

The future diversity of the health and biomedical workforce is “On Track”

During a typical school year, Gordon Scott organizes field trips for tribal students in middle and high school from Warm Springs to OHSU. Scott, a member of the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, is the embedded community liaison for the On Track OHSU! program. The program's goal is to increase racial diversity in health and biomedical science professions. “It's eye-opening for these kids, especially the younger students,” said Scott, who graduated from the same Oregon schools where he now works on behalf of the OHSU program.

At OHSU, Warm Springs students join with students from other Oregon schools whose populations are underrepresented in health and science to learn about career options. They tour research labs, visit the simulation centers and practice clinical skills. Older On Track students also have the chance to shadow OHSU pediatricians, other health care professionals and scientists. But the most popular element of the visits are the sessions with OHSU students, faculty and alumni, who share stories about their career paths.

For the Warm Springs students specifically, meeting the Wy'east scholars makes a big impression, Scott said. These scholars are part of another OHSU diversity initiative focused on college graduates. The 10-month post baccalaureate program — unique in the nation and overseen by the Northwest Native American Center of Excellence — provides an alternative path to the traditional medical school admissions process for talented Native American students. The need for these types of programs is profound. When the six scholars of the Wy'east program's inaugural class entered OHSU's medical school in 2019, they increased the total Native American student enrollment at all U.S. medical schools by 15 percent. Just 39 of the 21,600-plus U.S. medical students in 2019 and 0.4 percent of U.S. physicians identify as Native American. “The importance of increasing the number of Native American physicians and health care professionals cannot be overstated,” said Erik Brodt, M.D., director of the Northwest Native American Center of Excellence. Brodt, who is Ojibwe, is an associate professor of family medicine in the OHSU School of Medicine. “Health outcomes for Native Americans are far below average — a quarter die before age 45 — and Native medical students are part of the solution as they are more likely to serve Native people in their careers than their peers.”

Back in Warm Springs, Scott is a day-to-day presence at schools serving the community and is working to establish relationships with students and teachers — during science classes, in after-school programs, at sports events. “We start in sixth grade and stay in contact through their college years. It can take years to have an impact and we are in this for the long haul.”

Since its inception in 2013,
more than

4,000

Oregon students have participated in the On Track program. In addition to OHSU site visits, the program partners with schools to develop customized resources and curricula.

