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Occupational Assistance

MU professors are helping rural Missourians become therapy assistants.

Story by Erik Potter

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Lea Brandt got involved as a program director for the Missouri Health Professions Consortium in hopes of addressing the health care shortage in rural Missouri. She didn't know she'd be helping transform lives.

Since 2010, more than 100 students have graduated with an occupational therapy assistant associate of applied science degree from three community college consortium members. Another 44 are expected to graduate in 2013. The students come from rural areas. Many are married. Many have children. Most are working minimum-wage jobs. They are not able to travel to St. Louis, Kansas City or Springfield — the only places in Missouri where the occupational therapy assistant degree was previously

available.

But now, through a partnership among MU's School of Health Professions, the three original community colleges (Moberly Area Community College, East Central College in Union and State Fair Community College in Sedalia) and two new ones (North Central Missouri College in Trenton and Three Rivers College in Poplar Bluff), occupational assistant programs extend to all corners of the state. Mizzou professors teach the classes remotely and travel weekly to each site for hands-on lab work with students.

Linn State Technical College runs a similar degree program with consortium members for physical therapist assistants.

The consortium was established with a \$1.3 million gift from RehabCare, a St. Louis-based rehabilitation services company, and is now self-sustaining. "We plan on it going on and on," Brandt says.

Occupational therapy assistant jobs are readily available — the program has a nearly 100 percent placement rate for its graduates — and they pay well.

"One of the things we hadn't anticipated is [that] we're breaking the poverty cycle for these families," Brandt says. "We have seen, on average, students coming in making \$7 an hour, on government assistance, with kids at home. Coming out, they're making an average of \$25 an hour."


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