Tar Heel Footprints in Health Care

A periodic feature that recognizes individuals whose efforts—often unsung—enhance the health of North Carolinians

Thomas J. Bacon, DrPH

Thomas J. Bacon, DrPH, served for 17 years as the executive associate dean and the director of the North Carolina Area Health Education Centers (AHEC) program prior to stepping down from these positions in August 2013. Currently, Bacon holds a faculty appointment in the Department of Social Medicine at the University of North Carolina (UNC) School of Medicine and is a senior research fellow at the Cecil G. Sheps Center for Health Services Research at UNC–Chapel Hill.

Looking back on his time as the leader of AHEC, Bacon reflected on the program’s 3 greatest accomplishments. First, he lauded the continued production of primary care physicians through AHEC’s residency programs; compared with residents in other training programs, a higher percentage of AHEC-trained primary care physicians remain in North Carolina to practice following their residency. Second, Bacon highlighted AHEC’s strategic efforts to enhance the diversity of the health professions workforce through a variety of efforts in middle schools and high schools across the state. Finally, Bacon noted the broader use of technology to expand access to health education and to deliver more cost-effective training. In particular, AHEC’s digital library provides health professionals access to invaluable resources including online book and journal subscriptions.

Bacon anticipates that AHEC will face several challenges in the upcoming years related to decreased funding and increased competition among consolidated health systems. AHEC’s state funding has been cut more than 20% in the past 5 years; while Bacon believes that AHEC’s increased efficiency will compensate for some of this loss, it cannot make up for all of it. Also, Bacon posits that the ongoing consolidation of hospitals, physician practices, and other providers into large, competing, integrated systems makes it more difficult to maintain the spirit of collaboration around educational programs that has been critical to AHEC’s success over its 40-year history. Still, Bacon believes AHEC has a bright future because of the talented and dedicated people who are part of AHEC across the state.

Bacon has contributed much time, energy, and dedication to improving the quality of health care across North Carolina in his decades of service. Dean and chief executive officer of the UNC School of Medicine and UNC Healthcare William Roper, MD, MPH, commented, “Tom Bacon has had a remarkable career in North Carolina health care. We are all much better off for his fair-minded, principled, and steady leadership.” Bacon also acknowledged the role others have played in AHEC’s accomplishments, saying “I value the long spirit of collaboration across North Carolina between AHEC, universities, professional associations, and medical providers over the years.”


Elizabeth Chen, North Carolina Institute of Medicine, 630 Davis Dr, Ste 100, Morrisville, NC 27560 (Liz_Chen@nciom.org).

N C Med J. 2014;75(1):7. ©2014 by the North Carolina Institute of Medicine and The Duke Endowment. All rights reserved. 0029-2559/2014/75120