How Can NC Expand Healthcare Career Learning Opportunities?

Last month’s health newsletter provided a recap of the 2016 Emerging Issues Forum, FutureWork, and included prioritized strategies from the healthcare sector leadership hackathon. Interestingly, only one strategy was prioritized among all five sector sessions: Greatly expand the availability of project-based learning opportunities to help students better connect learning to real-world applications. In the healthcare session, successful project-based learning programs were defined as those that start as early as possible, providing students with the opportunity to shadow/intern with healthcare professionals and connect with each other to communicate ideas and think critically about their experiences.

Project-based Learning versus Work-based Learning
This central theme got me thinking – what exactly is project-based learning (PBL)? I asked our Education Policy Manager, Kendall Hageman, who offered a definition from the Buck Institute for Education, “a teaching method in which students gain knowledge and skills by working for an extended period of time to investigate and...”
respond to an engaging and complex question, problem, or challenge.”

While PBL is certainly a great way to expose students to healthcare careers, participants of the healthcare session were also interested in work-based learning (WBL) opportunities, defined by the NC Department of Public Instruction as, “an educational strategy that provides students with real-life work experiences where they can apply academic and technical skills and develop employability skills.” WBL includes apprenticeships, internships, job shadowing, and service learning, to name a few. The healthcare industry will greatly benefit from these opportunities to expand both PBL and WBL throughout the state.

Existing Programs
Healthcare session participants identified several models that NC should expand or explore implementing. Some of these programs are operated in K-12 schools, such as Pitt County Schools’ Health Sciences Academy and the City of Medicine Academy in Durham. Others are hosted by colleges and universities, such as UNC School of Medicine’s Health Professions Recruitment and Exposure Program (HPREP), an outreach program designed to provide high school students with the opportunity to interact with medical students, faculty and health professionals. A similar program is offered by Wake Forest School of Medicine.

Additionally, there are business-led efforts, including Cape Fear Valley Health’s job shadowing program and Novant Health’s student observation program. Other health systems and hospitals across the state offer volunteer opportunities that may or may not meet PBL or WBL criteria.

The North Carolina Area Health Education Center (NC AHEC), whose mission is to improve the supply and distribution of the health care workforce, is pioneering this work throughout the state. In addition to making sure the state has enough workers, NC AHEC is striving to supply a workforce that reflects the diversity of our state. For example, Mountain Area AHEC partners with Mission Hospital, the Western Carolina Medical Society, and the Asheville-Buncombe Institute for Parity Achievement to offer the Minority Medical Mentoring Program. This program pairs minority high school seniors with interest in becoming a physician with Buncombe County physicians, pharmacist and dentists.

So What do we Need for NC?
With so many existing efforts underway, where should NC focus the work ahead? If we simply need more of these programs—where do we need them, who needs them, and what needs to happen for them to occur? As a non-partisan public policy and convening organization, how can the Institute for Emerging Issues best support those already committed to and driving this work?

I need your help as I build upon the Forum’s healthcare session output. For the entire month of April, I am seeking your specific ideas to greatly expand healthcare learning opportunities for students that start as early
as possible, as well as for adults seeking to gain or change careers. *Please join this conversation*, as well as encourage participation among those with expertise, experience, and who are most likely to benefit from these programs. *Working together*, I believe we can achieve our goal of training enough workers with the skills necessary to meet the future healthcare demand.

Sincerely,

Sarah Langer Hall