

Meeting the needs of students and communities

Getting medical students into the community is Shawn O’Leary’s passion. As director of Multicultural Affairs and academic advisor to the Urban Health Scholars program at Geisel, O’Leary keeps students connected to community service. Or, as he puts it, he gives them an opportunity “to work on the social determinants of health.”

O’Leary and Dr. Joseph O’Donnell (’71), the senior advising dean and a professor of medicine, select several first-year students each year to be Urban Health Scholars; students stay on as scholars until they graduate. Getting first-year students exposed to urban health is crucial, O’Leary believes. “If we can capture [them] at this critical stage of their medical career development, I feel like we can develop an interest and foster that interest, and keep them in that kind of work,” he says.

The program begins with a cultural immersion tour in the Boston area that includes working with youth groups and visits to community health centers. The tour ends with a full day at the Mattapan Health Care Revival, an enormous outdoor clinic at the Mattapan, Mass., Community Health Center, where thousands of people receive free health screenings and health education.

O’Leary oversees numerous other student activities. *Lifelines*, an art and literary journal edited by Geisel students, began with guidance from O’Leary. He also fostered the Medical Spanish Initiative started by two first-year scholars who had done volunteer work in South America. The program provides resources and community events for learning Spanish medical terminology.

A portion of O’Leary’s job he is especially proud of is organizing the Geisel program

at Dartmouth’s annual Martin Luther King, Jr., celebration. In his first program, “HIV in the Black Community,” he was instrumental in setting up free HIV/AIDS testing in communities in New Haven, Conn.; Boston; and Manchester, N.H.

As a member of the Bois Forte Band of Ojibwe in Northern Minnesota, O’Leary enjoys taking Geisel students to Ojibwe reservations to learn about community-health programs. This past March, 16 first-year medical students traveled with him to four different Ojibwe reservations. The students work with physicians and a variety of health-care providers at both tribal and Indian Health Service facilities.

Most useful, he thinks, is the students’ chance to shadow community-health representatives who take care of patients in their homes. “Students come back with a different perspective on health,” says O’Leary, who has led Geisel educational experiences to the Minnesota reservations the past three years.

The road from childhood in Minnesota to Dartmouth was not easy. For part of his childhood, O’Leary lived at his grandmother’s house—a home that often had 18 or 19 people living in it at any one time. “My fourth-grade teacher told me I would never graduate from high school,” he says. It took time, but he eventually became the first in his family to graduate from college.

From 1996 to 2000, at the Center of American Indian and Minority Health at the University of Minnesota School of Medicine in Duluth, O’Leary developed summer community-based science programs. When he started the center had two programs; when



Shawn O’Leary does whatever it takes to help get medical students involved in local communities, including, above, playing drums at Sharon Academy.

he left there were 10 serving over 400 youths on reservations in four states. He also ran a preceptorship program that placed Native American medical students from the medical school in rural clinics to shadow tribal nurses and doctors.

O’Leary then served as assistant director of the Wabanaki Center at the University of Maine, where he recruited students for a Native American tuition-waiver program and brought large groups of Native American high school students to the university for hands-on math and science events.

O’Leary seems to have a knack for motivating students and making their dreams come alive. The key, he says, is “being genuine . . . and just being myself. People tend to open up and trust you more when they know they can.” His job at Geisel, he says, is to do whatever students need: “Yesterday, I was moving dressers with a student. The day before, I was teaching a student how to drive.”

Students appreciate his help. “Shawn’s defining characteristic is his undying dedication to his students and their education,” says fourth-year medical student Christopher Worsham. “He is always willing to put us in touch with the right person, make phone calls, or find funds in the budget to make sure we are able to shape our medical education how we would like.”

It’s all part of helping medical students learn to meet the needs of people in their communities. Matthew C. Wiencke