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SCRIPT receives funding, research targeted

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Public Relations

Preparing South Carolina's next generation of health professionals to practice and deliver quality health care in some of the state's rural areas has been the mission of the South Carolina Rural Interdisciplinary Program of Training (SCRIPT).



SCRIPT participants construct a windmill from Tinker Toys as part of a team building exercise.

Armed with new funding and a renewed purpose, the program takes on a broader, long-term role by adding a mentored research component that will help groom doctoral students in conducting valuable research aimed at eliminating rural health disparities in

South Carolina while shaping the state's rural health policies.

In a rare fifth round of grant funding, SCRIPT received a three-year \$358,000 grant from the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services' Quentin Burdick Rural Interdisciplinary Program. Since 1993, the program has been successfully administered by Lowcountry Area Health Education Center (AHEC) in Varnville, S.C. SCRIPT is a collaborative program between Mid-Carolina, Pee Dee and Upstate AHECs that trains health professionals to work in interdisciplinary teams to deliver medical care to underserved populations around South Carolina.

New direction in research

Staying focused to developing culturally sensitive health professionals and creating a team approach to care, SCRIPT's newest mission is to assemble a crew of three doctoral fellows chosen from various health science disciplines who will identify urgent rural health issues, conduct hands-on research and prepare data that can sway policy-makers towards action and produce rural health legislation.

"For years, the SCRIPT program provided participants, faculty and community partners with a wonderful opportunity for student learning and practice," said Elizabeth Erkel, Ph.D., R.N., community health researcher and associate nursing professor. "The program's three doctoral participants will gain valuable exposure to innovative research methods, statewide programs and resources that other students cannot get within traditional programs. The experience also provides knowledge about how offices communicate and interact with state lawmakers regarding the policy making process."

Doctoral candidates who meet program qualifications will be chosen from three of SCRIPT's

seven participating statewide institutions, specifically in health science disciplines of nursing (MUSC), health economics (MUSC) and public health (USC). The students will share a portion of their training with 82 SCRIPT participants who train and live in more than 20 rural and medically-underserved counties of South Carolina.

Interdisciplinary training

For 12 years, SCRIPT successfully prepared 593 health professions students from 13 disciplines within the state's higher education institutions. SCRIPT students represent multiple health care disciplines including medicine, dental medicine, nursing (bachelor's and master's degree level), health administration, nutrition, pharmacy, the rehabilitative sciences, public health, social work and speech language pathology. Today, the program values the documentation of rural health research while enhancing a new teaching model for health services researchers, public health educators and practitioners.

“The new program will be a model for interdisciplinary research,” said Janice Probst, Ph.D., associate professor, USC Arnold School of Public Health and director of the S.C. Rural Health Research Center. “It is rare that nurses, public health researchers, and health economist can interact with one another during training. The new program should generate doctoral-level researchers with a unique perspective on rural health issues and the best means for bringing evidence-based practice to rural areas.”

The SCRIPT experience usually begins with a four-day rural health workshop where all participants are introduced to theory and receive an overview of the state's overall rural health picture. Students also learn about interdisciplinary team building, leadership, aspects of basic rural health, transcultural issues and are introduced to the value of service learning activities in a community.

Like their traditional SCRIPT counterparts, the doctoral fellows will participate in the half-day Friday seminars to discuss broader health topics and review accomplishments. They will also participate in two, five-week Rural Interdisciplinary Practicum sessions to enhance their rural health services research experience by working with three rural community health centers around the Lowcountry AHEC service area. Fellows will be guided by a five-member, interdisciplinary faculty mentor team from MUSC and USC experienced in rural health disparities research.

From research to policymaking

The new SCRIPT will have doctoral teams and mentors collaborate with a newly organized SCRIPT Research Advisory Committee, composed of the state's Lowcountry rural health directors, public health educators, research support and legislators who will continually evaluate statewide rural health issues and guide SCRIPT research. Following the program, the participants will formally present their research and recommendations back to the advisory committee for action. They will also have a chance to unveil their scientific findings on a broader scale. Erkel hopes that fellows will share their results at statewide and national meetings and conferences.

“I hope through this program we can learn something new,” said Diane Kennedy, executive director of Lowcountry AHEC and SCRIPT 2006 project director. “There's a lot of questions that should and can be answered through research. SCRIPT has done a pretty good job to prepare practitioners to practice health care in rural communities. From what Dr. Erkel and other SCRIPT leaders have already established, we can now look at the economic, public health and nursing pieces in greater detail. Our doctoral students will have an opportunity to draw broader, clearer perspectives of the overall public health picture for South Carolina

residents.”

This fall, Erkel, Kennedy and Probst are currently working with advisors and finalizing details concerning applicant criteria, rotational experience and other research issues.

According to Erkel, fellows who complete SCRIPT and choose careers in the area of rural health research and policy making will be regarded as future leaders in their field.

“These individuals will have a future as strong research faculty members or can play an active role in both state or federal government, thanks to the experience and grounding they’ll have forged through rural health research and interdisciplinary collaboration,” Erkel said.

For information, e-mail kennedyd@lcahec.com or visit <http://www.lcahec.com/script.html>.

SCRIPT alumnus beams about rural health experience

Aiken native Mardell Bates loves her job as a physical therapist working at Colleton Medical Center in Walterboro. The 26-year-old MUSC alumnus enjoys the direct interaction she has with patients at the center to provide rehabilitative support and recovery care.



Mardell Bates

But Bates did not always know that working within a rural clinical practice setting was what she wanted. Many of her questions were finally answered during 2004 after completing the South Carolina Rural Interdisciplinary Program of Training (SCRIPT) with MUSC.

After applying to receive academic credit, Bates was approved and matched to participate in one of two Lowcountry SCRIPT program sessions. She attended a rural health workshop and participated in a weeklong practice rotation at Barnwell County Hospital and Friday field trips and interdisciplinary conferences as part of her SCRIPT training. At Barnwell, Bates immediately felt comfortable with people and the slower pace of country living. She and other SCRIPT students shared a townhouse throughout the duration. To Bates, the interaction with other interdisciplinary students was also valuable and helped in breaking down stereotypes of specific health professions disciplines.

“I was hoping through SCRIPT to get a better idea of what it’s like to work around some of the state’s rural communities,” Bates said. “The experience helped me understand that there are patients who live in rural areas around the state that don’t always receive the same level of resources as others to assist in their medical care needs.”

Bates matched with preceptor-physical therapist Carolyn Caswell, who is part of a physical therapy team serving patients at the facility. As part of a community-focused health promotion project, Bates and Caswell chose to address a growing concern of low back-related injuries among the area’s Wal-Mart store employees. The pair agreed to coordinate a “back school” or in-service presentation to educate employees about proper lifting techniques and safety.

Since August, she’s worked full-time in Walterboro and has no complaints about her 48-mile commute from Charleston. She’s content to provide her medical expertise to a community that struggles with providing for their primary health needs.

“The SCRIPT experience made a definite impact on me and my career choice,” Bates said, who has since convinced fellow rehabilitative science students to make room for the SCRIPT experience in their studies.

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