

Healthcare Professionals for Utah's Rural Communities

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Cultivate

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Utah State University's Health Professions Director Michele Lyman receives daily calls from rural clinics and hospitals asking for more of the program's graduates. The need for medical personnel in rural areas in southern and central Utah is often in communities close to one of USU's statewide campuses where health professions are taught, which is a major reason the programs were established.

According to Lyman, one healthcare system in the Blanding area has five clinics across the Navajo reservation in the Utah strip, which serves close to 174,000 people who need healthcare. The demand for more medical professionals in rural areas is so great in the Four Corners region — surrounding the spot where Utah, Colorado, Arizona, and New Mexico meet — Lyman said she often gets requests from as far away as Cortez, Colorado, and Farmington, New Mexico.

USU's statewide campuses offer programs to fill the demand for healthcare practitioners with a range of training, including medical assistants, certified nursing assistants, emergency medical technicians, medical laboratory technicians, pharmacy technicians, phlebotomists, and surgical technicians. The programs are part of the Department of Aviation and Technical Education's focus on teaching skills that are needed in communities throughout the state and region.

"It's very important that we are able to train people who want to go back into their communities and serve their people," said Lyman. "These health professions programs are important so our students can come to school and go back into their communities where they really want to be living with their families and taking care of people in their communities."

USU's instructors have years of real-world experience in the medical field and have often worked in the rural areas in which they live and teach. Spencer Spotted Elk started out cleaning buildings on the Blanding campus to pay his way through school. He eventually graduated and served his community in the local hospital as a laboratory technician. Spotted Elk now teaches at USU Blanding as a medical laboratory technician instructor and brings his knowledge to the classroom with hands-on learning.

"Having those hands-on experiences is part of everything we do here," Spotted Elk said. "I try to bring in different aspects of how we learn. You have some people who love to learn by reading books and you also have those hands-on learners. When I'm teaching, I tried to give those different perspectives."

Spotted Elk said the jobs his students will eventually take are hands-on. While they are students, these future medical professionals can train in a calm, controlled, and educational environment where they will prepare for real-life situations.

Jonathan Brewer is a lab technician student being trained by Spotted Elk. He said being a lab tech is the perfect fit for him because he enjoys the behind-the-scenes detective work.

"They say the lab work is 70% of the diagnosis of patients," Brewer said. "People think we just take the blood, put it on a machine, and click a button. It takes a lot more investigation than most people think."

Students at USU campuses are trained with state-of-the-art equipment, preparing them to hit the ground running as they enter the workforce. One piece of equipment is an Anatomagetable that has a uniquely important role

among the learning resources available at the school. The tabletop is a large touch screen with multiple cadaver scans uploaded to its operating system. Each cadaver is scanned one layer at a time from the skin, to the bones, and all the systems in the human body. The image library allows students to view specific medical pathologies, including fractures, joint replacements, and aneurysms.

Health professions students dissect the “cadavers” digitally and study any part of the human anatomy. According to several students, it’s much less intimidating to work on a real patient once you’ve had experience working with the Anatomagetable. In addition to its practical uses as an important learning tool, Spotted Elk said using the table has important cultural benefits for USU Blanding’s Native American students.

“You’re supposed to allow the dead to go in peace and let them rest,” Spotted Elk said. “There are a lot of taboos that we try to respect. Having that table, you’re able to get hands-on experiences that one would never get with real cadavers. We’re also respecting our culture and our way of life.”

A major component of USU’s health professions programs is catering to Utah’s rural communities and the needs of individual students who often have jobs, families, and other responsibilities in addition to attending school.

“I’ve been practicing in rural Utah for 30 years,” Lyman said. “I’ve watched healthcare progress, and it might have been slow at first, but it’s wonderful to see that we have healthcare in the area now. Even though it’s tough. It’s very hard. Now our students are getting healthcare to their communities and that’s a wonderful thing.”

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Spencer Spotted Elk graduated from the medical laboratory technician program and returned as an instructor after serving the community at a local hospital.



Health Professions Director Michele Lyman.