Preparation of nurse practitioners and physician assistants to fill the primary-care gap

THE DEMOGRAPHICS of health care are shifting. People are growing older and managing an increasing number of chronic conditions, while the pool of primary-care providers continues to shrink. The master’s-degree programs for aspiring nurse practitioners and physician assistants at the Betty Irene Moore School of Nursing at UC Davis focus on preparing new primary-care providers while developing leadership skills in graduates who will meet the demand and guide health-care teams.

As millions of previously uninsured people enter the health-care system, there is unprecedented demand for nurse practitioners and physician assistants to keep populations of people healthy and out of the hospital. The American Association of Nurse Practitioners reports the number of licensed nurse practitioners in the United States has doubled in the past 10 years. The number of physician assistants is expected to increase 38 percent by 2022 according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

“We offer the only combined programs in the nation and tailor our curriculum to provide a broad education that includes advanced skills to solve complex problems, knowledge of quality and safety, an understanding of how health-care systems work and their business aspects,” explained Debra Bakerjian, senior director for the school’s nurse practitioner and physician assistant programs. “Our graduates are better prepared to work as leaders of health-care teams with the ability to establish systems of care to address population health.”

Nurse practitioners are registered nurses who are prepared, through advanced education and clinical training, to provide a wide range of preventive and acute health-care services, such as taking health histories, providing complete physical examinations, diagnosing and treating many common acute and chronic problems, providing education and prescribing medications. Physician assistants are health-care professionals licensed to practice medicine with physician supervision. They
conduct physical exams, diagnose and treat illnesses, order and interpret tests, counsel on preventive health care, assist in surgery and write prescriptions. A recent study reported that nearly 80 percent of people who see these providers have longer consultation periods and are equally or more satisfied with the quality of care than a visit with a physician.

The concept of collaborative health-care teams dates back to the 1920s when advocates espoused clinical efficiency as well as social teamwork. Historically, students in nursing, medicine and other health-related professions have little contact with each other. With the recognition that health-care professionals must work seamlessly as a team, the School of Nursing is dedicated to system-level interprofessional and interdisciplinary education.

Over the past 40 years, UC Davis graduated more than 1,850 nurse practitioners and physician assistants, with 67 percent of graduates working in underserved areas. Additionally, nearly 70 percent of graduates work in primary care, compared to significantly lower national averages of between 30 and 40 percent. In 2013, the physician assistant and nurse practitioner programs transitioned from the UC Davis School of Medicine to the School of Nursing and became part of the Nursing Science and Health-Care Leadership Graduate Degree Program.

“Physician assistants and nurse practitioners have historically viewed each other as very different, and to a certain extent, as competitors,” said Gerald Kayingo, assistant clinical professor and physician assistant. “Thanks to visionary faculty who understand both worlds, we shift the paradigm and infuse the various perspectives and experiences of these two professions.”

The programs are led by an interprofessional team of more than 50 faculty members from disciplines including nursing, medicine, health informatics, nutrition, biostatistics, pharmacy, sociology and public health. The programs shifted from certificate programs to master’s-degree programs enabling students to learn beyond the basics of clinical preparation to develop a deeper understanding of health care and health systems.

“The nurses in the nurse practitioner program all have clinical experience under our belts, but the physician assistant students bring a very broad perspective to the table,” said Sara Marchessault, nurse practitioner master’s-degree student. “It’s phenomenal to see the mixture of skills and expertise that you have all together in one room.”

Marchessault chose the School of Nursing in order to broaden her skills and return to her rural, Northern California community to better serve those needing care. The physician assistant and nurse practitioner programs focus on developing providers who are prepared to deliver care in areas where it’s needed most, thus expanding access for a growing population. A recent survey found that 41 percent of rural Medicare beneficiaries saw a nurse practitioner or physician assistant for all or some of their primary care in 2012. Christopher Morales, a former U.S. Army medic inspired by the level of care provided by physician assistants, decided to fulfill his purpose at UC Davis.

“I knew through the School of Nursing I would have an opportunity to work in my community right away,” said Morales. “UC Davis really makes it clear that people collaborate with others and working in the community is important.”

The School of Nursing cultivates academic excellence through immersive, interprofessional and interdisciplinary education and research in partnerships with the communities we serve. Faculty focus on innovative experiences to educate clinicians to deliver care as a member of an effective team, preparing graduates to meet those goals now more than ever.

More details on the nurse practitioner, physician assistant and other degree programs at the School of Nursing can be found at nursing.ucdavis.edu.