

VOICE OF THE DAY

Qualified health care employees are needed

RICHARD OLIVER • JANUARY 10, 2010



Springfield native Alex Roark (right) helped stroke survivor Angie Conrow regain function of her right arm. During her occupational therapy master's studies in the University of Missouri School of Health Professions, Roark's work with the constraint-induced therapy earned her an MU chancellor's research award. (Cheri Ghan / University of Missouri)

What if I told you there are hundreds of great paying unfilled jobs in Missouri and there's no one available to fill them? What if I told you that this was just the tip of the iceberg ... that thousands of jobs will continue to become available over the next several decades? What if I told you that the inability to fill these positions will have a detrimental effect on the quality and availability of health care to the citizens of our state? And what if I told you hundreds of highly qualified students seeking admission to University of Missouri degree programs to prepare them to fill these jobs are turned away each year because of a lack of space to accommodate them?

At a time when unemployment is soaring, manufacturing facilities are closing and attempts to attract new industries to Missouri have not yielded great returns, the health

care sector is still hiring. Why? Because there is a huge shortage of qualified professionals.

As the dean of the largest public school of health professions in Missouri, the University of Missouri School of Health Professions, I hear the same complaint from clinic and hospital administrators, school districts, skilled nursing facilities and health industry leaders many times a week: "We need more of your graduates."

The shortage of the diagnostic, imaging and rehabilitation health care professionals in the "allied health professions" has been called the silent health care crisis. With the aging society, rise in chronic conditions like obesity, diabetes, asthma and skyrocketing diagnoses of autism disorders, more allied health professionals like physical and occupational therapists, speech-language pathologists, imaging and respiratory care professionals and medical technologists are needed to provide the care the public needs now and in the future.

The allied health disciplines represent great jobs for Missouri. Our undergraduates report an average annual starting salary of around \$45,000 with graduate students reporting an average starting salary of around \$60,000. Ninety percent of our students are Missourians and roughly 86 percent of our graduates remain in Missouri. Training Missourians to care for Missourians represents tax revenue and business revenue for Missouri ... real dollars and cents, real economic development for our state.

Why is Mizzou turning away qualified students? For the School of Health Professions it's all about capacity. We're out of space in our 1960s dormitory home and each year we are forced to turn away about as many students as we accept into our professional programs.

So what's the solution? Rather than focusing entirely on attracting new jobs and industry, why not fill those open allied health positions in Missouri clinics, health care facilities and schools. Providing outstanding health care impacts all Missourians. We must increase, not decrease, support for higher education, especially degree programs that help improve our citizens' health and foster economic recovery. The window of opportunity to prevent a Missouri health care work force crisis is narrowing at an alarming rate, but with strategic investments, we can avoid an incurable prognosis and provide a healthier tomorrow.



Richard Oliver

Richard Oliver, Ph.D., is dean of the University of Missouri School of Health Professions.