

## Creating a Path to Success with the COPE Health Scholars Program

Early morning shift-change at St. Mary Medical Center in Long Beach, CA – nurses huddle reviewing patient notes, physicians begin their daily rounds, administrators start their patient experience meetings, nutrition staff passes out breakfast trays, and Environmental Service workers begin room turnover. The hospital is alive with activity.

The COPE Health Scholars are also beginning their day. These individuals, ranging in age from 18 to well past 60, are enrolled in COPE Health Solutions' series of experiential learning health care programs.<sup>1</sup> They shift alongside staff to deliver patient care, gaining valuable health care exposure, education, and career development. Easily identifiable by their khaki pants, navy polo shirts, and eager-to-learn smiles, they are a unique part of the patient-care fabric.

National employment in the health care field is expected to grow 18 percent by 2026,<sup>2</sup> creating an abundance of health care related jobs and careers. For individuals looking to enter the field, it is becoming increasingly important to not only understand if a career in health care is right for them, but also in which area they wish to specialize.

Providing diverse experiences for pre-health individuals and helping them find the right role in health care is central to the COPE Health Scholars program. The core 15-month program provides individuals the ability to progress through a structured tier system that is designed to expose them to clinical areas in both an inpatient and ambulatory setting. Typical rotations across the care continuum include medical surgical nursing units, the operating room and outpatient clinics. Individuals can also opt to experience administrative areas, such as human resources and risk management. The education students receive in the program also extends beyond their shifts, as the program fosters continual learning by engaging Scholars in community projects and professional shadowing opportunities.

Due to the time and financial investment that is associated with pursuing a career in health care, experiential learning opportunities such as the Health Scholar program are critical for individuals to identify a truly fulfilling career path, as opposed to one influenced by pop-culture or limited industry knowledge. For individuals who do not have family members, friends, or mentors in the industry, the program provides them with the necessary exposure to make informed choices about their future before they take on educational loans and other career-related commitments. After gaining a firsthand understanding of the day-to-day realities of the roles available in health care, many Health Scholars find their initial assumptions and expectations do not align with the reality, leading to a shift in their career trajectory.

For example, at St. Mary, 25 percent of Health Scholars adjusted their career goal to a role that better reflected the impact they wanted to make in health care after only three months in the program, and exposure to just one department. After one year, and exposure to over four departments, the number of career goal adjustments increased to 39 percent<sup>3</sup>.



**Breeann Rapan,**  
Program Manager



**Roya Mirilavassani,**  
Senior Regional  
Manager

“I wanted to make a difference and help people but I realized that through my rotation in the Foundation, not only could I help patients on a 1-to-1 basis but that I could help provide an even bigger impact on the patient population by working on the Port of Long Beach Grant...”

**Kimberly Eclarino**  
Former Health Scholar

<sup>1</sup> *The Health Scholar program, in collaboration with the UCLA Fielding School of Public Health Executive Programs in Health Policy and Management, is a structured, professional experiential program designed to expose and train college and university-level students and career transition individuals to the realities of various health care professions*

<sup>2</sup> *According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics*

<sup>3</sup> *Percentages compiled from Health Scholar cohort that began the program in December 2016*

For Kimberly Eclarino, the COPE Health Scholar program provided this crucial perspective. Initially on a pre-nursing trajectory, Kimberly changed her career path to health care administration after a rotation through the Health Scholar administrative track. Kimberly reflects:

“As a pre-nursing student, I wanted to make a difference and help people but I realized that through my rotation in the Foundation, not only could I help patients on a 1-to-1 basis but that I could help provide an even bigger impact on the patient population by working on the Port of Long Beach Grant in acquiring the Mobile Clinic & other fundraising initiatives to help fund various programs at the hospital.”

Now, Kimberly works as a Fund Development Grants Coordinator with the St. Mary Medical Center Foundation and is currently pursuing her Certified Fund Raising Executive credential.

Students like Kimberly not only gain the exposure to different career paths, but also the foundation to thrive as health care workers. Health Scholars go through a didactic 30-hour training, where they learn about regulations, infection control, customer service, patient safety, confidentiality, and hands-on patient care skills. The intensive training and progressive rotations build patient empathy, teamwork, and communication skills, which are highly sought after in the field, especially with the system-wide shift to a collaborative, team-based health care delivery model.

Health Scholars put these skills into play daily, often rounding on over 30 patients in a four-hour timeframe. Their extensive exposure to patients of diverse ethnic and socioeconomic statuses further allows the scholars to see firsthand how health care disparities affect quality of care. This experience translates to a career-long understanding of how to address these challenges with a greater degree of cultural competence, both as a health care provider and administrator.

The ability to develop her communication and team-based collaboration skills were invaluable for Kimberly Eclarino. Because of her experience with the Health Scholar program, Kimberly has been able to contribute cross-functionally in her role, leveraging her administrator and clinical experience to confidently engage staff members in fundraisers, visit donors when they are in the hospital, and relay patient questions to the appropriate health system stakeholders. “I believe I was able to quickly rise to my current role because of the skills I developed with the Health Scholar Program,” she states.

Students are not the only ones benefiting from the Health Scholar program; the hospital and health system are also provided a unique solution to workforce challenges by home-growing a pipeline of qualified candidates. New Scholars enter the program every three months, which means that there is a consistent influx of eager individuals waiting to experience the health care field. The facility is able to “test drive” these individuals, by observing their work ethic, commitment, and organizational fit, before they are even considered to be hired. Then, when entry-level positions open up, hiring managers can quickly pull from a large recruiting pool of candidates familiar with the system’s culture and patient population. Ardel Avelino, Senior Director at St. Mary Medical Center shared:

“The Health Scholar Program provide students with a unique and valuable first hand perspective on healthcare systems and operations. It’s really seeing how theory is applied into clinical practice. Each day, we see students demonstrate compassionate care to patients. This program is beneficial for both the participants and healthcare organization.”

Since the program started in 2004, St. Mary has hired over 105 Health Scholars and alumni into positions ranging from ER technicians, nursing staff, clinical lab scientists, medical assistants, and coordinator roles within various administrative departments.

“I believe I was able to quickly rise to my current role because of the skills I developed with the Health Scholar Program.”

**Kimberly Eclarino**  
**Former Health Scholar**

As the focus on care delivery re-design and patient-centric health care technology continue to boom, new niches will be carved out in health care. Due to this growth, individuals will see an increase in diverse career opportunities, and will need resources to prepare for them. The COPE Health Scholars Program will continue to support individuals interested in a health care career, by providing them with the opportunity for firsthand experience, career exploration, and skill development to support them on their journey to a successful and fulfilling career in health care.

“The Health Scholar Program provide students with a unique and valuable first hand perspective on healthcare systems and operations. It’s really seeing how theory is applied into clinical practice.”

**Ardel Avelino, Senior Director  
at St. Mary Medical Center**

**COPE Health Solutions** is a national leader in helping health care organizations succeed amid complexity and uncertainty

For more information about the COPE Health Scholars Program, please contact Breeann Rapan at [brapan@copehealthsolutions.com](mailto:brapan@copehealthsolutions.com) or Roya Mirilavassani at [rmirilavassani@copehealthsolutions.com](mailto:rmirilavassani@copehealthsolutions.com) or (213) 259-0245.