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Top West Coast Schools of Acupuncture and Chinese Medicine Join Forces

PORTLAND, OR – Trustees overseeing the Oregon College of Oriental Medicine (OCOM), the top-ranked U.S. school of acupuncture and Chinese medicine, voted last night to close the college after 41 years and enter into an agreement with the National University of Natural Medicine (NUNM) to teach OCOM’s third-year students for their final year of classes, offer first- and second-year students the option of a comprehensive credit transfer, and accept incoming OCOM students automatically. Trustees also voted to enter into an agreement with Five Branches University (Five Branches) to accept OCOM’s doctor of acupuncture and oriental medicine students into the Five Branches doctor of acupuncture and herbal medicine program.

Fourth-year OCOM students will graduate August 26, making them the last class to earn a degree from the college. OCOM offers master’s and doctoral degrees in a program that includes study in acupuncture, Chinese herbal medicine, therapeutic massage, and qi cultivation, as well as a focus on collaboration with Western medicine practitioners.

School officials this week will submit their joint plans – known as teach out agreements – to the U.S. Department of Education, the Higher Education Coordinating Commission, the Accreditation Commission for Acupuncture and Herbal Medicine, and the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities. If accreditors approve the plans, OCOM would no longer offer classes after September and instead current OCOM students would have the opportunity to continue their education with NUNM or Five Branches – or transfer to any school they choose that best suits their needs.

If approved by regulators, the arrangements would bring together two powerhouse names in Portland integrative medicine. Together, OCOM and NUNM have graduated thousands of acupuncturists and provided care to tens of thousands of Pacific Northwest patients in their Old Town and Lair Hill clinics.
NUNM began on Southeast Hawthorne Boulevard in 1956, making it the oldest accredited naturopathic medical school in North America. NUNM went on to build a Chinese medicine and acupuncture program, as well as graduate programs in nutrition, integrative medicine research, global health, and integrative health sciences.

In 1983, with only a handful of U.S. acupuncture schools established, NUNM alumna Satya Ambrose, MSOM, ND, joined forces with Eric Stephens, DAOM, to create OCOM. In the early years, the pair rented offices from NUNM and taught NUNM students in the evenings as they got OCOM off the ground. OCOM graduated its first class in 1986.

“There’s a symmetry to these schools coming back together,” said Philip Lundberg, OCOM president and CEO. “We share history and many faculty members, as well as a steadfast commitment to research and community care.”

NUNM President and CEO Melanie Henriksen, ND, CNM, said: “As we mourn the tremendous loss of OCOM’s closure to our profession, I stand with unwavering commitment to welcoming their students and faculty and pledging to do everything in my power to sustain their mission and legacy. Continuing OCOM’s tradition of excellence is the right thing to do for the profession of acupuncture and Chinese medicine. We will open our doors not only to OCOM students, but to the college’s faculty, staff, and patient community.”

Five Branches President and CEO Ron Zaidman, MACHM, MBA, said: “We are thrilled to support OCOM students and ease their transition to our program and our Five Branches community. All our schools share in the rich, healing tradition of Chinese medicine and understand its role as a powerful force in healthcare.”

OCOM is closing due to financial challenges created by three main drivers: the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, major shifts in higher education, and contraction in Chinese medicine education.

The increase in crime, drug use, and people living unsheltered in Portland and, especially, in Old Town, due to the pandemic led to a steep decline in enrollment and gutted the college building’s value. OCOM lost half its student body in the last four years. At the same time, higher education enrollments nationwide have been declining for more than a decade due to changing demographics, rising tuition costs, and the explosion in student loan debt that has caused many students to rethink a four-year education.

Finally, the number of schools of acupuncture and Chinese medicine is declining. According to the Accreditation Commission for Acupuncture and Herbal Medicine, 10 U.S. schools have closed in the last five years. Another school, the AOMA Graduate School of Integrative Medicine located in Austin, Texas, closed in April 2024. According to experts, closures are largely due to a shrinking pool of prospective students and an increase in tuition costs.

Federal and state officials are expected to rule on the teach out plans in about six weeks.
About OCOM
The Oregon College of Oriental Medicine is a professionally accredited graduate school located in Portland’s Old Town neighborhood that for years has earned the #1 ranking for U.S. schools of acupuncture and Chinese medicine, offering master and doctoral degrees in a program that includes study in acupuncture, Chinese herbal medicine, therapeutic massage, and qi cultivation, as well as a focus on collaboration with Western medical practitioners. OCOM has graduated more than 1,500 alumni who practice in all 50 states. Since it opened in Portland in 1983, students and staff have treated tens of thousands of Pacific Northwest residents through its community clinics, and provided no-cost, front-line health care to hundreds of people experiencing homelessness. Students rotate through clinics operated by Providence, Legacy Health, and Oregon Health & Science University and faculty have conducted rigorous, peer-reviewed research in partnership with organizations like OHSU and with support from Kaiser Permanente and the National Institutes of Health.

About NUNM
National University of Natural Medicine (NUNM) was established in 1956 as the National College of Naturopathic Medicine with one primary objective: education leading to the Doctor of Naturopathic Medicine degree. In the 1990s, the school developed curricula that emphasized the holistic spirit of the classical teachings of Chinese medicine and in June 1998, graduated its first class from the School of Classical Chinese Medicine with the master of science in oriental medicine degree. The shift from a single to a multi-purpose institution eventually resulted in a name change to National College of Natural Medicine, announced during our 50th anniversary in June 2006. In 2016, with the approval to offer undergraduate degrees and earning university status, the institution again underwent a name change to the National University of Natural Medicine.

About Five Branches
Five Branches University (Five Branches) has been at the forefront of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) education and clinical care in the San Francisco Bay Area. Five Branches was founded in 1984 to bring the highest-quality, authentic TCM education and instruction to the Western world. A small group of distinguished faculty members trained in China launched the school, which is now a world class TCM university. Five Branches offers graduate and post-graduate degree programs in English and Chinese and operates a campus and clinic in two California locations – Santa Cruz and San Jose. The university is accredited for distance education and is the first TCM school in the nation to launch a fully online, asynchronous Doctoral Bridge Completion Program.

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