PAs for the Underserved

Carroll University is Wisconsin’s oldest four-year institution of higher education. Two years ago, the small, private school in Waukesha added something to its long and distinguished history – a PA program. This in itself was not profound, as Wisconsin already had three PA programs, but Carroll’s program is unique. What makes it unique, and comment worthy, is its start and what it hopes to achieve.

The Carroll University Physician Assistant Program was made possible, in part, by a HRSA and ARRA Training in Primary Care Medicine and Dentistry: Physician Assistant Training in Primary Care grant. The goal of the grant and the program is to produce not only highly skilled and professional PAs, but culturally competent PAs who will be ready and able to serve Wisconsin’s underserved populations. As we know from PA history, a shortage of physicians in the post-World War II era called for the creation and integration of mid-level practitioners. From the work of Eugene Stead, M.D. and various other pioneers, PAs have gained incredible momentum and solidified their place in the modern healthcare system. Once again, America is facing an impending physician shortage that will no doubt increase the necessity and distribution of mid-level professionals.

Carroll’s program is saturated with cultural competence training and selects students who express sincere interest in working with underserved populations. Most notably, the practicum course is quite different from other programs. The practicum course is present in each semester of the didactic year and begins in the summer by having students examine their own identity and culture. An intense self-examination allows students to acknowledge and address any biases or deficiencies they have developed or possess. In the fall, students begin examining Wisconsin’s many ethnic groups, with special consideration and emphasis on the barriers, challenges and unique conditions inherent in each. In addition, students begin serving with the United Community Center in Milwaukee and St. Joseph’s Medical Clinic in Waukesha. These experiences give face time in a healthcare setting with the very populations they will someday serve.

It is rather obvious that learning from experience is more beneficial than simply having exposure in the classroom. The student body of the class is composed of a diverse population that complements and enhances the goal of producing culturally aware and competent PAs. Although most of the 21 students are younger than 30, they possess a wealth of experience and
knowledge. Some are immigrants themselves; some are first-generation Americans. Others have completed overseas healthcare mission trips while in their undergraduate studies or as a personal endeavor. The classroom is often filled with the stories of trips and lessons learned from various experiences while overseas, working in healthcare, or simply volunteering right here in Wisconsin.

To learn more about Carroll’s unique PA educational opportunity, contact Cindy Holahan at cholahan@carrollu.edu.