

# PHYSICIAN ASSISTANT STUDIES NEWSLETTER

Spring 2021  
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## NEW DIRECTIONS

Happy New Year!

A new year and a new start! We are beginning 2021 with cautious optimism that our national pandemic will begin to fade away from the spotlight, the newsfeed, and the day-to-day discussions and allow all of us to return to life as it was prior to COVID-19. Thank goodness for medical research and the development of a vaccine!

As a PA program, it is safe to say that the one thing we miss the most is the ability to interact in-person with those around us. We miss the ability to teach students face-to-face; to work with them on procedures, physical exam skills, simulations, and case studies without personal protective equipment; and to meet with them in our office to fully develop faculty-student relationships. As a department team, we miss the interaction amongst faculty and staff, the hallway conversations, and the community within the School of Medicine & Health Sciences.

In the midst of hardship and challenges, this pandemic has taught us many things. Most of all, it is that life is about relationships. Family ties are as important as ever and even the tiniest of gestures can have great impact. And beyond our work lives, our social circles have been minimized and we have learned to embrace uncertainty and accept ambiguity, understanding that we can only really control what truly is

ours to control. With a little extra understanding, kindness, and grace, we can take what we have learned from our own reflections of the past and push forward with the hope and expectation of a new beginning: regenerating those relationships, expanding social circles, and perhaps approaching our social interactions and opportunities with a bit more gratitude and appreciation.



There will surely be subsequent challenges in moving forward. What will “normal” look like once we are able to return to activities? How will this change the way we deliver patient care? Our healthcare systems? Our teaching? Our lives? Although these answers are unknown, we do know that we are hard-working. We are adaptable. We are resilient. We are the medical community and together, we will do great and wonderful things.

Best wishes for a peaceful and prosperous New Year!

Jeanie McHugo, Ph.D., PA-C  
Chair, Department of Physician Assistant Studies  
UND School of Medicine & Health Sciences

## STUDENT REFLECTIONS DURING COVID-19

**Aunica Novacek, PA-S, Class of 2021**

**How did the coronavirus pandemic affect you professionally?**

During my clinical rotations, coronavirus is clearly a hot topic since in my region COVID spread like wildfire. So, for my professional career and education, this pandemic is affecting me by decreasing the typical visits into the clinic and many other visits that would present to the ER



with most visits being taken over by patients with COVID symptoms. COVID has definitely taken a hit on the medical professional job market in the region for me as well.

**What has been the biggest challenge during this time period and how did you strive to adapt?**

The biggest challenge for me during this time period is all the uncertainty that comes along with this pandemic. Every day, I have gone into my clinical rotation wondering if I would see patients with medical conditions besides COVID symptoms or concerns and be able

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# STUDENT REFLECTIONS DURING COVID-19

Continued

to further my education. I also wonder if I am exposing myself and others to this virus that can be anywhere. And when you throw in the normal uncertainty of being a student unsure of your thoughts, actions, and everything else, basically every thought throughout the day has some sort of uncertainty, which can be challenging during this time.

## **What lessons have you learned from this experience?**

I have learned that many people have difficulty understanding the pandemic. People don't see the negatives that can result from COVID itself unless it hits them personally. I have learned that I need to take my rotations one day at a time, as I never know what the next day will bring. Finally, I also have learned I need to control only what I can, and if I can't control something, I don't need to worry so much about whatever the situation may be.

## **Describe how you might incorporate this experience into your care for patients.**

I will incorporate my experiences from this pandemic into my clinical practice by understanding there are many unknowns in life and in medicine and that I will only be able to control certain aspects of what I am doing. Patients' health is my top priority and I can only do the best I can in providing answers and care.

## **Describe how this might positively impact your future clinical practice.**

I feel this situation will positively impact my future clinical practice by providing me a mentality that I can provide rural medicine in challenging times. I know and understand that life will change, there will be lots of uncertainty, and I know that medical providers including myself will be able to get through it and work through all the adversity.

## **Kylie Pastian, PA-S, Class of 2022**

### **How has the coronavirus pandemic affected you professionally?**

The alterations that accompany our on-campus learning have been the biggest way in which coronavirus has impacted me professionally. We are limited in our ability to mingle and interact with each other, and learning physical exam skills with the constraints of distancing and increased PPE has put an interesting spin on something that is already so new to many of us students.



### **What has been your biggest challenge during this time period and how do you strive to adapt?**

Unfortunately, the weekend preceding our first on-campus didactic I found out that I was a close contact of someone that had contracted the virus — and I also tested positive the following week — so I had to isolate during the first in-person experience, trying to learn without

the rest of my PA '22 classmates. It was hard missing out and having to make up the physical exam skills at a later time, but I think the willingness of the faculty to work with me (and other students in the same situation) displayed the adaptability of the UND PA program, which is consistent with the roles that PAs play in healthcare as a whole.

## **What lessons have you learned from this experience?**

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted nearly every aspect of our personal, professional, and social lives on a global level; in fact, it's hard to imagine a life "before COVID." With the changes that the pandemic has brought, I have learned to never take anything for granted. It's easy to get lost in the rule changes, cancelled events, and missing friends and family, but keeping in mind that the difficulties are for the greater good helps me maintain a positive perspective.

## **Describe how you might incorporate this experience into your care for patients.**

I have always been a big proponent of healthcare aimed at treating the whole patient, instead of just the "problem." In seeing all of the psychological manifestations that have come with the isolation of COVID-19 pandemic, my position is reinforced; moving forward, I think as a system and as individuals we need to really be attentive to the entire spectrum of our patients' needs. This is something I look forward to cultivating as I learn over the next few years, and will continue to do so as a practicing PA.

## **Describe how this might positively impact your future clinical practice.**

Coronavirus has taught us all many things that we will carry forward, even after the crisis has (hopefully) resolved. We have learned that all of us, including the healthcare system, are resilient, selfless, and hardworking beyond measure. We have ascertained the value of human interaction and solidified the importance of proactive and high-quality healthcare. I think this knowledge has the potential to drive healthcare in a positive direction, and I am excited to see the ways in which what we have learned will take hold.

# \$50 FOR 50

To help celebrate our 50-year milestone, the PA Department would like to ask its alumni and colleagues to bolster its student scholarship funds with a gift of \$50. Donors can select whether the gift goes into our Katherine Maryann Rasmussen or Mickey Knutson scholarships funds. These funds provide critical financial need to our students each year. Please help us reduce their financial burden!

You can make a gift today by returning the enclosed card or by going online at [UNDalumni.org/PA50for50](http://UNDalumni.org/PA50for50)

## WE ARE THANKFUL

As we look forward to the new year, we express our gratitude to our many preceptors and clinical sites. A pivotal component of the program is the incorporation of a primary care preceptor throughout the entire clinical portion of the program. Without you, we could not meet our goal of preparing quality PAs. We appreciate the time and expertise you give to our students. THANK YOU for your dedication and commitment to PA education.

## ALUMNI

Alumni we want to hear from you! Where are you practicing now? Accomplishments to announce? Great memories from PA school to share? We'd love to print your news and photos in a future newsletter. Contact us at [UND.med.paprogram@UND.edu](mailto:UND.med.paprogram@UND.edu).

Thank you for continuing to make us proud.

## THE BEST

According to the US News Best Job Rankings 2021, Physician Assistant ranks #1 in the 100 Best Jobs, Best Health Care Jobs and Best STEM Jobs!



# FACULTY SPOTLIGHT

Russ Kauffman, MPAS, PA-C

Russ Kauffman grew up in the mountains of western Colorado. A college roommate talked him into taking an EMT course and afterwards he felt compelled to learn more about medicine. He completed a paramedic program and earned an Associate of Applied Science in Emergency Medicine degree at Pueblo Community College in 2001. Russ worked as a paramedic in the ER while completing his Bachelor of Arts degree in Biology in 2004 at the University of Colorado in Colorado Springs. He went on to obtain a Master of Physician Assistant Studies – Pediatrics degree from the University of Colorado, Anschutz Child Health Associate/Physician Assistant Program in 2008. Since graduation, Russ has worked in multiple emergency rooms in Alaska, North Dakota, and Minnesota. Russ has a passion for education and learning and



joined the Department of Physician Assistant Studies at the UND School of Medicine & Health Sciences in January 2016. Russ lives in Grand Forks, N.D., with his wife, Misti, and their six children, Noah, Jonah, Rebekah, Micah, Elijah, and Nehemiah. In his spare time, he enjoys spending time with his wife and children in all of their various activities, reading, volunteering through the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and serving on the Red River Valley Athletics gymnastics board.



## 50TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION!



The Physician Assistant Studies Program (formerly MedEX and the Family Nurse Practitioner Program) celebrated its 50-year milestone virtually during Homecoming week 2020. On Friday, Oct. 9, 2020, Jeanie McHugo hosted the Continuing Education Symposium on Virtual Care During COVID-19. Participants were able to learn about how they can adapt telehealth tools and strategies into their practices. Later that evening, the celebration continued with a Milestone Program focused on the history of the PA Studies Program. Stories and program history were shared from guest speakers Dr. Robert Eelkema, program founder; Mary Ann Laxen, former program chair; Jeanie McHugo; and School of Medicine & Health Sciences Dean Joshua Wynne. The UND PA program was one of the first to offer a unique hybrid of online coursework combined with alternating classroom and clinical experiences to award a Master of Physician Assistant Studies degree. We have proven successful to our mission by producing nearly 2,000 graduates in 50 years.

# DIDACTIC SESSIONS

With extra precautions and planning, we were fortunate to have two short on-campus didactic sessions in August and October.

## CLASS OF 2021

Ultrasound, Surgery (SIM), and Dermatology Lesions



## CLASS OF 2022

Social Distancing, History & Physical Labs



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## UND PA PROGRAM FACTS

As of October 2020, 72% of graduates are employed. Of those:

- 50% are working in primary care
- 35% are working in surgical specialties
- 15% are working in other clinical areas

In addition, 50% are working in rural/underserved areas and, of those, 60% are working in rural/underserved primary care.

The PA profession has seen a 68% growth increase over the past 10 years and the profession is projected to grow another 31% by 2029, much faster than the national average according to the U.S. Department of Labor. Currently, there are 460 PAs licensed in North Dakota.

### Graduating Class of 2020

