

Community Scholar Program: Creating and Evaluating Interprofessional Learning Opportunities for Students in Occupational Therapy, Physiotherapy, Nursing and Medical Programs in Role-Emerging Community-Based Sites

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Introduction: This project, funded by HealthForce Ontario, provided students with an opportunity to become "Community Scholars", student clinicians with training in community health working with inter-professional teams in community settings.

Objectives: The objectives of the project were to provide students enrolled four health professional programs (occupational therapy, physiotherapy, nursing, medicine) opportunities to: gain knowledge about community health issues; learn about the contributions that their own and other health professionals can make to address those community health issues; and experience inter-professional service delivery in community-based sites.

Methods: Four community sites provided clinical experiences for the students including: the Shelter Health Network of Hamilton (a collaboration of social service agencies and health professionals addressing the health issues of people without stable housing); YWCA Hamilton (a women's organization focused on empowering people to participate in the community); Stonechurch Family Health Centre and McMaster Family Practice (two primary health care clinics serving approximately 24,000 patients). Meetings and experiences with community leaders supported student learning, as did regular meetings with faculty mentors. Evaluation methods included student Activity Logs, Reflective Journals, and Focus Groups with students, preceptors, and mentors to examine their experiences and learning. Community leaders and agencies completed Surveys about their impressions of and satisfaction with the project

Results: Project participants (students, preceptors, mentors, agencies and community leaders) agreed that the Community Scholars gained important learning while simultaneously providing service to the agencies and their clients. Participants gained insights into the challenges of making entrée into community organizations, working in interprofessional teams, and integrating health professional students into social service agencies. Students developed insights and competencies in relation to community health, interprofessional practice, and better understood the contributions of their own professions to community health. Student occupational therapists struggled with the relative lack of understanding of their profession.

Conclusion: Students, community agencies (and their clients) and educational programs benefited from this initiative.

Contribution to occupational therapy: Occupational therapists have important contributions to make in community health settings. Effort is needed to help community agencies, other disciplines, and student occupational therapists understand and take advantage of those potential contributions.