

WORKFORCE ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN RESULTS

2025

 **OLORADO
RURAL HEALTH
CENTER**

The State Office of Rural Health

Celebrating 35 years of Service

- 1991-2026 -



Report Summary



80

Respondents

Key focus areas:

- Barriers to entering and sustaining healthcare careers
- Job search & recruitment preferences
- Scope of practice & career priorities

BACKGROUND

The Colorado Rural Health Center (CRHC), works to improve access to healthcare in rural communities by supporting workforce development initiatives across the state. Persistent workforce shortages continue to impact rural healthcare systems, making it critical to better understand both the experiences of the current workforce and the perspectives of individuals entering healthcare careers.

To support this effort and our commitment to providing updated and relevant information, CRHC conducted surveys comprising a new 2025 Environmental Scan to examine factors influencing recruitment, retention, and career pathways in rural healthcare. The 2025 scan expanded upon previous work by collecting perspectives from both health professions students and the current healthcare workforce, providing insight across multiple stages of the healthcare workforce pipeline. A special emphasis was placed on:

- Barriers to entering and sustaining healthcare careers
- Job search & recruitment preferences
- Scope of practice & career priorities

Responses collected from the environmental scan will help inform the development of an updated Community Apgar Questionnaire-based workforce framework designed to support rural healthcare organizations in addressing workforce challenges and strengthening recruitment and retention strategies.

METHODS

Environmental scan survey questions were developed in response to evidence-based factors impacting recruitment and retention of healthcare professionals in rural communities, as well as barriers to entering healthcare careers. Two surveys were conducted as part of the 2025 Environmental Scan: one targeting health professions students in Colorado and one targeting the current healthcare workforce in rural areas of Colorado. Questions across both surveys were intentionally aligned to allow for comparison between student perceptions and workforce experiences. Both surveys were administered electronically using SurveyMonkey and participation was voluntary.

The health professions student survey was distributed through a convenience sample of health professions programs and student networks across Colorado. Outreach methods included email campaigns, direct communication with program faculty and staff, partnerships with Area Health Education Centers (AHECs), and promotion during student presentations and workforce-related events.

The current healthcare workforce survey utilized a convenience sample of rural healthcare professionals, including those working in critical access hospitals, provider-based clinics, private practices, and other healthcare organizations throughout rural areas of Colorado. Sampling strategies were supported through CRHC's existing relationships with rural healthcare organizations and outreach methods including email campaigns, individual communication, and promotion during events and educational webinars.

RESPONSES



36 Student Respondents

Respondents who identified as students preparing for the rural workforce made up 31% of survey respondents.



44 Workforce Respondents

Respondents who identified as active participants in the rural workforce made up 69% of survey respondents.

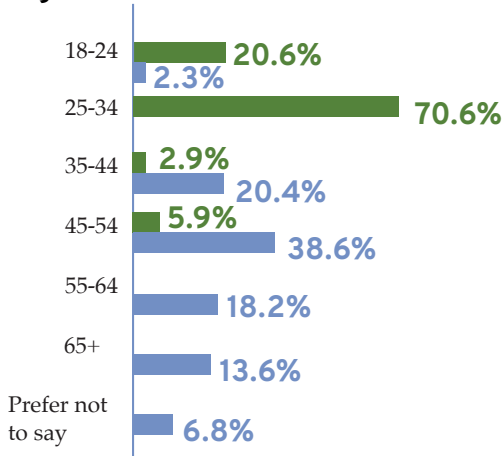


CHECK OUT OUR WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT TOOL AT WWW.CORURALHEALTH.ORG/APGAR

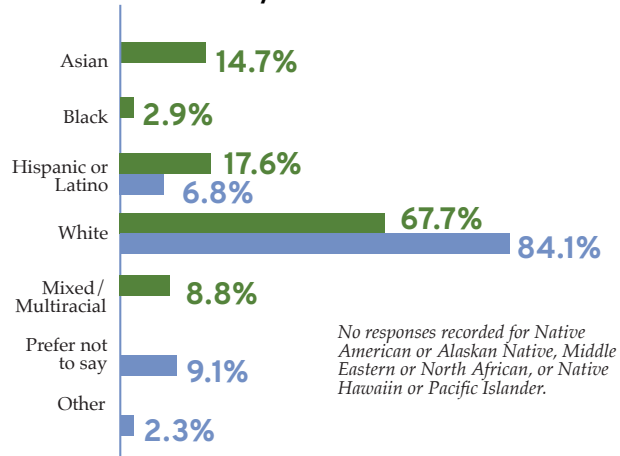
RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

● Students ● Workforce

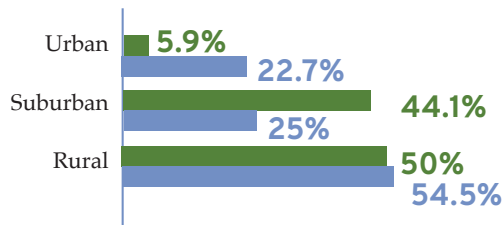
Age



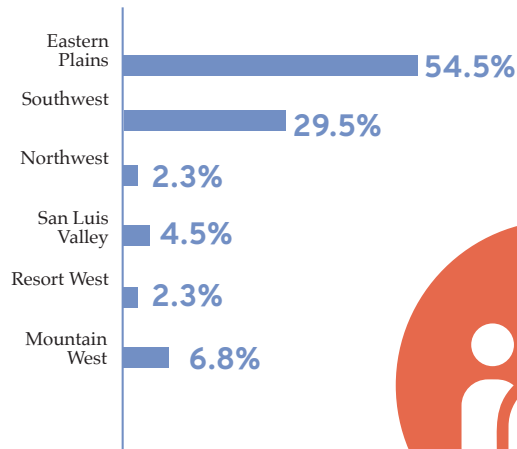
Race and Ethnicity



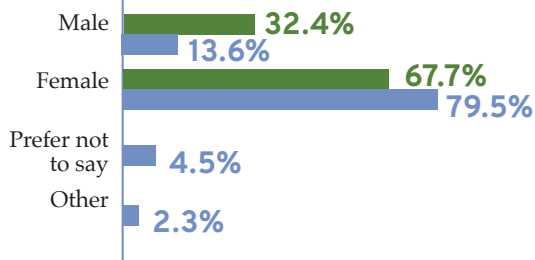
Place of Origin



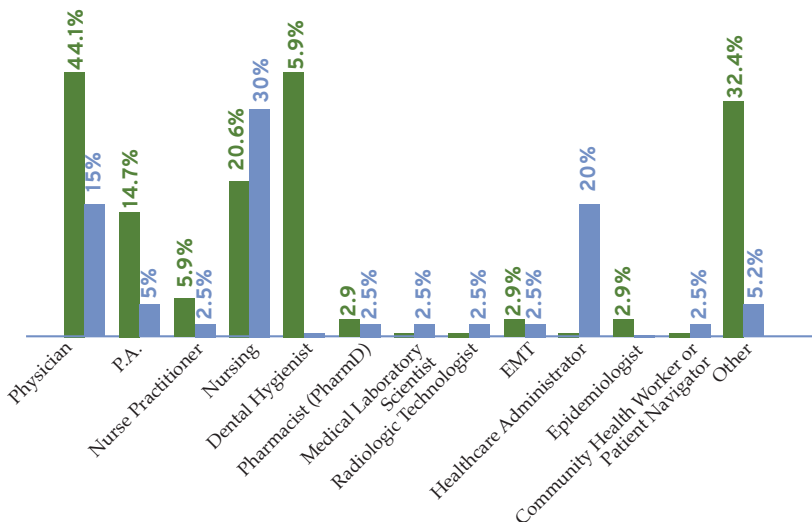
Region of Work



Gender Identity



Health Profession or Career Path



No responses recorded for the following:

- Dentist (DDS, DMD)
- Dental Assistant (CDA, RDA)
- Pharmacy Technician
- Medical Assistant (CMA, RMA)
- Respiratory Therapist (RRT, CRT)
- Medical Laboratory Scientist (MLS, MT, MLT)
- Phlebotomist (CPT)
- Radiologic Technologist (RT)
- Physical Therapist (PT, DPT)
- Occupational Therapist (OT, OTD)
- Psychologist (PhD, PsyD)
- Psychiatrist (MD, DO)
- Clinical Social Worker (LCSW, LMSW)
- Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC, LMHC, LPCC)
- Substance Abuse Counselor (LADC, CADC)
- Behavioral Health Technician (BHT)
- Public Health Professional (MPH, DrPH, CHES, CPH)
- Health Information Management (RHIA, RHIT)
- Healthcare Administrator
- Ophthalmologist (MD, DO)
- Optometrist (OD)

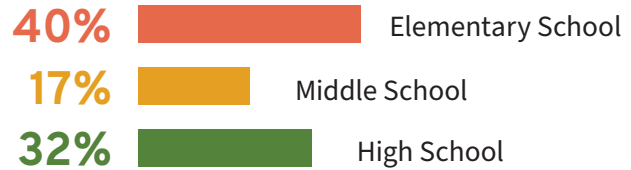
Survey Results

Healthcare as a Career

FIRST INTRODUCTION TO HEALTHCARE AS A CAREER

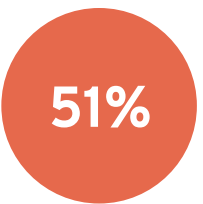


of students pursuing a career in healthcare were introduced to the field as a career in high school or earlier

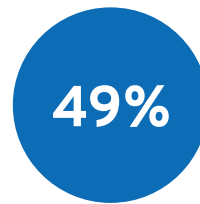


ACCESSIBILITY OF HEALTHCARE AS A CAREER

The accessibility of healthcare careers to diverse populations is a divisive topic among student respondents

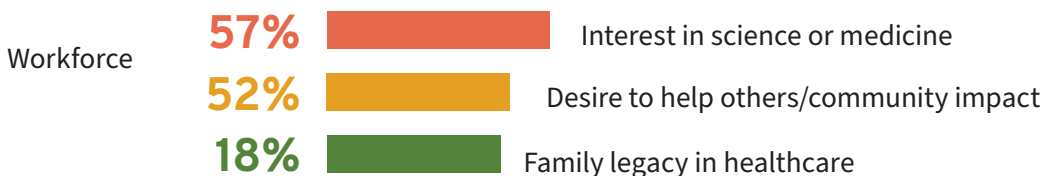
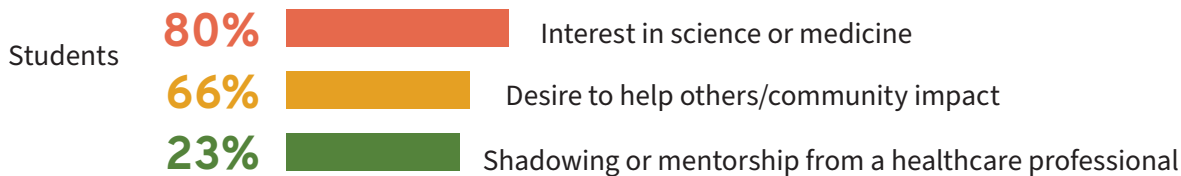


of student respondents reported that healthcare careers were somewhat or very accessible to diverse populations



reported that healthcare careers were somewhat or very inaccessible.

TOP 3 FACTORS INFLUENCING DECISION TO PURSUE HEALTHCARE AS A CAREER



Education and Training

BARRIERS FACED IN EDUCATION OR TRAINING



of student respondents reported facing barriers in their healthcare education or training related to their identity



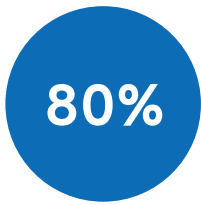
Top Student Barriers:

- ✓ 66% said time commitment/work-life balance
- ✓ 63% said cost of education/training
- ✓ 49% said competition for admissions/residencies

Top Workforce Barriers:

- ✓ 71% said time commitment/work-life balance
- ✓ 66% said cost of education/training
- ✓ 27% said limited access to clinical training sites

STEREOTYPES



of students reported encountering stereotypes in pursuit of their healthcare career



of students reported encountering stereotypes in pursuit of their healthcare career

Top Reported Student Stereotypes

- 49% assumptions about age or stage in life
- 37% assumptions about ability based on gender
- 31% stereotypes related to their racial or ethnic background

Top Reported Workforce Stereotypes

- 36% assumptions about age or stage in life
- 34% assumptions about ability based on gender
- 11% judgements about my academic capabilities based on where they grew up or went to school

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Though responses did not statistically differ between student and workforce respondents on their top focus areas for professional development, students reported developing hard skills and workforce was more focused on soft skills and leadership development.

Student Focus Areas:

- 1 49% expanding technical expertise
- 2 49% advancing education and/or certifications
- 3 46% gaining industry specific knowledge

Workforce Focus Areas:

- 1 59% developing work-life balance strategies
- 2 50% building leadership skills
- 3 41% improving communication or interpersonal skills

Rural Job Location

CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Student responses revealed a slight bias towards urban areas regarding career development. **66% perceived career development opportunities to be better in urban areas.**

RURAL HEALTHCARE FACTORS

Among student respondents, the top three factors influencing their perception of healthcare in rural areas were:



availability of healthcare providers

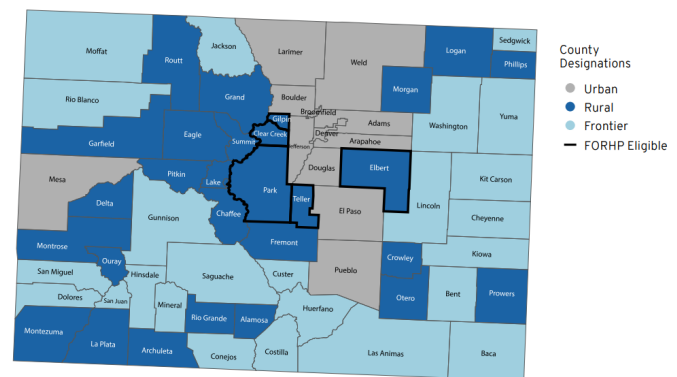


access to necessary medical facilities and technology



geographical isolation and transportation challenges

FORHP Eligible Areas



The Federal Office of Rural Health Policy has modified its list of areas eligible for rural health funding. The counties outlined in bold are eligible for FORHP funding and are now considered rural as they are outlying metro counties that do not have an urban area population of 50,000 or more people. The newly adopted designation method designates outlying Metropolitan counties that do not contain any Urbanized Area (UA) population as fully eligible for rural health grants.

JOB LOCATION

Responses did not statistically differ between student and workforce respondents regarding job location factors though students reported less flexibility in location.

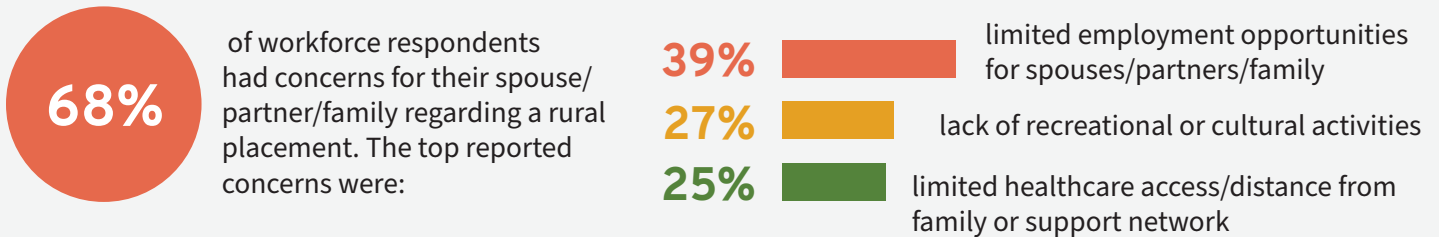
Students Valued:

- 1 28.6% Community type - I am committed to working in a specific setting that aligns with my values & career goals
- 2 22.9% Regional preference - I prefer a certain geographic area but am open to different community types
- 3 20% Flexibility - I am open to any location as long as the role aligns with my skills and interests the most

Workforce Valued:

- 1 40.9% Flexibility - I am open to any location as long as the role aligns with my skills and interests
- 2 25% Community type - I am committed to working in a specific setting that aligns with my values & career goals
- 3 18.2% Regional preference - I prefer a certain geographic area but am open to different community types the most

RURAL PLACEMENT CONCERNS



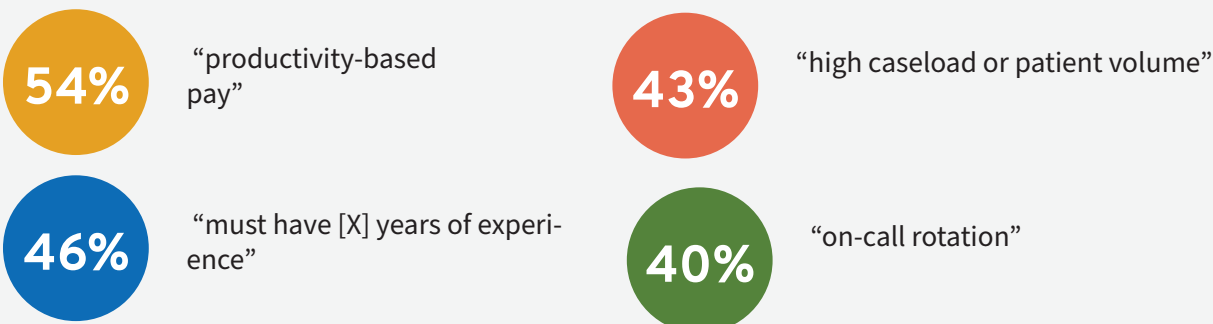
Job Postings/Interview Length/Recruitment Process

Opinions on overly specific qualifications in job postings were mixed. Of all respondents **45.6% (51% students and 41% workforce)** said overly specific qualifications can discourage applicants while **40.5% (49% students and 34% workforce)** reported that overly specific qualifications provide helpful expectations.

Among student respondents, **moderate (54%) to extensive (40%) detail is highly preferred to a brief overview (6%)** in job listings. Students highlighted that the extra detail provides clarity and removes hidden expectations.

Additionally, students overwhelmingly valued information about salary and benefits in the job listing. **54% desired the exact salary and full benefit package listed and 40% wanted at least a general salary range and key benefits listed.**

Among students, the most common words that were reported to cause hesitation to apply included:



MOST IMPORTANT ASPECTS OF THE HIRING PROCESS AS A CANDIDATE

Among students the most important aspects of the hiring process as a candidate were:

- 1 71% clear and transparent job responsibilities and expectations
- 2 49% emphasis on work-life balance and overall well-being
- 3 37% salary range and benefits included in the job posting

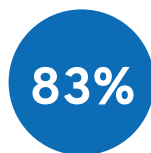
For workforce, the most important aspects of the hiring process as a candidate were:

- 1 73% salary range and benefits listed in the job posting
- 2 68% clear and transparent job responsibilities and expectations
- 3 43% flexible work hours or ability to balance personal/work commitments

There were not any concrete preferences regarding interview length. **74% and 64% reported that interview length depends on the role and company for students and workforce, respectively.** Respondents believed that some positions require more in-depth conversations while others can be assessed in shorter interviews.

While most student respondents believe an interview should have two stages (an initial screening and an interview) (57%), **many did not have a preference as long as interview length was clear from the beginning of the application.**

Most students expected to hear back within 1 week (54%) after submitting a job application. 26% expected to hear back within three days and 17% expected to hear back within 2 weeks. **Zero students thought hearing back more than 2 weeks after applying is acceptable**



of student respondents prefer a personalized email as the method for initial contact.

Student respondents overwhelmingly agreed that an unorganized recruitment process was a red flag for the company's overall culture and operations (94%). 55% of workforce respondents did not believe their company has an organized recruitment process.

ANALYSIS METHODS

Categorical responses were aligned between current workforce and student respondents

- 44 workforce responses
- 35 students responses
- 1 student response was submitted after analysis and was not included

Responses to aligned questions were tested to see if they differed between students and workforce

- Chi-squared or Fishers Exact tests were used to test whether the responses differed statistically
- Standardized residuals were assessed for questions that significantly differed between student and workforce responses to identify how the responses differed
- The residuals help determine the “why” behind the differing responses. Residuals greater than +/- 1.96 significantly contribute to the difference at a significance level of $p < 0.05$. The closer the residual is to zero, the less contributions that response makes toward the overall difference. A positive residual indicates a greater observed response than expected and vice versa for a negative residual.

Rank distribution was used to identify differences between student and workforce responses for ranking questions

- Mean rank was calculated for both groups and mean difference was assessed
- A resampling approach was used to calculate 95% confidence intervals and assess statistical significance

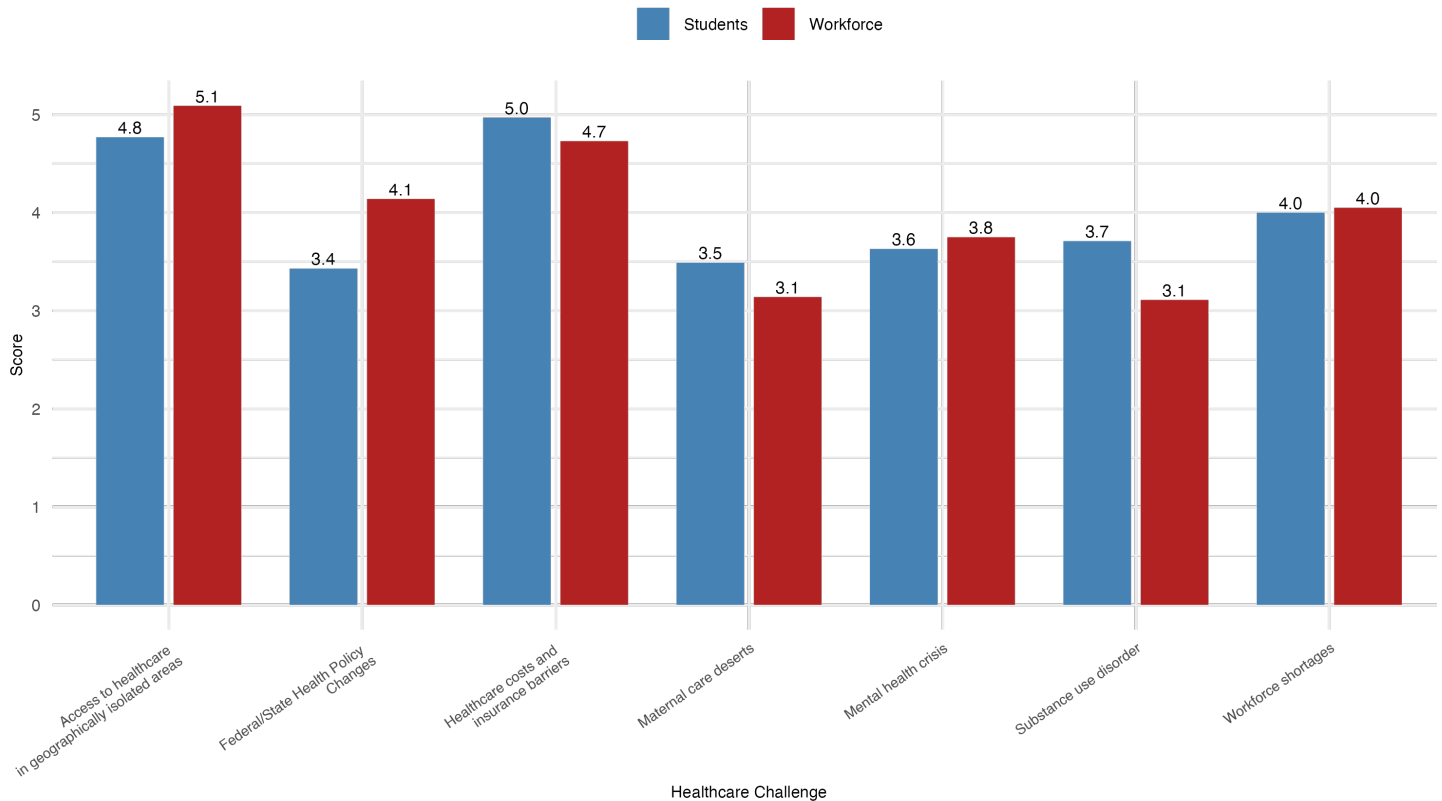
Free response questions were analyzed for common themes and summarized

Analysis

HEALTHCARE CHALLENGES

Students ranked healthcare costs and insurance barriers, maternal care deserts, and substance use disorder significantly higher than workforce. While respondents already in the workforce ranked access to healthcare in geographically isolated areas and federal/state health policy changes significantly higher than students.

Student vs Workforce Perceived Healthcare Challenges



Top Student Healthcare Challenges:



Healthcare costs and insurance barriers (3.0 mean rank)

Followed by:

- ✓ Access to healthcare in geographically isolated areas (3.2 mean rank)
- ✓ Workforce shortages (4.0 mean rank)

Top Workforce Healthcare Challenges:



Access to healthcare in geographically isolated areas (2.9 mean rank)

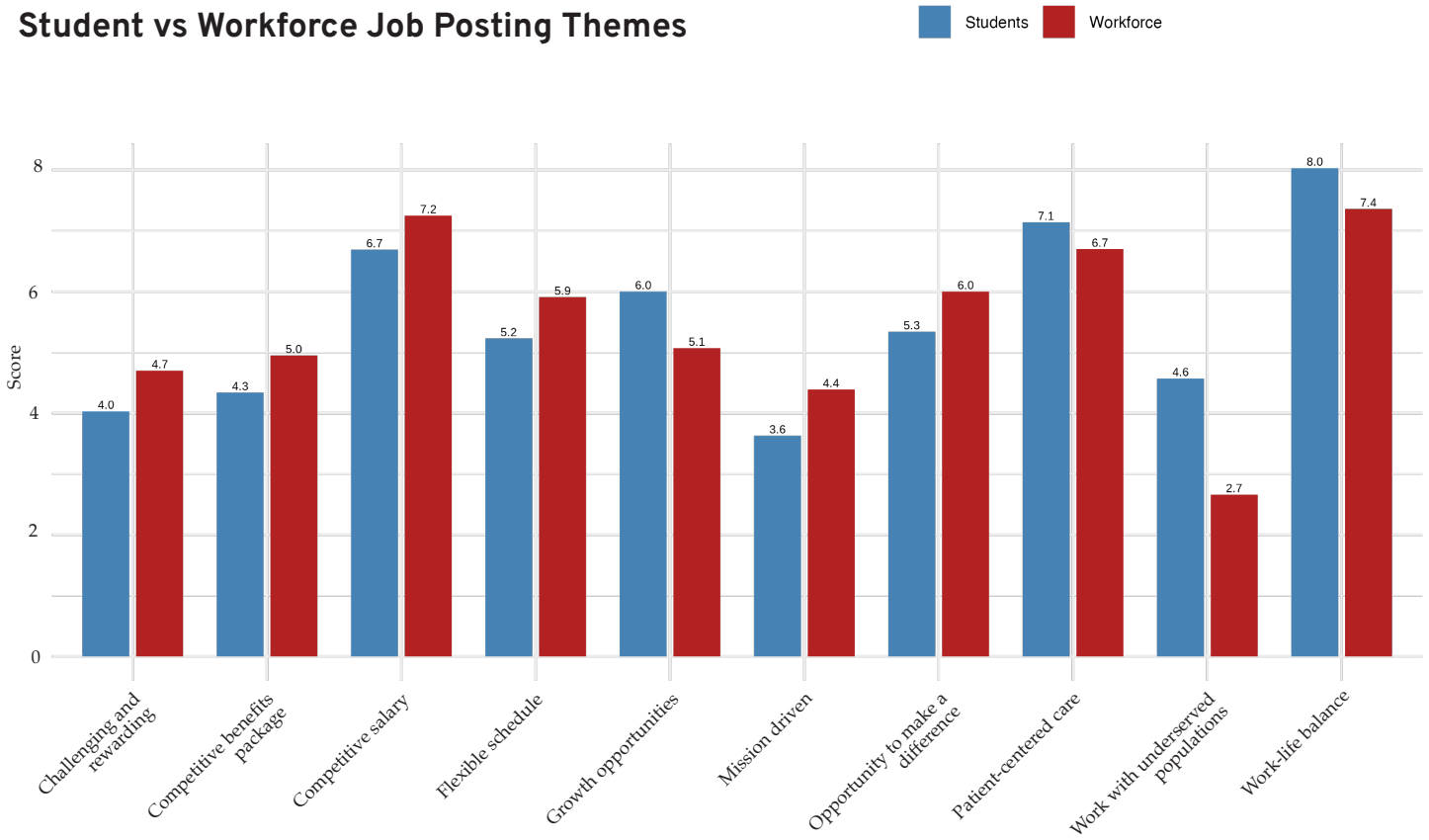
Followed by:

- ✓ Healthcare costs and insurance barriers (3.3 mean rank)
- ✓ Federal/State Health Policy Changes (3.9 mean rank)

JOB POSTING PHRASES

The average rank of all job posting phrases/themes significantly differed between students and workforce respondents. Respondents already in the workforce placed higher importance on "challenging and rewarding", "competitive benefits package", "competitive salary", "flexible schedule", "mission driven", and "opportunity to make a difference" compared to students. Students placed higher importance on "growth opportunities", "patient-centered care", "working with underserved populations", and "work-life balance" compared to respondents already in the workforce.

Student vs Workforce Job Posting Themes



Top Student Job Posting Phrases



Students ranked "Work-Life Balance" as the most important phrase to look for in a job application
2.9 mean rank

Followed by:

✓ "Patient-Centered Care"
3.9 mean rank

✓ "Competitive Salary"
4.3 mean rank

Top Workforce Job Posting Phrases



Workforce members also ranked "Work-Life Balance" as the most important phrase to look for in a job application
3.6 mean rank

Followed by:

✓ "Competitive Salary"
3.7 mean rank

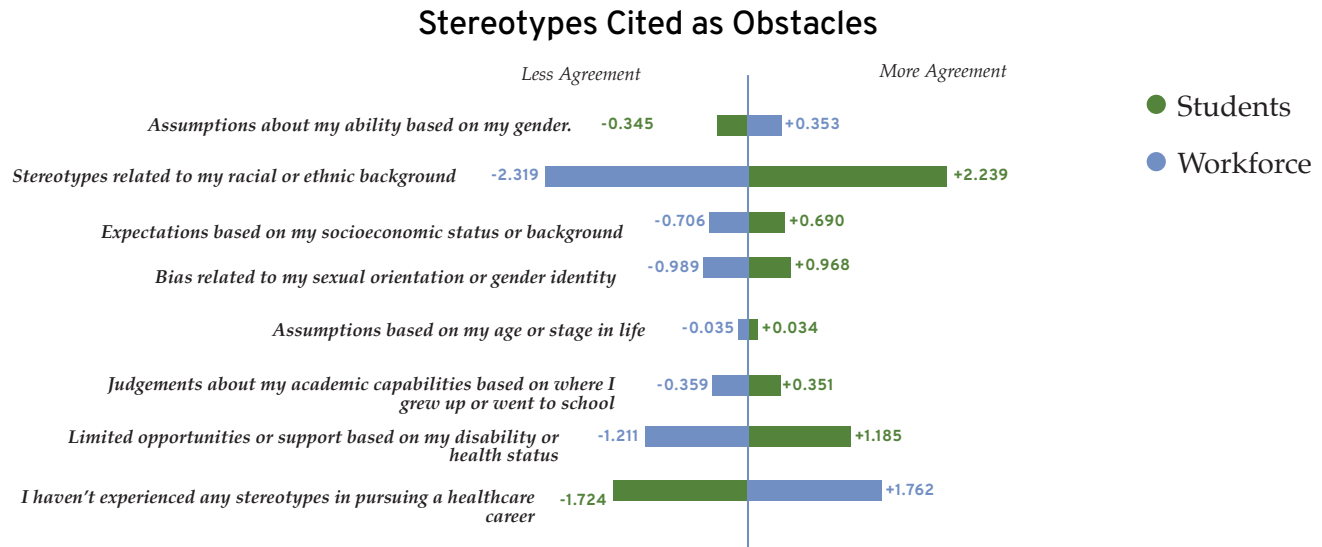
✓ "Patient-Centered Care"
4.3 mean rank

DIFFERING QUESTIONS

Responses to “Stereotypes encountered in pursuit of healthcare career” and “What aspects about the hiring process are most important to you as a candidate” significantly differed between students and active members of the healthcare workforce. For the statistical methods see page 6.

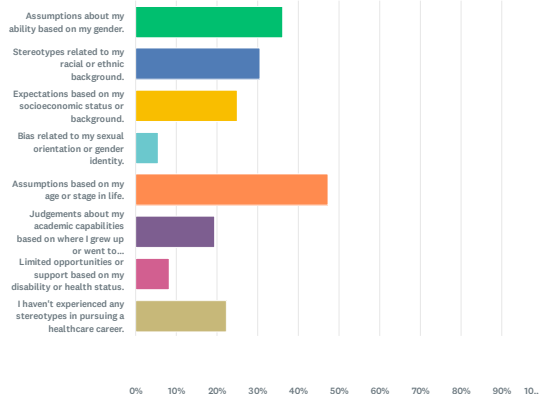
“Stereotypes encountered in pursuit of healthcare career” ($p = < 0.001$)

Stereotypes related to racial or ethnic background were the primary driver of the overall difference in responses. The scores below show the standardized residuals for each response. A positive score indicates that a response was observed more often than expected, while a negative score indicates it occurred less often than expected. If a score is greater than ± 1.96 , the difference is statistically significant. Students were significantly more likely to report stereotypes related to their racial or ethnic background, while workforce respondents reported this category less frequently (2.27 and -2.32 , respectively).”



Raw Responses: Student

As a health professional student, which of the following stereotypes, if any, have you encountered regarding your identity when pursuing a career in healthcare? (Select up to three.)



Raw Responses: Workforce

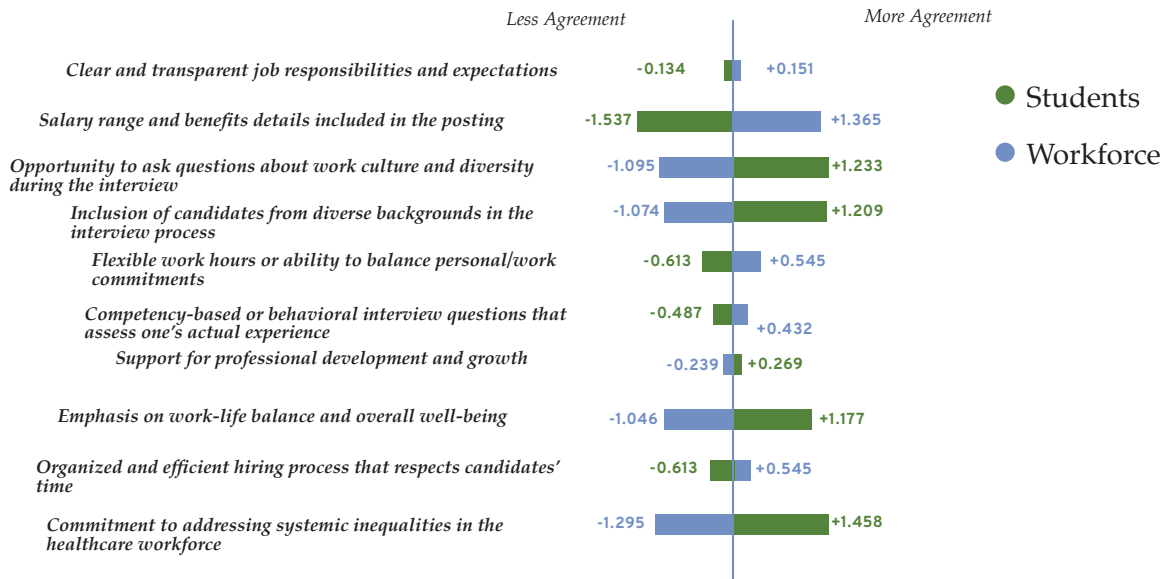
Which of the following stereotypes, if any, have you encountered regarding your identity during your career in healthcare? (Select up to three.)



What aspects of the hiring process are most important to you as a candidate? p=0.04

While responses differed between students and workforce overall, no individual response categories exceeded the ±1.96 standardized residual threshold, indicating that no single category significantly contributed to the difference between groups. Moderate trends were observed for “Salary range and benefit details in the posting,” which workforce reported more often, and “Commitment to addressing systemic inequalities in the healthcare workforce,” which students reported more frequently. Students also exhibited minor tendencies to report “Opportunity to ask questions about work culture and diversity during the interview,” “Inclusion of candidates from diverse backgrounds in the interview process,” and “Emphasis on work–life balance and overall well-being” more often.”

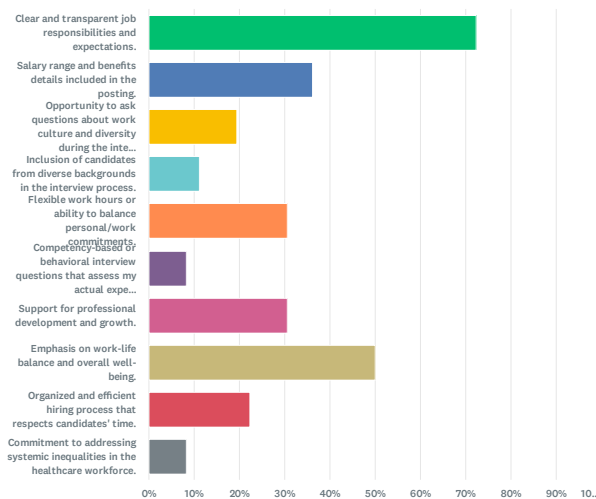
Important Factors in the Hiring Process



Raw Responses: Student

Q21 What aspects of the hiring process are most important to you as a candidate? Please select up to three factors that influence your decision to apply or accept a job offer in the healthcare field. (Select up to three.)

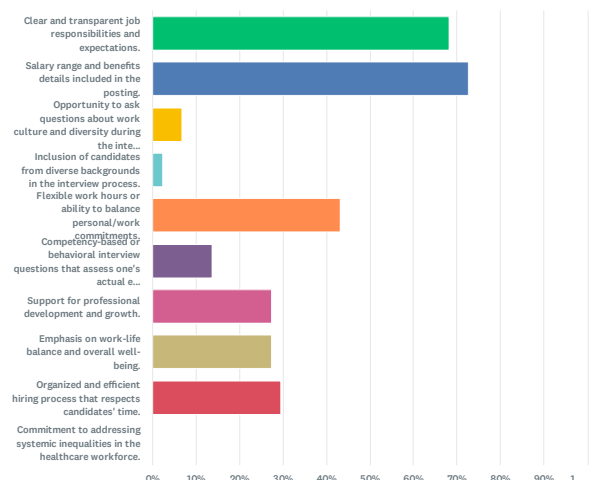
Answered: 36 Skipped: 0



Raw Responses: Workforce

Q14 What aspects of the hiring and onboarding process are most important to candidates? Please select up to three factors that may influence one's decision to apply, accept and/or retain a job offer in the healthcare field. (Select up to three.)

Answered: 44 Skipped: 0



Analysis: Sample Job Apps

Respondents to both student and workforce surveys were asked to respond to a sample job add and pick out what phrases or ideas made them want to apply and which had the opposite effect. Below is analysis of each group's responses to the prompt.

WORKFORCE RESPONDENTS

Across responses, competitive salary and benefits, team-based work, and transparency in the job posting were the primary factors generating interest. Some respondents were also attracted to a fast-paced, high-demand environment and a peaceful/rural setting, particularly when framed as honest and straightforward rather than apologetic.

The most common sources of hesitation were limited opportunities for advancement, expectations of extended or on-call hours, and concerns about work-life balance. The explicit statement about "limited direct paths for advancement" was frequently described as discouraging, especially for early-career applicants, and in some cases overshadowed all other positive aspects of the role.

Rural location and limited amenities were highly polarizing. While appealing to some respondents with rural experience or preference, others viewed them as significant drawbacks—particularly when combined with vague job expectations or perceived overemphasis on the negatives of a rural location. Several respondents also reacted negatively to the overall tone of the posting, describing it as vague and overly negative, insufficiently focused on mission, impact, or employee growth, despite appreciating the intent toward transparency.

STUDENT RESPONDENTS

Overall, respondents were most attracted by competitive salary and benefits, along with opportunities to work in a collaborative, committed team and—for some—a peaceful rural setting. Clear articulation of benefits, PTO, and responsibility helped generate interest.

The most consistent sources of hesitation were vague or potentially demanding work-hour expectations (on-call, extended, or "flexible" hours), limited opportunities for advancement, and lack of clarity around responsibilities and career development. Several respondents also expressed concern that terms like "cultural fit" and "fast-paced" could signal exclusion, overwork, or poor work-life balance.

Rural location was polarizing: appealing to some for lifestyle reasons but a deterrent for others due to concerns about isolation, amenities, and mobility. Across responses, clearer expectations and greater transparency were repeatedly identified as key factors that would influence willingness to apply.

Analysis: Accessibility

Respondents to both student and workforce surveys were asked to respond to the following prompt:

Based on your experiences, what changes or strategies could the healthcare industry adopt to make it more accessible and welcoming to individuals from minority, rural, and/or underserved communities who are pursuing careers in healthcare? (Short answer)

WORKFORCE RESPONDENTS

Respondents emphasized financial, educational, and structural barriers as the primary challenges to improving accessibility in healthcare careers and services. The most frequently cited needs included reducing the cost of education through scholarships, tuition assistance, loan support, and rural service payback programs, as well as increasing wages particularly in rural areas to offset geographic and lifestyle limitations.

Expanding access to education and training emerged as a central theme, with respondents highlighting online and self-paced learning, dual-credit programs in high schools, rural clinical training sites, mentorship programs, and early exposure to healthcare careers beginning in elementary through high school.

Respondents also stressed the importance of access to housing, childcare, transportation, spousal employment opportunities, and leadership development. Several comments pointed to systemic inequities, lack of representation, and insufficient mentorship or leadership training as barriers to both entry and retention, highlighting the need for more inclusive hiring practices and stronger institutional support.

STUDENT RESPONDENTS

Respondents overwhelmingly identified cost as the primary barrier to improving accessibility in healthcare careers, citing high tuition, testing fees, application costs, and limited financial support during training. Many emphasized the need for scholarships, stipends, affordable tutoring, loan assistance, and reduced tuition, particularly for students from rural, low-income, or underserved backgrounds.

Early exposure, mentorship, and clear pipeline pathways were highlighted as essential, especially for rural students and those from minority or first-generation backgrounds. Respondents called for outreach in public and primary schools, pipeline and pathway programs, job shadowing, clinical and research opportunities, and career counseling to help individuals navigate complex healthcare career options and admissions processes. Visibility of diverse role models was seen as critical to reinforcing that healthcare careers are attainable.

Several responses emphasized inclusion through structural and institutional supports rather than rhetoric, including accessible work schedules, childcare and insurance for students and part-time workers, accommodations for neurodivergent individuals, support for second-language learners, and recognition of geographic and socioeconomic differences in experience. While views on DEI approaches varied, there was broad agreement that equitable access requires fair admissions and hiring practices, leadership diversity, bias training, and practical supports that enable success throughout the education and career pipeline.

Additional Workforce Resources

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT REPORT

From 2023-2025, The Colorado Rural Health Center collected workforce data from:

- Health professional student environmental scans
- Current rural health professional workforce environmental scans Rural site visits
- CRHC's Colorado Provider Recruitment and Retention Program Other workforce-based grant initiatives

When matched to our largest workforce research project, the Community Apgar Questionnaire (CAQ), this information helped us develop a framework for addressing specific aspects of rural provider recruitment and retention.

The CAQ is a validated research tool developed and implemented by Dr. David Schmitz, M.D., University of North Dakota and Dr. Ed Baker, PhD, Boise State University. This tool utilizes 5 classes of 10 factors each to:

- Assess the recruitment and retention readiness of rural clinics and hospitals.
- Identify the importance of each factor relative to the characteristics of clinics, hospitals, communities, and patient populations.
- Identify how clinics and hospitals may have advantages and challenges related to each factor.
- Create space for clinics and hospitals to discuss possible solutions for recruiting challenges and language for marketing advantages.

Each CAQ uses a cohort of participating organizations to better understand state-level challenges and advantages as well as the unique top and bottom factors of each organization. There is a suite of CAQ options, but this framework narrows in on factors from the Rural Health Clinic and Critical Access Hospital CAQs.

DOWNLOAD THE REPORT AT WWW.CORURALHEALTH.ORG/APGAR



SNAPSHOT OF RURAL HEALTH

Published annually by the Colorado Rural Health Center, the Snapshot of Rural Health analyzes rural Colorado's demographics, health outcomes, and healthcare infrastructure. The report devotes significant time to reporting on the state of the healthcare workforce in rural Colorado. This following is a sample of workforce data in the snapshot, which can be found here: <https://coruralhealth.org/snapshot-of-rural-health>

PHYSICIAN BURNOUT (2024)



49% feel burned out

↓7.5% from 2023

20% feel depressed

↓13% from 2023

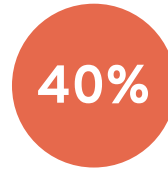


Emergency Medicine physicians continued to have the highest burnout rates among specialties

Top Reported Causes of Burnout

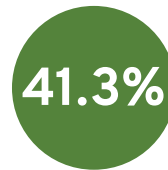
- 62%** Too many bureaucratic tasks
- 41%** Too many hours worked
- 40%** Lack of respect from coworkers

NURSING BURNOUT (2024)



40% of registered nurses indicated they plan to quit within the next 5 years

- 21.9%** Specific reasons for leaving
- 18%** Planned to retire
- 18%** Leave nursing



41.3% of registered nurses who intend to leave the profession cited burnout/stress as the main cause

- 33%** Other reasons for leaving
- 26%** Workload
- 26%** Understaffing

BENEFITS AMONG RURAL HEALTHCARE FACILITIES



Only 3%

offer a housing stipend



43%

offer loan repayment



38%

offer a bonus/productivity structure



Over 50% said

a housing stipend would help recruitment and retention



50% listed

it as a desired benefit



56% listed

it as a desired benefit

RURAL COLORADO HEALTHCARE JOB MARKET (SEPT 2024 – AUG 2025)



9,280 rural job openings

advertised online in the healthcare and social assistance industry in rural Colorado

Representing 19.7% of all rural job openings



65.2%

of the advertised healthcare and social assistance industry rural job openings were at hospitals

Healthcare practitioners and technical occupations (HPTO) had the most online job postings of all rural occupations

42% of all job postings were for HPTO, the most common were

10,797 registered nurses (45%*)

1,853 physical therapists (7.7%*)

1,465 radiology techs (6.1%*)

*HPTO postings

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