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### Unique Partnership Will Train Therapy Assistants

Kansas City, Mo. -- The Coordinating Board for Higher Education yesterday approved new degree programs to train more occupational and physical therapy assistants in rural areas of Missouri.

Up to 30 students from five community colleges in mid-Missouri will obtain an Associate of Applied Science Degree in occupational therapy within two years. The colleges formed a consortium with the School of Health Professions at the University of Missouri-Columbia to offer new therapy assistant programs. The consortium will expand to admit 48 students within the next four years, and possibly include additional colleges. Plans are in place to add a Physical Therapist Assistant Program in the next one to two years.

Commissioner of Higher Education Robert Stein says the programs are a model of collaboration that could be replicated around the state. "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," Stein says.

Costs for the program will be partially underwritten by RehabCare Group, Inc., a national provider of rehabilitation services headquartered in St. Louis. The company pledged \$1.3 million in April to help fill the gap in the state's need for allied health professionals.

"Currently in Missouri we have more than 100 vacancies for therapists," says RehabCare President and CEO John H. Short. "We typically average 700 vacancies nationwide, and the Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts that by 2014 there will be a shortage of more than 100,000 physical, occupational and speech therapists in the U.S."

Short says the vacancy problem is exacerbated by a large population in need of rehabilitation services. "The bulk of our services are delivered to people 65 and older, which is a growing demographic," Short says. "Seniors are healthier now but they need help to maintain their independence, especially after an illness or injury. Couple a national shortage of therapy professionals with an increasing demand for rehabilitation and you have a legitimate crisis." Physical and occupational therapy help patients recover mobility and learn techniques to overcome disability.

Lea Brandt, Occupational Therapy Assistant Program Director, will oversee instruction and curriculum. "We'll use a hybrid model - traditional classroom instruction combined with interactive TV and hands-on practice," Brandt says. The first graduates are slated for program completion in December 2010.

Participating community colleges are:

- Moberly Area Community College
- State Fair Community College
- East Central College
- North Central Missouri College
- Three Rivers Community College

Students have already begun to take prerequisite classes for the program. Mary Swearingen, 19, a student at State Fair Community College from Warsaw, learned about the program from her anatomy teacher. She has finished her prerequisites and plans to get her associate's degree then tackle a master's. "I'm excited about it," says Swearingen, a former lifeguard who wants to specialize in aquatic therapy.

Lindsey Koechner, 18, of Tipton was inspired to join the program by her mother, Joanne, an occupational therapist in California, Mo. "I like what my mom does," Koechner says. "She gets to know the elderly patients and their needs. She gets to see them smile every day." Both Swearingen and Koechner intend to pursue their careers in or near their home towns.

Occupational and physical therapists help patients learn techniques to overcome disabilities. A unique consortium among community colleges and the University of Missouri-Columbia is helping to

address the current and growing shortage of qualified therapists in the state. -- Guili Krug photo