforce that serves where need is greatest while sustaining a lifelong sense of calling.*

### Acknowledgements

Special thanks to the BUCOM Classes of 2028 and 2029 for generously taking the time to participate in our survey.

### Methods

### References

