



Collaborate with Community: AHEC Scholars

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INTRODUCTION

Although many promising recruitment strategies are in play among U.S. respiratory education programs, the standouts usually emerge from collaborative efforts within the community. When multiple stakeholders gather together to define and solve recruitment challenges, they are more likely to spark greater creative problem solving and value – spurring enhanced awareness of the respiratory care profession to drive stronger results.

HOW IT WORKS

Born out of community collaboration, one of the most successful recruitment practices at MSU Texas serves as an outreach initiative for Texas Tech and, as an affiliate, MSU Texas: the Area Health Education Center Scholars, or [AHEC Scholars](#). AHEC is a federal grant program established in 1971 with 261 centers nationwide, including six in the West Texas area.

The two-year program offers creative, hands-on curricula for high school and college students in rural or underserved areas who are seeking a career in health sciences or human services. Initially, the AHEC program did not have educational offerings for respiratory therapy. Jennifer Anderson, EdD, RRT, RRT-NPS, the academic department chair for the MSU Texas Respiratory Department, and Sarah Long, the manager of AHEC who is also at MSU Texas, persuaded the Health Resources and Services Administration, the federal sponsor of AHEC, to add the respiratory therapy curriculum.

Sarah describes the program as a feeder system, bringing clinical training to individuals who otherwise may not be aware of healthcare professions like respiratory therapy, and resulting in a higher number of trained respiratory therapists (RTs) to fill high-demand jobs. Over the past three years, the respiratory therapy program has tracked eight students who were influenced by the AHEC Scholars program to become RTs.

The program is hosted by MSU Texas to support the network of healthcare organizations across the region in recruiting a diverse workforce. In addition, AHEC helps organizations with grant dollars to support the promotion and fulfillment of the education programs. For example, grant resources were used to fund pig lungs, as well as printed flyers and brochures to circulate among area high schools in the region to promote the respiratory therapy curriculum.

To further promote the profession and inspire candidates to choose a career as an RT, MSU Texas publishes Health Opportunities of Texas (H.O.T.) [Texas Hot Jobs](#), a directory of health careers now in its ninth edition. Developed by Texas Tech in conjunction with the West Texas AHEC, the publication goes to area high school and college students, parents, academic and career counselors, and other career seekers to detail the opportunities in health professions across participating colleges and universities in Texas.



OPPORTUNITY

Clearly, there is power in numbers, and it all starts with collaboration – staying highly engaged with community stakeholders to determine what's possible for elevating recruitment efforts. Start by exploring the [national AHEC Scholars](#) to determine whether there is a program near you. Consider working with area colleges and universities to publish a statewide or city-wide reference guide for RTs (and other) careers. When you leverage your community relationships, you likely will find a path forward to more effective and efficient respiratory therapy recruitment efforts.