

Fostering the inspiration to serve rural Oregon

Nick West grew up on a cattle ranch in northeast Oregon in the small town of Imbler. After high school (his graduating class was 16 people), Nick spent a year traveling across Oregon as a Future Farmers of America state officer. Later, while earning an undergraduate science degree at Oregon State University, he was a wildland firefighter during summers.

Nick always knew he wanted to spend his professional life in service to rural Oregon. But it was during his four years as a student at the OHSU School of Medicine, where he became involved with like-minded peers and mentors, that the path to achieving this goal became clear.

Nick was encouraged to participate in the rural scholar educational track at OHSU, a program designed to expose students to the unique opportunities offered by rural medicine. Nick cites the six months he spent embedded in a Wallowa County clinic, shadowing and learning from local family medicine doctors, as influential to his eventual decision to practice in rural Oregon.

“Rotating as a student at Winding Waters Clinic in Enterprise cemented my commitment to come back one day to practice family medicine in northeast Oregon. I learned firsthand the full scope of opportunities in rural practice,” Nick said. “It was a tremendous experience.”

For decades, OHSU schools, in close partnership with health care clinics and hospitals, have provided these types of rural educational experiences for hundreds of students each year. Additionally, the OHSU School of Nursing is a member of a nursing consortium with 11 community colleges, and also has four of its own campus sites located outside of Portland (Monmouth, Klamath Falls, La Grande and Ashland).

In 2015, following the input, guidance and encouragement of community leaders, OHSU significantly expanded this educational footprint in rural Oregon with the establishment of the OHSU Campus for Rural Health. The goals were to inspire even more students like Nick to consider rural practice and to do so in ways that encourage patient-centered collaborative health care. Klamath Falls was selected as the first site, with two more campus locations on the South Coast and in Eastern Oregon established shortly thereafter.

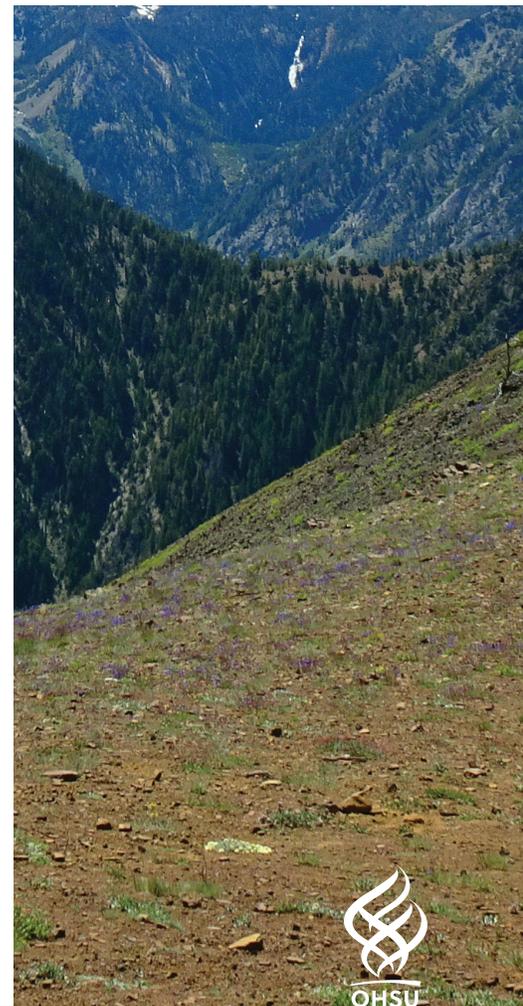
The Campus for Rural Health is the locus for a nationally-unique interprofessional curriculum bringing together students studying in different health fields—nurses, dentists, pharmacists, physicians, physician assistants and others. For a month or longer, students live and learn together in one of the three campus locations, studying under the leadership of community partners, local clinicians and OHSU faculty. In addition to working together

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Provost

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as a team during their rural clinical experiences, students undertake a collaborative community-based project.

“By studying and working in multi-disciplinary teams, our students understand the breadth of rural health needs and how to become full advocates for community members, whether they eventually choose to practice in rural Oregon or not,” said Elena Andresen, Ph.D., OHSU Provost. “And this experience also fosters caring relationships that might inspire students to one day return to these towns to practice.”

The collaborative community-identified projects are wide-ranging, designed in part to develop information that will support local caregivers and non-profits in their goals to care for vulnerable populations, such as veterans, homeless people and others.

In addition to his six-month stint at Winding Waters Clinic, Nick also spent a month at the Campus for Rural Health in Klamath Falls, participating in a project focused on pregnant women who use tobacco. The project’s goal was to develop knowledge from across disciplines to improve the understanding of how to support women in smoking cessation.

“It was great to see how the different perspectives of the students melded together into solutions. We all saw first-hand that each individual’s knowledge and profession on the project’s outcome were invaluable,” Nick said.

OHSU rural educational programs are supported by an array of on-the-ground university partners, such as the Area Health Education Centers and the Oregon Office of Rural Health. The Campus for Rural Health also works closely with other OHSU rural initiatives, including the Oregon Rural Practice-based Research Network, the Moore Institute for Nutrition & Wellness statewide nutrition program, the OHSU-Cascades East Family Medicine Residency Program, among others.

While the primary goal of OHSU rural initiatives across all mission areas is to advance the health and well-being of Oregonians, these programs also have a meaningful economic impact. Faculty-physicians and other providers generate downstream revenue for local businesses. The hundreds of OHSU students who rotate through rural Oregon each year generate their own economy-stimulating activity. Further, OHSU contracts for services on behalf of these students, such as housing. For example, the university recently committed to a ten-year lease for part of the Bugge Bank in Coos Bay, supporting the town’s long-term vision for this now-renovated historic building.

Nick, who also participated in the state-supported Scholars for a Healthy Oregon Initiative, graduated in 2019. Today, he is a resident-physician in the OHSU-Cascades East Family Medicine Residency Program in Klamath Falls. Next year, like other former OHSU students participating in rural education programs, Nick, his wife and son intend to permanently settle in eastern Oregon where he will practice family medicine.