



Attracting Professionals to Rural Healthcare: The Experiences of a ND Physical Therapy Program to Attract Students & Promote Rural Health

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Introduction

As a rural state in the Northern Plains, it can be difficult recruiting healthcare students, especially with the recent proliferation of physical therapy schools in the past several years. In addition, the need for providing healthcare to underserved rural areas is a major national focus. The purpose of this project is to examine the reasons applicants apply and accept offers to the physical therapy program at the Univ of Mary while also identifying the percentage of students who receive rural healthcare clinical experience while in the program and who then choose to work in rural healthcare after graduation.

Methods

In 2022, 57 first-year physical therapy students completed an anonymous survey on their reasons for selecting the Univ of Mary. The questions asked in the survey were what led them to apply, what led them to ultimately choose the university, and what factors were the most important in their decision. In addition, between 2020-23 the PT program collected data on 187 students on the location of their full-time clinical placements and also between 2018-22 on 197 students on the location/setting of employment after graduation.

Comments from Students

“Sense of community and hospitality as well as the openness and comfort the professors provided when meeting with them for figuring out the application process and all that it encompassed.”

“After my interview I had the chance to talk to many of the current students. They made me feel included and like I belonged in the program.”

“The faculty are so fun, kind, knowledgeable, and really make us feel that we belong here, too.”

“I felt like I actually mattered here and wasn’t just another number. The interview process supported this by having current students there to welcome us and talk to us, and all the faculty were so welcoming as well.”



Results

Students reported the major reasons for applying to the program were a sense of community, location, reputation of the program, hands-on learning experiences, mission of the university, and clinical experience options. Current students were asked why they ultimately chose the program with responses including reputation, sense of community, interaction with current students, early clinical experiences, location, and the pro bono clinic. Regarding the data collected from previous cohorts, 75% had the opportunity to have a full-time clinical experience in a rural community and approximately 25% of our graduates then chose to work in a rural area.

Discussion

A clear mission, sense of community, clinical experiences, and program reputation were key characteristics in student’s decision to attend the Univ of Mary PT program. Every student participates in a local/international service-learning project while an overwhelming majority of students participate in at least one full-time rural clinical experience in the program. With these opportunities and exposure, the program has been successful in meeting a need of recruiting rural healthcare providers, in that 25% of our graduates choose to practice in rural communities.