

Caitlin Rich Zulla '99

Boston, MA

Region I Alumni Trustee Candidate

The CEO of Optum Health East (part of UnitedHealth Group), Caitlin Zulla oversees an \$8 billion enterprise with health care delivery services including primary, specialty, surgical, home-based, virtual, urgent, behavioral and community care. “People have told me that I excel at doing the hard things,” says Zulla. “I see it more about operating with integrity and honesty. These principles are also the foundation of my ability to build high-performing teams and foster a culture of psychological safety.”

After earning a master’s degree in Public Health from Columbia in 2001, Zulla embarked on a professional path that she describes as characterized by loyalty, mostly to two companies, both undergoing substantial transformations and both recruiting her to turn around challenging situations. At MedAssets, she transformed a struggling sector into the company’s growth engine, leading to a successful private acquisition. She then inherited underperforming teams at SCA Health and ultimately at Optum. She arrived as a senior vice president at SCA and quickly rose through the ranks, serving as CEO from 2019 to 2023 and completing a master’s of Health Care Delivery Science from Dartmouth. In March of 2023 she was named CEO of Optum Health East.

In this position, she oversees more than 17,000 employees, including 4,000 physicians and advanced practice clinicians. “We are focused,” says Zulla, “on realizing healthcare’s Triple Aim: to deliver value, superior experiences, and high-quality care for the 5.6 million patients we serve.”

She credits her success in business to her time at Princeton: “Princeton’s greatest gift was teaching me how to build successful teams and how team-building drives improved performance. Something I learned on the Princeton fencing team.”

An accomplished epee fencer in high school, Zulla was encouraged to “go West” for a slot on the 1996 Olympic fencing team. Instead she chose Princeton. Then as team captain, she built the best team possible, one that went on to win the Ivy League championship for the first time in school history in 1999 and continued that success after her graduation, winning again in 2000 and 2001. She herself went on to be a three-time All-American and the first fencer to win Princeton’s Sportswoman of the Year Award.

An Ecology & Evolutionary Biology major, she did step away from fencing her junior spring and summer to study with the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute in Panama and Kenya, where she had a transformational experience assisting a victim of domestic violence. That experience helped to shape her views on healthcare access and equality. After Princeton, she continued to explore these issues with Project 55, writing grants for a domestic violence nonprofit.

Zulla maintains her commitment to Princeton’s informal motto to be “in the nation’s service and the service of humanity.” Over the past five years she has served on the board of One World Surgery, a nonprofit organization that organizes medical mission trips to Honduras and operates a dedicated outpatient surgery center and training facility, located on the grounds of a home for

orphans and abandoned children. She has volunteered on eight mission trips, trips that provided life-changing medical care to patients.

Those many hours committed to athletic training at the level to successfully represent Princeton and the U.S. in fencing are no longer possible. Now, Zulla shares, “I channel that energy into Peloton (tread and bike). My favorite Peloton instructor is Jess Sims and her quote ‘How you do something is how you do everything’ is always on my mind and encourages me to always lead with integrity and give my all to anything I do.”