



ALBANY MEDICAL COLLEGE

'Second to None': The Powerhouse Legacy of Dean Vincent P. Verdile, MD

"Dean Verdile has profoundly affected Albany Medical College, elevating medical education and training, biomedical research and clinical care in our region. He has made a significant impact on our System, and we wish him the very best in his retirement."

— Robert T. Cushing, chair of the Board of Directors, Albany Med Health System

Dean Vincent Verdile at the 2017 Albany Medical College Commencement.

Dean Verdile viewed his charge 20 years ago as bringing "new light through old windows."

Or, as Albany Med President Emeritus **Jim Barba** recalls the appointment of **Vincent P. Verdile, MD, '84**, the 17th dean of Albany Medical College: "We needed a dean for the 21st century. And there's no doubt that Vince was that dean."

Today, Dean Verdile is the second longest-tenured dean of an American medical college and is preparing for retirement on Dec. 31, 2021—a retirement that will include staying on as dean emeritus to play a significant role in coaching and mentoring his successor and in providing strategy and leadership for an upcoming capital campaign.

As Barba looked back over time, he remembers the

year 2000 like yesterday. "The College was facing significant financial stress as well as challenges with the faculty and the Alumni Association. We needed the right dean to lead us out of the morass—a dean with political savvy, energy, vigor and strength.

"To find the right individual," he continued, "I convened a commission of physicians, Board members, and others to create a job description for what I called a '21st century dean.' When that job description was delivered to me, after much thought and research by the commission, I read it and realized it fit Vince like a glove."

Appointed by the Board of Directors as interim dean in 2000, less than a year later, it named Dr. Verdile as the official dean of Albany Medical College.

And so Vince Verdile set out to light up those windows. And he did.

He brought peace among the faculty; he brought stability to the academic departments; he balanced the budget; he addressed the Alumni Association challenges. He guided the completion of a new curriculum; he was successful in matriculating high caliber students. And much more—all while respecting the history and traditions of the College but also determined to advance its missions.

As **Dennis P. McKenna, MD, '92**, Albany Med president and CEO, observed: "Dr. Verdile's legacy is rich in significant accomplishments."

Kevin Kiley, MD, retired chair of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, believes the dean was

remarkable. “I believe he will go down in history as the best dean of Albany Medical College,” he said, noting the dean was “superb at selecting and developing chairs, outstanding in diversifying the faculty, brilliant in fundraising, and second to none in his selection of excellent students as well as in his interpersonal and problem-solving skills.”

The dean’s association with Albany Med dates to 1980 when he walked through the Medical College doors fresh out of Union College in Schenectady. A native of Troy, he graduated from medical school in 1984, and met his wife, Lou-Ann, a nurse in the Pediatric ICU, while here; following a residency and several positions at the University of Pittsburgh, he returned in 1993 to become vice chair of the Department of Emergency Medicine and a few years later chair. In 2016, in addition to dean, he was named the senior executive vice president for System Care Delivery to improve clinical integration, quality of care and patient access.

He was one of the first emergency medicine physicians in the U.S. to hold a college deanship. But, as he has said many times, “Being in the ED is great training for a dean. Both jobs are all about juggling many balls and being decisive.”

Or, as **Kevin Roberts, MD, ’77**, retired chair of the Department of Anesthesiology and past president of the College Alumni Association, notes: “He could handle a million things at a time—and always with a great sense of humor.”

Stabilizing Influence

Many point to Dean Verdile’s greatest contributions as stabilizing both the College finances and the academic environment.

One of the first areas the new dean tackled was finances; the College was hemorrhaging red ink, contributing to the unstable financial situation of the entire Medical Center at the time.

But “the dean always has a way of turning catastrophe into opportunity,” said Hospital General Director **Ferdinand J. Venditti, MD**. “He led the College during a very tumultuous time. The Balanced Budget Act of 1997 caused dramatic reductions in Medicare, and that spilled from Hospital to College. He had to develop a turn-around plan quickly because the College’s finances were abysmal. He did it—and he helped

put the Medical Center on stronger ground, both academically and clinically.”

Michael Gruenthal, MD, PhD, professor emeritus of neurology and retired chair of the Department of Neurology who held the Matthew Bender IV Endowed Chair for 12 years, observed, “Every academic medical center has financial challenges, and the budget process is always painful. Deans have to deal with the many needs, wants and asks from their department chairs.

“Watching Vince manage this process was amazing; he was masterful,” continued Dr. Gruenthal. “He had a unique talent to get everyone on board even if they were less than delighted with the final budget.”

Also, when Dr. Verdile became dean, he faced a faculty practice that wasn’t functional and was losing money, Dr. Venditti continued. “He had to right-size it.”

A highly controversial move at the time, Dr. Venditti said that, in subsequent years, the dean rebuilt the practice carefully and with much thought and consideration. He matched the needs of the College with the Hospital to provide specialties to the region that didn’t exist and enhance those that did. The goal: to create a world-class academic medical center close to home so families did not have to travel to New York City or Boston for leading-edge care. He did that, too. Today, the Albany Med Physicians Group has more than 500 doctors—carefully selected to meet that goal.

Looking back at the dean’s tenure, Dr. Venditti, who has been at Albany Med for 23 years and reports to the dean, said: “Like all academic medical centers, we are not over-resourced. What Vince has been able to accomplish with the resources at hand is nothing short of remarkable.”



Dean Verdile and Dr. Dennis Nmecha, ’20, emergency medicine resident physician at Strong Memorial Hospital, at an alumni event at the University of Rochester Medical Center earlier this year.

From Dr. Gruenthal’s perspective, “Stabilizing the faculty and the chairs by creating an atmosphere of trust, honesty, and openness will be Dr. Verdile’s greatest legacy. He should be incredibly proud of what he’s done, and Albany Med should be very, very grateful.”

John DePaola, chief administrative officer for System Care Delivery and executive associate dean, noted, “Nationally, the chairs of clinical departments typically turn over on average of about every three years. We’re stable. Look at our chairs; so many have exceeded 10 years or more during the dean’s tenure.”

In fact, so unusual is the Dean’s track record with College leadership stability, DePaola said, “It has been called out and commended in College accreditation site visits.”



Dean Verdile, center, with Dr. Henry Pohl, executive associate dean, left, and Dr. Ellen Cosgrove, vice dean for Academic Administration and Julio Sosa, MD, Chair of the Department of Medical Education, in 2019.



Dean Verdile, right, with William Gooch, MD, '84, left, and Denene Milakovich-Klosterman, MD, '85, in 1984, the year he graduated from Albany Medical College.

“For me, a fellow ED doctor, Vince’s retirement is bittersweet. He has worked long, smart and hard to bring our Medical College to where it is today; his retirement is well deserved. But I now contemplate a time when he will not be nearby every day. He hired me 21 years ago; he serves on my Cabinet; he was my mentor. And I can say, unequivocally, that he was the single best Emergency Medicine physician I was ever taught by. I am deeply grateful for the professional—and personal—time he shared with me. Because of him, I have stayed at Albany Med for my whole career—to learn from him, to work alongside of him.”

— Dennis P. McKenna, MD, '92
Albany Med president and CEO



Dean Verdile with his wife, Lou-Ann.

Academics: A Thriving College

In the arena of academics, the heart and soul of the College, Dr. Verdile “not only understood educational imperatives, but he championed them,” said **Henry Pohl, MD**, retired dean for academic administration and currently executive associate dean, spearheading special projects.

“He took a student-centered and faculty-centered approach to management. And he advocated for student and faculty success,” continued Dr. Pohl, who believes the dean is the “most all-around dean” he has known at Albany Med. “I worked with the five previous deans, and Vince is the whole package,” he added. “He helped ensure all academic programs were thriving and that there were resources for research.”

During Dean Verdile’s two-decade tenure, he guided a complete overhaul of the medical school curriculum and brought numerous innovations to the College, including the Patient Safety and Clinical Competency Center, one of the largest and most sophisticated simulation facilities in the nation where students and professionals practice their skills before encountering live patients. He facilitated the Sosa Academy of Medical Science that recognizes excellence, rewards achievement, and promotes innovation in educating health professionals.

Additionally, the College research building with state-of-the-art labs was constructed, in part, with a \$10 million grant from the National Institutes of Health, for which the dean acted as the principal investigator. He also revitalized the

Alden March Bioethics Institute and diversified the College’s academic leadership.

“I remember when I was chair of Emergency Medicine in the 1990s. I looked around at my colleagues, the other department chairs, and thought, ‘We’re all old white guys,’” Dean Verdile recalled. He vowed to change that—and, in fact, he has significantly diversified the academic leadership, recruiting 22 new chairs over 20 years with women and people of color, an accomplishment of which he is rightly proud.

“The dean has had remarkable success in achieving diversity among the chairs and deans. He was fully committed to diversity and raised funds that fueled the College’s diversity initiatives,” pointed out Dr. Gruenthal.

As recently as early summer, the dean announced that **KMarie King, MD**, the first Black woman to chair a Department of Surgery at an academic health sciences center in the United States, would join the College in September, and last year, **Angela Antonikowski, PhD**, was named the institution’s first chief officer for health equity, diversity and inclusion. And these are but a few of his diversified hires.

“He has helped attract scores of leading physicians to the Medical Center, competing successfully with hospitals in major metropolitan areas,” Dr. McKenna observed. “Think about what that means for our region—outstanding health care.”

“He did it all—the dean was a great clinician, a great department chair, a great teacher, a great recruiter, a great fund-raiser and an amazing steward of Albany Medical College.”

— Kevin Roberts, MD, '77, retired chair of the Department of Anesthesiology and past president of the Albany Medical College Alumni Association

Dean Verdile has also bolstered student applications. When he took the reins of the College, there were fewer than 6,100 student applications; in 2020, there were nearly 14,000 applicants for 145 seats.

“He has brought exceptionally high caliber students to Albany Medical College by creating an outstanding and innovative learning experience,” said **Margaret Gillis**, vice chair of the Albany Med Health System’s Board of Directors and chair of the Committee on College Affairs. Gillis added that he has diversified the student body, much as he did the department chairs and deans.

During his tenure an “early assurance program” with the University at Albany has greatly increased the College’s minority admissions. For this program, students who have distinguished themselves after two years in UAlbany’s rigorous science program are admitted to the College early with the proviso they maintain a high academic standard for their remaining undergraduate years. A similar program was established for the College’s physicians’ assistant program.

“The dean is exceptional with students—they seek him out, he’s always accessible—in the halls, in Choices, in his office,” Dr. Kiley continued. “They admire him.”

And, as Dr. Pohl pointed out, “Students as well as faculty viewed him as an ally.”

The College and the student body are never far from the dean’s mind. On one occasion while in Boston, a young restaurant server opined to the dean and Lou-Ann that she was heading to her second job when her shift ended—a patient care associate in the ED at a Boston hospital. She also told them it was her dream to become a doctor. The wheels were set in motion. Dean Verdile made sure her application was reviewed, and based on its merits, she was interviewed and accepted at Albany Medical College.

Four years later in 2016, Liane MacAuliffe graduated from Albany Medical College, a standout who was the recipient of the Lamb Foundation Prize for the medical student who most nearly approached the ideal in physician-patient relationships. She received additional recognition for excellence in demonstrating dedication to teaching, outstanding clinical skills, insight into learning styles, and for epitomizing professionalism in medicine. She also

was commissioned into the U.S. Navy and awarded a full scholarship for a residency at the Naval Medical Center in San Diego. Today, Dr. MacAuliffe practices internal medicine at the Naval Health Clinic in Cherry Point, North Carolina.

Research: Unwavering Support

From a research perspective, **Harold Singer, PhD**, chair of the Department of Molecular and Cellular Physiology, said Dean Verdile couldn’t have been more consistent and unwavering in support of the College’s research mission.

“He functioned as a partner with the basic science chairs and supported our mission before the institution,” Dr. Singer said. “He respected our expertise and judgment on scientific matters, and conversely we respected his advocacy for research.”

And, according to Dr. Singer, the dean emphasized and supported translational research initiatives, which are “so important to keep us relevant to Albany Med as well as the community.”

Fundraising: Nothing Short of Remarkable

In the arena of fundraising, observers say again that he is “nothing short of remarkable.”

Despite the demands of the College and Hospital, Dean Verdile traversed the United States annually helping raise millions of dollars. Alumni and soon-to-be donors welcomed him to their communities and opened their homes so he could spread the word about the College, its opportunities and challenges.

“Early on, he made academic scholarships a priority, growing scholarship funds from \$1 million in 2001 to more than \$33 million 20 years later. Today, there are 154 endowed scholarship funds, an increase of over 100 during his tenure,” noted Board Vice Chair Gillis.

Importantly, the College endowment has nearly tripled, growing from \$43.5 million in 2001 to nearly \$125 million last year. According to Dr. Pohl, before the dean, “it was a pitiful endowment.” Today, there are more endowed chairs and professorships than ever before in the College’s 182-year history.

“Growing the endowment is a significant accomplishment,” Dr. Roberts said. “The dean was



At a reception to honor the 175th anniversary of Albany Medical College in 2014, Dean Verdile (back row, center) celebrated with members of the Class of 2014.

approached by alumni whose giving increased substantially through his dedicated efforts.”

In addition, in 1999, Dean Verdile and his wife Lou-Ann, created Light Up the Night, the premier summer fund-raiser, which has raised more than \$4.1 million to benefit the Albany Med Emergency Department. The dean recalls the first year of this popular event, which started with a day at the Saratoga Race Course in 1999, somewhat surprised at the resounding success it has become. “There were 75 people there 22 years ago—mostly my family. Before Covid, we had about 500 guests—not all relatives.”

What’s his secret, some question? “Simply said, he is passionate about the College. He has brought positive change and innovation. He also instills confidence and garners respect. His vision and spirit are contagious, and donors want to sign on,” said **James Kellerhouse**, vice president for Philanthropy and chief development officer.

And as Dr. Venditti notes: “He is smart, interesting, interested, gregarious, extroverted, fun and funny.”

Respectful of All

Many say the dean’s leadership style played a significant role in his success. Dr. Gruenthal has a unique perspective having served as a department

chair and senior associate dean—and having worked for three other deans before he came to the Medical Center. “Dr. Verdile was outstanding. He was incredibly trustworthy. If he made a commitment, he always kept it. He was very knowledgeable, supportive and always available. He was pragmatic with a great sense of what’s possible, when it’s possible and how to make it happen.

“Above all else,” Dr. Gruenthal continued, “he is a decent human being who can always be counted on to do the right thing for a group, an individual, or the Medical Center.”

Dr. Roberts noted, “He talked to stakeholders and non-stakeholders when he was formulating a plan and never shied away from talking things through. So, when a plan was presented, there typically wasn’t a lot of pushback,” including in the often contentious arena of finances and budget.

“He always looked at every issue by focusing on the big picture, not by viewing each issue in isolation,” Dr. Pohl observed.

“He’s not a man of few words; he’s outgoing, open, and friendly; he’s inclusive; and he treats everyone, students and faculty alike, with great respect. And he’s as patient as the day is long,” said Dr. Kiley, who had served under numerous high-ranking military officials

and deans before joining Albany Med. “He can make tough decisions, but he does so privately and quietly.”

Dr. Singer said he saw in the dean “an unusual ability to deal well with diverse personalities and egos,” adding that few people are as adept as Dr. Verdile.

There’s something more about the Dean that people universally point to. He inspires loyalty; he’s kind, and he’s always willing to help.

“Because of him, I have stayed at Albany Med for my whole career—to learn from him, to work alongside of him,” said Dr. McKenna.

Dr. Venditti concurred. “Over the years,” he said, “I have been approached to return to Boston, where I started my medical career. One of the reasons I never pursued these offers is that I so enjoyed working with the dean. It has meant a job is not a job. You know that makes all the difference in the world.”

DePaola, who has worked with the dean for 16 years, said: “I cannot tell you the number of times he has encouraged me to leave the office early to get to my son’s baseball game. He knows I’ll be in early the next morning, but he understands family and how important that work-life balance is. That’s what makes a job great.”

The dean receives hundreds of calls from employees, friends, community leaders and acquaintances—all with the same question: I or my family member has this condition, that condition. I don’t know what to do. I am at a loss. What doctor should I see?

“It doesn’t matter who they are—the highest-ranking government official, or an employee or friend seeking advice, the dean always helps them out,” continued DePaola. “He makes recommendations, makes appointments—does whatever he can. That’s just him.”

For an ED doc who said he never dreamed of being a dean, Dr. Kiley may have summed it up best: “He will go down in history as the best dean of Albany Medical College.”

— Pamela Sawchuk Brown