

# Health Data Reporter

## Examining the Rural Health Opportunities Program

**Christine Swanson, M.A., Roxanna Jokela, M.H.A.,  
Michelle Mason, M.A., and Keith Mueller, Ph.D.**

In this Data Reporter, we examine the success of the Rural Health Opportunities Program (RHOP) since its inception in 1992. RHOP offers students from Nebraska rural high schools a special opportunity to enter health professions training programs at UNMC by guaranteeing them admission to UNMC upon successful completion of preprofessional requirements at a participating state college. This program is administered by the Rural Health Education Network (RHEN) at the University of Nebraska Medical Center (UNMC) in partnership with Chadron State College (CSC) and Wayne State College (WSC).

### Key Results<sup>1</sup>

Of RHOP medical graduates who have completed residency training,

- 67% have remained in Nebraska
- 53% are practicing in a rural community in Nebraska
- 10% are practicing in rural communities in other states

Of RHOP physician assistant graduates,

- 71% have remained in Nebraska
- 64% are practicing in a rural community in Nebraska
- 18% are practicing in rural communities in other states

Of RHOP dentistry graduates,

- 71% have remained in Nebraska
- 63% are practicing in a rural community in Nebraska
- 16% are practicing in rural communities in other states

Of RHOP pharmacy graduates,

- 69% have remained in Nebraska
- 44% are practicing in a rural community in Nebraska
- 6% are practicing in rural communities in other states

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*Sixty-eight percent of RHOP graduates are currently practicing in rural areas; 52% are practicing in rural areas of Nebraska.*

<sup>1</sup>RHOP data presented in this report is current as of fall 2006.

## Background

The Rural Health Education Network (RHEN) activities began in the early 1990s with support from the Nebraska legislature for the purpose of developing health professions student training in rural locations. In 1992, the Rural Health Opportunities Program (RHOP), in collaboration with Chadron State College (CSC) and Wayne State College (WSC), began to recruit future health professionals from rural communities.

In 2001, the RHEN office received support through the Health Resources and Services Administration to fund Area Health Education Centers (AHECs) across the state. The AHECs further the mission of RHEN in recruitment and retention of health professions students in underserved areas. A major focus of AHECs is to expose students (K-16) to health career opportunities and assist in promoting RHOP opportunities. These AHEC programs give students a better awareness of and preparation for a health or science career.

In addition to RHOP, RHEN sponsors and/or participates in several programs aimed at recruiting and retaining rural health care providers, including

- *Eighth Grade Health/Science Meet.* Since 1993, more than 3,000 eighth-graders from across Nebraska have participated in regional science meets. Up to 80 students per year are selected from the regional meets to attend the 2½-day state meet on the UNMC campus each June. Alumni participants meet every other year.
- *Career Day.* This event is sponsored with the UNMC Student Association for Rural Health. Participating rural high school students spend a day with UNMC students and faculty. More than 200 students participate each year from more than 45 rural schools.
- *Workshops in Agro-Medicine, Cultural Competency, and Geriatric Health Careers.* All undergraduate students in Nebraska's preprofessional health sciences programs can apply for three weeklong workshops.
- *Student/Resident Experiences and Rotations in Community Health.* Students/residents engage in community service projects for underserved populations.
- *Rural Rotations.* Most UNMC students, during their clinical training, participate in a rural rotation under the direction of a volunteer preceptor.
- *Family Medicine Residency Rural Training Track.* Established in 1991, this rural training program is now the largest in the nation. The rural training track prepares residents in Family Medicine, especially those with rural backgrounds, for rural practice and increases the likelihood that they will choose to practice in rural areas after they finish residency training.

## What is RHOP?

RHOP offers students from Nebraska rural high schools a special opportunity to enter health professions training programs at UNMC by guaranteeing them admission to UNMC upon successful completion of preprofessional requirements at a participating state college. Students apply directly to either CSC or WSC and to RHOP. Students under consideration for RHOP are interviewed and reviewed under the following criteria:

- Residency in a rural Nebraska community (rural is defined as any community outside Omaha, Lincoln, and south Sioux City)
- Academic potential (as evident in high school performance)
- Commitment to practice in rural Nebraska (personal commitment, not tied to financial return as part of RHOP)

Acceptance into RHOP is a joint decision made by state college and UNMC faculty and by program administrators.

As RHOP students matriculate through either CSC or WSC, they are expected to complete program activities aimed to provide insight into their chosen field and reinforce their commitment to eventual practice in rural Nebraska. These activities include

- Exposure to health care settings and practices
- Interaction with other students interested in health professions
- Exposure to practical experiences in rural health
- Visits and contact with UNMC and with the college of their health profession, its alumni, and its students

Students begin their undergraduate health care education at CSC or WSC and later transfer to UNMC for professional training. The preprofessional training programs available at CSC and WSC vary slightly; both offer programs in medicine, pharmacy, dentistry, dental hygiene, and clinical lab science. However, CSC also offers programs in nursing, physician assistant, physical therapy, and radiography.

As of fall 2006, 290 RHOP students had graduated from UNMC health professions programs, and 188 RHOP students were enrolled and attending CSC, WSC, or UNMC. Table 1 shows the distribution of RHOP graduates and students by home county and status in the program.

**Table 1. RHOP Graduates and Students by Home County and Program Status**

County	UNMC Grad	UNMC Student	CSC Student	WSC Student	Total	County	UNMC Grad	UNMC Student	CSC Student	WSC Student	Total
Adams	2	1	2		5	Jefferson	3				3
Antelope	3		1	1	5	Johnson	2				2
Arthur	1				1	Kearney	3		1		4
Banner	1				1	Keith	4	1	1		6
Boone	5	2	1		8	Keya Paha	2				2
Box Butte	10	3	6		19	Kimball	5				5
Boyd	1	1			2	Knox	4	2		2	8
Brown	3	2	3		8	Lancaster	1				1
Buffalo	4		1	1	6	Lincoln	15	8	7		30
Burt	1				1	Logan	1				1
Butler	1			2	3	Madison	9	3	2		14
Cass	2	1			3	McPherson			1		1
Cedar	2			1	3	Merrick				1	1
Chase	2			1	3	Morrill	7	1	1		9
Cherry	3		1		4	Nance	2			1	3
Cheyenne	5		2		7	Nemaha	4				4
Clay	3	3			6	Nuckolls				1	1
Colfax	4	2		1	7	Otoe	1	1			2
Cuming	3	1	1		5	Pawnee				1	1
Custer	11	4	2		17	Perkins	1	1			2
Dakota	4	1			5	Phelps	4	3			7
Dawes	17		2		19	Pierce	9	2			11
Dawson	1	2	1	1	5	Platte	5	2		4	11
Deuel	1	1			2	Polk	1	1			2
Dixon	1		1	1	3	Red Willow	1		1		2
Dodge	3	1		3	7	Richardson	3		1	1	5
Douglas	2				2	Rock			1		1
Dundy	4				4	Saline	6		1		7
Fillmore	1	1	1		3	Saunders	1	1	2	1	5
Franklin	1				1	Scotts Bluff	31	5	4	1	41
Frontier			1		1	Seward	3	3		1	7
Furnas	3		2		5	Sheridan	7	2	5		14
Gage	1	1			2	Sherman		1			1
Garden	4				4	Sioux	2		1		3
Garfield	2	1			3	Thayer	3		2	1	6
Gosper	2				2	Thurston				1	1
Grant	1		1		2	Valley	4	1			5
Greeley	3				3	Washington	5	1	1		7
Hall	3	1	3	1	8	Wayne	4	3		2	9
Hamilton	1	3	1	1	6	Webster	1				1
Hitchcock	1		1		2	Wheeler	1	1	1		3
Holt	8	3	1	2	14	York		2		2	4
Hooker	3				3						
Howard	1	1	1	2	5	<b>Totals</b>	<b>290</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>478</b>

## Current RHOP Statistics

RHOP specifically targets rural students for health professions and provides programs to promote enthusiasm for an eventual rural practice. RHOP is a unique program for Nebraska and one of only few such programs in the United States that enrolls students from rural communities into all academic programs. Table 2 shows the rate of return to rural communities for RHOP graduates as of fall 2006. RHOP graduates who have returned to Nebraska communities currently practice within 42 of Nebraska's 93 counties (Table 3).

**Table 2. UNMC RHOP Graduates, Rate of Return to Rural Communities**

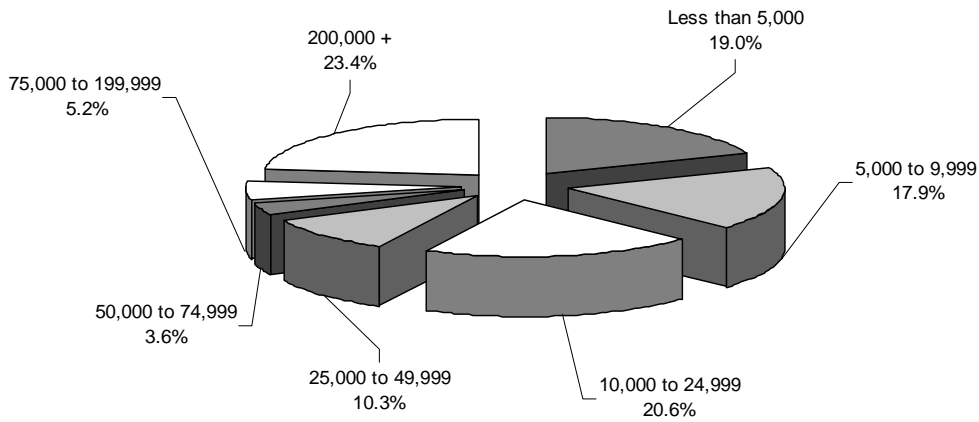
Health Care Field	Practicing in			Total Graduates
	Practicing in Rural Nebraska	Rural (NE and out-of-state)	Practicing in Nebraska	
Dentistry	63%	79%	71%	30
Dental Hygiene	55%	75%	70%	21
Clinical Laboratory Science (Previously Medical Technology)	39%	71%	55%	31
Nursing	60%	60%	100%	5
Physician Assistant	64%	82%	71%	46
Pharmacy	44%	50%	69%	41
Physical Therapy	45%	66%	66%	38
Radiography	40%	40%	100%	9
Medicine - completed residency	53%	63%	67%	49
<b>Total</b>	<b>52%</b>	<b>68%</b>	<b>68%</b>	<b>270</b>

**Table 3. RHOP Graduates, Practice Locations by County**

County	CSC Grad	WSC Grad	County Total	County	CSC Grad	WSC Grad	County Total
Adams	6	2	8	Lincoln	4		4
Boone	1		1	Madison	1	2	3
Box Butte	4		4	Morrill	1		1
Brown	1		1	Otoe	1	1	2
Buffalo	7		7	Perkins	1		1
Burt	1		1	Phelps	2		2
Butler		1	1	Platte	1	1	2
Cass		1	1	Red Willow	4		4
Chase	1		1	Saline	1	1	2
Cheyenne	7	3	10	Sarpy	4	1	5
Cuming	1		1	Scotts Bluff	22	1	23
Custer	2	2	4	Seward	1	1	2
Dawes	4		4	Sheridan	2		2
Dawson	3		3	Thurston		1	1
Dodge	1	1	2	Valley	3	2	5
Douglas	15	9	24	Washington		1	1
Dundy	2		2	York	3	1	4
Gage		2	2	<b>In-state total</b>	<b>131</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>174</b>
Hall	8	3	11	Out-of-state (rural)	32	8	40
Hamilton		1	1	Out-of-state (urban)	28	11	39
Holt	2		2	In residency or not currently practicing			37
Howard	1		1	<b>Out-of-state total</b>			<b>116</b>
Kearney	1		1	<b>RHOP total</b>			<b>290</b>
Kimball	2		2				
Lancaster	10	5	15				

Nearly 58% of all RHOP graduates, regardless of the state in which they practice, do so in communities with less than 25,000 people, and 68% practice in population centers with less than 50,000 (Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Practice Sites of All RHOP Graduates by Community Population**



## Conclusion

RHOP is a successful program that creates opportunities for students interested in health careers. A greater percentage of RHOP graduates are practicing in rural areas than are graduates from UNMC who were not in RHOP, confirming the validity of the RHOP strategy. RHEN, now working with AHECs, has built an array of specific programs that create awareness of and interest in health careers, and training opportunities for health professions students. The full complement of programs is making a difference in meeting the health care service needs of rural Nebraska communities. For further information about these programs, visit the RHEN Web site, <http://www.unmc.edu/rhen>, or contact the RHEN office at (402) 559-9509.

## Nebraska Health Information Project

The Nebraska Health Information Project is a partnership made possible with the financial support of the State of Nebraska and through additional personnel and other resources provided by the University of Nebraska Medical Center. While initiated by the Nebraska Unicameral, the ongoing success of the project results from cooperation and collaboration among a number of organizations and individuals, particularly those involved in delivering health care services, financing health care, and analyzing health-related data.

Other reports have been published by the Nebraska Health Information Project, including biennial databooks that present Nebraska health and demographic data at the county, area, and state levels. To find out more about these and future reports, visit our home page at <http://www.unmc.edu/nebraska>

Nebraska Center for Rural Health Research  
University of Nebraska Medical Center  
984350 Nebraska Medical Center  
Omaha, NE 68198-4350  
Phone: (402) 559-5260  
Fax: (402) 559-7259  
<http://www.unmc.edu/rural>