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# Oregon Rural Scholars Program:

## *Building From Success*

What was your first exposure to the unique rewards and challenges of practicing medicine in a rural community? For some of us, the small-town family doctor is what formed our first idea of who a physician is and what they do. For others, maybe a required clerkship during medical school was the first and only chance we had to see full-scope rural primary care in action. There

continues to be an acute need for medical professionals in smaller communities nationwide and we know that getting student doctors exposed to rural practice early and often increases the chances that they will choose this path for themselves.

Since 2009, students at the OHSU School of Medicine have had the opportunity to apply for the Oregon Rural Scholars Program (ORSP), a competitive, rural training track sponsored by Oregon AHEC that endeavors to maximize exposure to the rural setting. All students at the School of Medicine are required to complete at least one rural experience, but ORSP scholars go further, spending a minimum of three continuous months in a rural setting. Additionally, rural scholars receive curriculum and advising designed to deepen their interest in rural medicine.

Students apply to the ORSP during their second year of medical school and up to fifteen are admitted based on essay questions, transcripts and prior rural experiences. Preference is given to students who come from a rural community themselves and to those who intend to remain to practice within Oregon. After admission, the scholars are matched to a practice and a community that suits their unique interests and plans. Before the clinical experiences begin, the scholars research the communities where they will rotate and share their findings with each other as they begin to gain an understanding of the demographics, economics and cultural factors that make each small town unique. In the fall of the second year, rural scholars journey to Klamath Falls for a weekend retreat, where they build community, learn wilderness medicine skills and do procedures workshops with the family medicine residents. Cascades East Family

The Oregon Rural Scholars Program was created to match student passion for rural medicine with Oregon communities in search of its next generation of health care providers.

Medicine residency faculty and staff go above and beyond in hosting the retreat and many rural scholars have gone on to do their residency in Klamath Falls as a result of this early exposure to the program. This year, the students' travel expenses were covered through gracious support from the OAFP/Foundation.

The core of the ORSP experience is the clinical clerkship that occurs during the third year of medical training. Scholars spend a full twelve weeks immersing themselves in their rural community. The extended duration of this rotation allows the students to get a rich view of what their own futures could look like as rural physicians and lets them remain in a single practice long enough to become comfortable with the systems and truly add value to the clinic. During this time, ORSP students and faculty meet weekly via online video small groups. Students share clinical cases and do journal clubs as part of their ORSP curricular requirements. Additionally, these meetings help form a community of practice among scholars, building a sense of community and combating feelings of isolation that can sometimes occur for students away from friends, family and classmates.

The success of the Oregon Rural Scholars Program can be measured both in numbers and in the positive experiences that students and preceptors report year after year. Johnathan Righetti, who completed his rotation in Baker City, said,

*"I have never felt so welcome or so at home; my Rural Scholars rotation has exceeded even my lofty expectations for an extended rural family medicine rotation. While in Baker City, I have gained*

*experience in far reaching medical disciplines such as pediatrics, geriatrics, orthopedics, obstetrics and gynecology, and general surgery. I have delivered babies, assisted in surgical cases and practiced dozens of procedures in clinic while providing modern, preventive, evidence-based medicine to the people of Baker County. I was welcomed by the community with open arms, and have found a second home in Eastern Oregon, where I very well may return to practice in the future."*

Dacey Storzbach, who completed her Rural Scholars rotation in Tillamook, found a new passion through her experience:

*"I've really loved learning about the community, the continuity care and getting to see what practice is like in a small town. I grew up mainly in cities, but I've always been interested in medical care for underserved populations and participating in ORSP has convinced me that I want to practice in a rural setting."*

The ORSP has enrolled over 90 student physicians throughout its lifespan and data indicate that student interest in both rural practice and in generalist specialties endures beyond the completion of the program. Cumulatively, 75% of students in the program who matched upon graduation have entered targeted residencies (family medicine, pediatrics, internal medicine or general surgery). Approximately 56% of ORSP graduates have entered a family medicine residency, compared to 8.5% nationally among U.S. medical graduates. Since 2011, ORSP scholars have been able to apply for the Primary Care Loan Forgiveness awards established by the Oregon legislature. Awards of up to \$35,000 are made annually to health profession students across the state that are enrolled in their respective institution's rural training track.

Since its beginning, the ORSP has expanded in size and in depth, with the addition of five additional student slots per class as well as new community

engagement and public health curriculum. Moving forward, the ORSP will become a truly interprofessional endeavor, with students from the OHSU physician assistant and nurse practitioner programs joining in as well.

The Oregon Rural Scholars Program was created to match student passion for rural medicine with Oregon communities in search of its next generation of health care providers. The successes in meeting this goal are clear, and by expanding the scope of the ORSP to include other clinical students this program will even better meet the diverse health care needs of Oregon's rural communities.

*If you wish to support the goals of the expanding ORSP program, please send your donations to OAFP/Foundation, 1717 42<sup>nd</sup> Ave., Ste. 2103, Portland, Oregon 97213 or donate online at <https://oafp.org/oafp-foundation/>.*