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SLU AHEC Sponsors research projects in social determinants of health and behavioral health integration

One of the Missouri AHEC celebrated programs is the *AHEC Scholars* program. This national program prepares health professional students to work in modern health professional settings where interprofessional team work is common, primary care centers are living laboratories where vital research on chronic disease is conducted, understanding of social determinants of health improve cultural competency and health outcomes, and behavioral health is integrated into primary care centers.

SLU AHEC and the SLU Dept. of Family and Community Medicine has a long history of strong collaborations with community-based agencies that target social determinants of health. Through their practice-based research network, ARCHNet, the department maintains strong relationships with health networks, independent family practices, federally qualified health centers and rural health clinics. Members of the ARCHNet also have strong connections to community-based social service agencies, mental health centers, substance abuse treatment centers and government agencies.

ARCHNet has regularly hosted health professional students to work on research projects involving social determinants of health, behavioral health, as well as topics of special importance to the AHEC Scholars program, like opioid use and chronic pain and Covid-19. They have also received additional support from the school of medicine, including stipends through the Drs. Mary Susan and Robert Heaney Primary Care Research fund. So far, many students involved with this program have been able present research at national conferences, and a few students have also been published in high ranking scholarly journals. These accomplishments not only provide students a better understanding of social determinants of health and behavioral health, they also provide them an opportunity to make strong connects to underserved populations in the St. Louis metropolitan community, where we hope they continue to practice. In addition, the program increases student competitiveness in job/ residency markets, and the institutional legitimacy of the medical schools and health professional programs in our state.

This past year, the SLU AHEC and ARCHNet program sponsored 8 health professions students. Their projects included studying implementation of substance treatment programs in rural communities, evaluating reentry programs for criminal justice populations, appraising the use of marijuana among individuals using prescription opioids and testing the feasibility of primary-care-based nutrition and food stability programs for primary care patients. Five of the students published abstracts for the North American Primary Care Conference held in November of this year. The others learned a lot about the importance of social determinants and built strong connections with St. Louis area agencies.



MAHEC is a partnership of seven locally governed organizations and three university-based health professions education programs working statewide to increase the numbers of Missouri youth entering stable, high-paying jobs as healthcare professionals and the numbers of professionals caring for underserved populations.

The MAHEC partners include:

- A.T. Still University Kirksville
- University of Missouri-Columbia
- Saint Louis University
- East Central Missouri ECMO AHEC – St. Louis
- Mid-Missouri AHEC – Rolla
- Northeast Missouri NEMO AHEC – Kirksville
- Northwest Missouri NWMO AHEC – St. Joseph
- Southeastern Missouri SEMO AHEC – Poplar Bluff
- Southwestern Missouri SWMO AHEC - Springfield
- West Central Missouri WCMO AHEC – Kansas City