



ECU News Services

Shelley White, '16, is a Health Services Management alumna who helps facilitate ECU's involvement in primary care quality improvement through her role with health care nonprofit [Access East](#). (Photos by Jay Clark)

LEADERS IN CARE

ECU health services students lead evolution of rural health clinics

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By Kathryn Kennedy
University Communication

An internship program in East Carolina University's Department of Health Services and Information Management is allowing students to lead a movement toward patient-centered care in primary care clinics across the East.

Funded by the Kate B. Reynolds Foundation, it places senior, undergraduate students in clinics seeking a designation as patient-centered medical homes, or PCMHs. Dr. Bonita Sasnett, who leads the program, said the interns help prepare practices to meet certification requirements for recognition as PCMHs.

Sasnett describes PCHM as patient empowerment, and "a holistic approach to providing care." The designation from the National Committee for Quality Assurance also ensures better reimbursement rates for clinics.

As interns, students practice working with an Electronic Health Records (EHR) system and interpret health care policy, Sasnett said. To help a practice understand its challenges, they pull reports that examine factors like the number of no-shows compared to kept appointments, patient wait times and preventative care metrics.

"The target...was to reach out to rural practices that don't have quality teams or IT [information technology specialists]," explained Shelley White, a 2016 Health Services Management alumna now directing the second cohort of interns and coordinating clinic placements through her job at Access East. Access East is a not-for-profit corporation based in Greenville whose aim is to "help tie loose ends together for patients and health care providers."

White said students are trained in the tenants of PCMH before they arrive in the field – qualities like communication with patients and the importance of coordination of care between physicians, nurses and staff. Every patient should have access to his or her health information and understand it, and clinics should try to connect patients to community resources that eliminate barriers to care, such as transportation.

"You want the patient to take an active role and have the care be centered around that patient," White said. She said there's a lack of awareness in rural communities about what PCMH means and why it's beneficial to both patients and the practice.

White is one of 12 students who have taken the internship, and seven are currently serving in primary care, outpatient practices in Beaufort, Lenoir, Martin and Pitt counties.

"When students graduate, if they're interested in policy writing or graduate school, (the internship) is great preparation," Sasnett said. "It's also a cultural experience, because a lot of these students are from the Charlotte and Raleigh areas and haven't been exposed to rural populations with low socio-economic status who have limited access to care and resources. Students become more culturally aware of the challenges of providing care in the rural communities as a result of this experience."

"I'm learning a lot of the business side of it," said ECU senior Katie Adams, who plans to attend graduate school in occupational therapy. "I eventually want to open my own practice, so it helps a lot with that."

"We have been able to catch up on some of our (patient) tracking, which is something we've had a lot of trouble getting caught up on," said Tracie Zeagler, an ECU nursing alumna and quality improvement coordinator at Kinston Community Health Center, one of the internship sites. "Katie being here has helped with that effort."

White said she found the process educational, with many "ah-ha" moments along the way.

"Many practices don't have a book of policies recorded," White observed. "You need that for training and to show your staff is all following the same protocol. It sets that standard of how things are to be done."

"I found myself educating the staff so that we're not just coming in on their territory and telling them what to do," she continued. "You walk into the practice and you become the leader."

Health Services & Information Management is a department in the College of Allied Health Sciences. The department includes undergraduate programs in Health Services Management and Health Information Management, a master's program in Health Informatics and Information Management, and six graduate certificate programs.

Tracie Zeagler, quality improvement coordinator for Kinston Community Health Center, works with Katie Adams, a senior in the Health Services Management program, and Shelley White to improve business practices and patient-centered care at the clinic.



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