

New Program Encourages Students to Become Rural Health Professionals

Quincy, Illinois – Suzanne Bozarth, Janaya Harris and Stephanie Wessel have different career goals. Bozarth is studying to be a nurse at Blessing-Rieman College in Quincy. Harris is a master’s degree candidate at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Her career goal is to work as a social worker in a hospital setting. Wessel aspires to be a doctor in a rural community. She is part of the Rural Medical Education (RMED) program at the University of Illinois College of Medicine at Rockford. Although they’ve chosen different professions, the three students spent the summer working together in Quincy, Illinois to gain a better understanding of rural interdisciplinary health care delivery.

The Interdisciplinary Rural Health Professions Preceptorship is the first of its kind in the State of Illinois. The University of Illinois College of Medicine’s Center for Rural Health Professions Education, Evaluation and Research (RPEER); Southern Illinois University Family Practice; and the Western Illinois Area Health Education Center (AHEC) developed the pilot program. “Health care professionals in rural communities are already working in an interdisciplinary way, both out of desire and necessity. However, this is the first time we’ve been able to offer interdisciplinary education for students in a rural setting here in Illinois,” said Ben Mueller, RPEER Division Director for Community Outreach.

The program involved students, preceptors, and faculty from five health disciplines: family medicine, nursing, pharmacy, public health, and social work. “This program has been huge for me. I’ve spent enough time in medical school to know what doctors do, but this program has allowed me to tap into the knowledge of others to learn more about their roles in health care,” said Stephanie Wessel.

The students spent six weeks following a demanding schedule. They shadowed doctors, nurses, pharmacists, physician assistants, residents, and advanced practice nurses in a variety of clinical settings. “It’s important so that students, in the pre-clinical phase of their education, understand the importance of being a part of a healthcare team and how that relates to quality patient care,” said Paula Winkler, director of the Western Illinois Area Health Education Center in Quincy.

The students also attended an immunization conference in Springfield, worked on a community project with the Arthritis Foundation and participated in a health careers camp for high school students at Western Illinois University. “It’s been good for me because it’s got me very interested in public health. It just opened my eyes to everything,” said Suzanne Bozarth.

The students had weekly meetings with program coordinators and received high marks for their dedication. “We were fortunate to have three outstanding students with a tremendous ability to work together as a team. They were very flexible and durable to keep up with the demanding schedule,” said Mueller.

The program curriculum was designed to encourage the students to reflect on their experiences and learn from them. “Each of the three students had a significant change in thought about how to move forward with their training,” said Dr. Howard Zeitz, RPEER Division Director for Faculty Development.

Organizers say because the pilot program was such a success they will continue the preceptorship next year. “This is an exciting project and the students are really pioneers for rural interdisciplinary health education as what they do and experience will set the stage for future programs,” said Dr. Michael Glasser, assistant dean of Rural Health Professions and Center Development at the University of Illinois College of Medicine at Rockford.