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Oregon area health education center (AHEC) scholars: reimagine healthcare education and its potential to transform rural and underserved communities

Katie Caba, MHS, PA; Kate Hubbard, BA, Division of Physician Assistant Education, School of Medicine, Oregon Health and Science University

Keywords

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Abstract

Background: Oregon AHEC is part of a nationwide grant funded system created to improve the distribution, diversity, quality, and supply of health care workers in rural and under-resourced areas. In 2017, the Oregon AHEC Scholars Program was launched at OHSU. This presentation will provide an overview of the Oregon AHEC Scholars curriculum and innovative strategies to equip professional students to address the workforce shortages in Oregon.

According to the Oregon Office for Rural Health, more than one-third of Oregon's population lives in rural or frontier communities.¹ The Oregon Health Authority predicts a significant increase in demand that will exceed the national need by 2030, including a nearly 40% increase in demand for physician assistants and an over 60% increase in demand for nurse practitioners.² This demand is paired with a continued need to increase Oregon's health care workforce diversity and geographic distribution to address a range of community needs.^{3,4}

The Oregon AHEC Scholars' curriculum is an interdisciplinary two-year certificate program that combines didactic learning with community-based experiences, focusing on eight core topic areas:

- Interprofessional Education
- Behavioral Health Integration
- Social Determinants of Health
- Cultural Competency
- Practice Transformation
- Connecting Communities and Supporting Health Professionals
- Virtual Learning and Telehealth
- Current and Emerging Health Issues

Each year, scholars must complete 40 hours of didactic learning and 40 hours of team-based, experiential learning with an underserved population. Students take part in synchronous and asynchronous activities, virtual and in-person sessions, and experiential learning throughout the state. Relevant online modules, journal clubs, webinars, podcasts, conferences, panel discussions, volunteer experiences, and AHEC-sponsored speakers and annual events are some of the many ways scholars fulfill their requirements.

Methods: AHEC partners with colleges and universities around Oregon to recruit diverse cohorts of students training to become doctors (MD & DO), physician assistants, occupational therapists, pharmacists, dentists, nurses (NP & BSN), and physical therapists. The program enrolls 75–125 students annually from diverse backgrounds, experiences, and ethnicities, providing a robust interprofessional experience. The online platform enables flexible access to content and tracking of hours, while weekly updates provide curated educational content and relevant community-based opportunities.

Financial barriers are mitigated through the AHEC Scholars Fund, offering up to \$1,000 annually for expenses such as housing and travel to rural sites. Scholars are also eligible for the Oregon Primary Care Loan Forgiveness Program (PCLF) in collaboration with the Oregon Office of Rural Health.

AHEC's five regional centers and the OHSU Campus for Rural Health address preceptor and clinical training site shortages by using community partnerships and ties to recruit and support clinical training sites in rural communities across Oregon. Together, these partnerships offer unique opportunities, including team-based rotations, co-housing, and the Rural Health Equity course, cultivating strong connection to rural practice.

Impact: Currently in its seventh year, the Oregon AHEC Scholars program has graduated over 500 healthcare students from six schools representing 15 different professional programs. Students graduate with a certificate acknowledging their interdisciplinary education, equipped to serve in remote and underserved areas of Oregon and beyond. Just as important, they graduate with a growing community and professional network of healthcare colleagues across the state and nationwide.

Application: The Oregon AHEC Scholars Program serves as a model for developing a healthcare workforce equipped to meet the needs of rural and underserved communities. By integrating interprofessional education and community engagement, the program addresses gaps in workforce distribution and diversity in Oregon. The curriculum's success underscores the importance of innovative, collaborative, and culturally relevant approaches in healthcare education.

Learning Objectives

1. Recognize Oregon's workforce shortages and need for improving health equity through strategic education initiatives.
2. Identify components of the Oregon AHEC Scholars Program curriculum that contribute to the preparation of healthcare professionals for practice in rural and underserved communities.
3. Discuss challenges in implementing community-based learning experiences, including how to overcome financial and logistical barriers.
4. Apply lessons from the Oregon AHEC Scholars Program to encourage educational programs and students to address healthcare disparities in Oregon.

References

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