

By Michael Haederle | August 18, 2020

Educational Bargain

Joint UNM-CNM Certification Program Offers Affordable Medical Assistant Training

Medical assistants are everywhere in New Mexico's health care system – checking in and screening patients for the social determinants of health, taking vital signs and supporting physicians and midlevel practitioners in providing care.

Most receive their training through expensive for-profit programs that burden them with significant debt.

But for the past two years, the UNM Office for Community Health has partnered with Central New Mexico Community College in a unique and highly affordable program to train and certify medical assistants.

For the first year, UNM paid 50 percent of the salary for the director of the program, which is offered alongside the nursing program at the Health Sciences Center Rio Rancho campus, says Arthur Kaufman, MD, Vice Chancellor for Community Health.

“Medical assistants have the highest burden of debt compared to their income,” Kaufman says, adding that they typically shell out \$16,000 or more for their certifications. The UNM-CNM joint program costs about \$3,000, and students with financial need may qualify for Pell grants that cover the charge.



Many of the program’s graduates have found positions in the UNM Health System, he says. “We’re pushing for a concept in training where, instead of the training being conducted outside the academic health center, this is training provided *by* the academic health center. It could provide a model nationally.”

Kaufman asked Francisco Ronquillo, PA, a Bernalillo County-based Health Extension Regional Officer, to help organize the joint program.

“We have a formal agreement between the institutions,” Ronquillo says. The training program, which unfolds over two academic terms, include a clinic-based practicum, at the end of which students sit for a national certification exam.

“This is a huge opportunity for our New Mexico student population, because of the cost, because of the training and because it’s an entry level position,” Ronquillo says. “It’s creating pathways so they can pursue higher education. It’s creating this upward mobility opportunity for people – and they don’t wind up with a huge debt.”

Jill Anderson, RMA, directs the medical assistant program, operated by CNM’s School of Health, Wellness and Public Safety.

“It’s really growing in popularity,” she says. “I guess the word is getting out that UNM and CNM have this program. It is so much more cost-effective for these students than these for-profit centers.” CNM is currently enrolling students for the Fall 2020 semester, she says.

“It’s a really well-rounded program,” Anderson says. It starts with a one credit-hour introductory course that explains what the program will cover and outlines a medical assistant’s professional life.

Students must meet 434 competencies prior to their practicum, she says. “Every bit of the anatomy that you can think of is covered under the program.” The instructional curriculum covers subjects like phlebotomy, cardiology and pulmonology.

“It’s really one step down from nursing,” Anderson says. “Medical assistants are skilled to work hand-in-hand with the physician or provider. They are allowed to do whatever a provider deems fit, as long as they feel competent in their skill level. They have a really great opportunity to learn and do a multitude of things.”

There will be ample employment opportunities for medical assistants for the foreseeable future, she says.

“It’s just growing,” Anderson says. “The way that the health care model is designed now, it’s one MD, several mid-levels and a couple RNs and a slew of medical assistants. There’s really great job prospects.”

To support the work of the UNM Office for Community Health HEROs program, donations may be made to the [Drs. Arthur and Ellen Kaufman Community Health/HEROs Fund](#) at the UNM Foundation.