Gaining a “proper sense” of what happens out there: An “Academic Bush Camp” to promote rural placements for students

Amy T Page1, Sandy Hamilton1, Maeva Hall1 Kathryn Fitzgerald1, Michele Holloway1, Wayne Warner1, Barbara Nattabi1, Sandra C Thompson1

1 Western Australian Centre for Rural Health, School of Primary, Aboriginal and Rural Health Care, University of Western Australia, 167 Fitzgerald St, Geraldton WA, 6153

A shortage of rural health practitioners persists across most disciplines, limiting access to health services for people living in the bush. Participation in rural placements during undergraduate education is believed to encourage future rural workforce participation. The Western Australian Centre for Rural Health (WACRH) has developed innovative, interprofessional rural experiential and clinical placement models. Opportunities to expand rural student numbers are limited by several factors, including reluctance of universities to send students to rural non-traditional settings.

Academics and clinical placement coordinators of WA universities offering allied health and nursing programs were invited to a four-day academic bush camp. This camp aimed to build relationships while showcasing innovative rural health student learning opportunities, through experiential learning and structured workshops.

Methods: A pre- and post-questionnaire with open-ended questions and questions on a 5-point Likert scale (strongly disagree = 1, strongly agree – 5) were administered electronically to assess participants’ attitudes. Responses were entered into SPSS 22 and analysed using descriptive statistics. Follow-up phone interviews were conducted six months after the camp to assess longer-term reflections on the camp and any change in student placement intentions.

Results: Eleven of 12 (92%) participants were female, and 7 health disciplines were represented from all five WA universities. Nine of 12 (75%) attendees had previously lived or worked in a rural area. Eleven participants (92%) stated that the camp met their expectations, and all said they would recommend the opportunity to a colleague.

Following the camp, participants were more likely to agree with the statement “I am aware of the programs that WACRH has to offer” (p=0.016), and on the benefits of the WACRH programs through longer rural placements (p=0.83) and a service-learning environment (p=0.83).

Six months later, participants reported that their knowledge of WACRH’s placement model, supports and staff had improved or consolidated their willingness to send students.

Discussion: Rural academics can directly influence University placement intentions by showcasing opportunities for rural placement in terms of infrastructure, learning and academic support. A camp experience appears more powerful than campus-based meetings at increasing metropolitan academics’ awareness of rural placement programs, improving their in interest to work collaboratively and their willingness to encourage students to undertake rural placements. Academics from a rural background appeared more receptive to rural learning possibilities.

An academic bush camp appears effective in increasing awareness of opportunities for rural placements. Such programs have the potential to increase student numbers undertaking rural placements.