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Program to aid in rural therapy

MU-led consortium to train assistants.

By JENNA YOUNGS of the Tribune's staff

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A new program approved last week by the Missouri Coordinating Board for Higher Education is designed to add more occupational and physical therapy assistants in rural areas.

Occupational and physical therapists help patients with disabilities or injuries to regain mobility, according to a news release from the University of Missouri School of Health Professions. The school is leading a consortium of five community colleges to train about 30 students who each will receive an associate's degree within the next two years.

Lea Brandt, occupational therapy assistant program director, said the new program will teach students in an economical way and will help alleviate a growing demand for therapists.

"I think the most important thing with this economic crisis is that we have to find more educational models that really enhance professions and markets," she said. "Health-care providers are really needed. This program not only meets educational needs but also the health-care needs of Missourians."

The consortium "centralizes administrative structures to avoid costly duplication efforts," Brandt said. "It will offer blended learning models, including distance learning and adjunct faculty across the state."

The five community colleges in the consortium are Moberly Area Community College, State Fair Community College, East Central College, North Central Missouri College and Three Rivers Community College.

Brandt said the first batch of students in the program will graduate in December 2010. The program should expand to 48 students in the next four years and might include other colleges.

Robert Stein, commissioner of higher education, is quoted as saying in the news release that the therapy assistant program could be a good model for other education programs.

"The consortium is a perfect example of using the resources of higher education to deliver services demanded by society in the areas that need them most," he said.

St. Louis-based RehabCare Group Inc. pledged \$1.3 million in April to help underwrite costs for the program.

RehabCare President John Short said there already are more than 100 vacant therapist positions in the state and that gap is continuing to grow. Coupled with increasing demand for therapists in aging communities, Short said there could be "a legitimate crisis."

"The bulk of our services are delivered to people 65 and older," he said in the news release. "Seniors are healthier now, but they need help to maintain their independence, especially after an illness or injury."

Brandt said MU faculty will teach the bulk of the program courses, but the diplomas will be issued by the community colleges because MU doesn't grant an associate's degree.

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