



The University of Georgia



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INNOVATION AND ECONOMIC PROSPERITY UNIVERSITIES
AWARDS PROGRAM

CASE
STUDY
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Addressing Critical Needs in Rural Communities

Medical Rotations and Nursing Programs in Washington County, Ga.

One of the most critical needs in rural communities throughout Georgia is adequate health care. A 2007 study by a panel of state senators showed that large areas of the state were underserved by primary care doctors, OB/GYNs and pediatricians. Rural communities, the study found, have a harder time attracting and retaining physicians, which means many Georgians travel hours for basic health care. A survey of Georgians completing their medical training showed that only 4 percent planned to practice in a rural area.

When the UGA Archway Partnership was established in Washington County, Ga., in 2007 community leaders immediately listed community health as a need they wanted to address. In 2009 they added a goal of “increasing access to health care professionals.” Archway professionals—UGA employees who are based in 11 Georgia communities and serve as conduits between that community and the university—began looking at connections between UGA, other University System of Georgia schools, and technical and private colleges to address the need.

The Georgia Rural Medical Scholarship Program (GRSP) was established in 2010 to expose more Georgia medical students to rural health care. With the help of UGA’s Archway Partnership professional, Washington County established a partnership with Mercer University Medical School (about 60 miles away in Macon, Ga.) to offer rotations for students in the county’s private medical practices and at the Washington County Regional Medical Center (WCRMC).

Since the 2010 pilot program, which offered an internal medicine rotation in Washington County for eight Mercer students, the number of core and elective rotations has been expanded to offer opportunities in Johnson and Wilkinson counties for students in their first, third and fourth years of medical school. In addition to internal medicine, students can do rotations in community medicine, pediatrics, family medicine, surgery and special electives. A special elective in practice management was developed by the UGA Small Business Development Center, a unit of the UGA Office of Public Service and Outreach, in partnership with the GRSP and is offered in the rural community as well as on the Mercer medical campuses in Macon and Savannah. Through this elective, students learn business skills they would need in setting up a private practice.

To ensure the medical students fully experience a professional and social life in the rural counties, housing is provided free of charge by the community through a recently established nonprofit organization, and community residents make a special effort to include students in social and civic activities.

In 2011 and 2013, community organizations and residents came together for “Lock, Stock and Barrel,” a gun and garden event that attracted more than 200 donors who gave money to support students living in the area while completing their rotations. In 2011, the GRSP formed a board of directors made up of physicians, residents and state health care representatives to ensure the program’s sustainability.

A critical aspect of this program is the students’ repeated exposure to the same community, which allows them to establish strong professional and social connections. More than 60 percent of the students do more than one rotation in the county.

“You’re not having to compete with residents and other students for attention when there,” said Caitlin Collier, a Mercer medical student who participated in the 2010 pilot program and has since done other rural rotations. “If I could have done my pediatrics and family medicine rotations there, I would have.”

Ree Garrett, the director of development and physician recruiting for WCRMC, said, “The Georgia Rural Scholar Program has the potential to provide Washington County with much-needed doctors. The clinical experience medical students receive through the program is invaluable to their training, and the time they spend in our hospital and the community provides us the unique opportunity to sell them early in their medical training on the benefits of returning to live and work in Washington County.”



Graduates of the 2013 LPN/EMT to RN program offered in Washington County, Ga.

The rotations have been so successful that GRSP is exploring the possibility of offering rotations to medical students attending the Georgia Regents University’s medical school campus in Southeast Georgia. GRSP and Mercer also are looking at establishing a residency program for medical students at WCRMC.

LPN TO RN

In addition to the medical rotations, the Archway Executive Committee also developed a strategy to increase the number of registered nurses in the area rather than recruiting them from other areas of the state.

In 2009, Archway facilitated a series of meetings between officials from WCRMC, Oconee Fall Line Technical College (OFTC), potential health care employers and community leaders to assess the level of interest in a community-based education program that would help licensed practical nurses (LPNs) and emergency medical technicians (EMTs) learn the skills they would need to become registered nurses (RNs). Following surveys that showed the program would be well-received, WCRMC and OFTC created a partnership to establish an EMT/LPN to RN bridge program. Faculty from Darton College, in Albany, teaches the courses in space provided for free on the Sandersville OFTC campus. OFTC administrators upgraded the technological equipment at the campus to meet the needs of the program. The University System of Georgia provides funding.

The first cohort of students began the one-year program in 2009 with 27 students from seven counties. In recent years an average of 75 students have begun each cohort, and so far 265 have completed the program, most of them staying in Washington County and surrounding areas.

COLLEGE OF PUBLIC HEALTH AND ARCHWAY

Washington County also was the first to benefit from a unique collaboration between the Archway Partnership and an academic college at UGA. In 2008, Archway and the College of Public Health (CPH), created the first outreach position for CPH, based in Washington County and jointly funded by Archway and CPH. Subsequently, CPH established an Office of Outreach and Engagement, which has partnered with Archway to help fund public health professionals in Colquitt and Clayton counties.

Georgia Rural Medical School Partnership program

Year	Students	Rotations
2011	7	7
2012	6	10
2013	6	9
2014	4	4
Total	23	30

LPN to RN bridge program

Year	Students	Retention rate	Board certifications
2010	27	100%	25
2011	29	97%	26
2012	61	94%	55
2013	71	97%	65
Total	188	Avg. 97%	171