

Nurse Scholars Are Determined To Improve Health and Well-Being in WNC

MAHEC, Western Carolina University partnership trains nurses for rural primary care



WCU nurse scholars Kim Iamurri, Simran Thind, Angela Zarrella, and Sarah Francisco, all registered nurses, started the first of five rotations at MAHEC this January as part of the MAHEC's new FNP Scholar Program.

January 2018—Growing up in the rural mountains of Virginia, Kim Iamurri was surrounded by doctors and nurses, but she never thought she'd become one.

Instead, she pursued a career in public relations that led her out of the mountains and into the big city and Washington DC's fast-paced, high-pressured environment. It wasn't long before she started scheduling massage therapy sessions to help her manage stress. Not long after, she began scheduling them more frequently.

"At some point, I realized the only time I felt relief was when I was getting a treatment," Kim laughs. "I knew something had to change."

That insight led her to explore yoga and meditation. She noticed they not only helped her manage stress, they helped her focus. She was learning to take better care of herself, and her health and daily life were improving. Friends and family took notice. So did she.

With her newfound clarity, Kim realized she missed the mountains and wanted to pursue a career helping others find optimal health as she had. She made her move and came to Asheville, where she opened a massage therapy practice before enrolling in Western Carolina University's highly ranked nursing program.

"I loved helping people in my massage practice," she shares,

"but I wanted to do more to encourage wellness from the inside out. I found myself spending more time coaching my clients and sharing health prevention tools so they wouldn't need so much massage in the first place."

At some point, it dawned on her that this is what a nurse does.

Treating the person not the problem

"The nursing field hangs its hat on taking a holistic approach to health," explains Anthony (Tony) Roberson, PhD, who is a psychiatric nurse practitioner by training and director and professor of WCU's School of Nursing.

"As advanced practice clinicians, nurse practitioners look at the whole person, not just a medical condition, to help patients move toward wellness," Dr. Roberson shares.

WCU's Family Nurse Practitioner (FNP) Program provides nurses with specialized education in pathophysiology, health assessment, pharmacology, and primary care for adults, women, children, and older adults. This education prepares nurses to provide advanced care that includes health education, making diagnoses, ordering tests, prescribing medications, and creating care plans.

The two-year program requires more than 500 hours of hands-on clinical training to help students hone their skills

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in real-world settings. That's where the Mountain Area Health Education Center (MAHEC) in Asheville comes in.

From the classroom to community-based care

In January, MAHEC welcomed four students, including Kim, as part of its new FNP Scholar Program, which is a partnership with WCU that expands the number of clinical rotations for these students from four in 2016 to twenty in 2018.

"We really value our partnership with MAHEC because we both share a commitment to serve the communities in our region," shares Douglas Keskula, PhD, dean of WCU's College of Health and Human Sciences. "MAHEC understands the importance of training the next generation of healthcare professionals in Western North Carolina," explains Dr. Keskula. "We share that mission."

The FNP Scholar Program is designed to train nurses for primary care across the lifespan—a critical need in rural Western North Carolina where access to primary care is limited. Nurse scholars will have the opportunity to do all of their clinical training at MAHEC with rotations at a number of different sites including ob/gyn, family health, and geriatric practices working alongside MAHEC's FNP's and certified nurse midwives.

Training the next generation of healthcare providers

"Advanced practice provider students often have difficulty finding preceptors and clinical placement sites," shares Dolly Pressley-Byrd, certified nurse midwife at MAHEC and clinical coordinator for the program. "MAHEC strives to foster learners of all types," Pressley-Byrd continues. "Our experienced clinicians have honed their teaching and preceptor skills and are well-equipped to provide these students with a rich clinical learning environment."

That was one of the primary reasons Kim was interested in applying for the FNP Scholar Program.

"I am always excited when I learn a patient's doctor is a MAHEC resident," she explains. "I love the way they interact with their patients and colleagues with wonder and curiosity. It isn't unusual for these doctors to come to the hospital in the middle of the night to lay eyes and hands on a patient if they aren't doing well," she adds. "They really care about their patients. It's personal."



Kim Lamurri, RN, and Angela Zarrella, RN, prepare for their first clinical rotations in adult primary care at MAHEC's Family Health Centers at Enka/Candler and Lake Lure. Additional rotations will include women's health, geriatrics, pediatrics, and an internship.

Kim was also encouraged by other nursing students who felt their rotations at MAHEC were the most rewarding because they were encouraged to ask questions and treated as valuable members of the care team.

That sentiment is shared by fellow FNP Scholar Angela Zarrella, RN, who is currently doing her first rotation at MAHEC's primary care practice in Lake Lure. Angela also works at Mission Hospital and has had many positive encounters with MAHEC providers.

"I applied for this program because I knew I'd have exceptional training," she explains. "MAHEC has a great reputation and a strong focus on education. I knew I wouldn't be treated like an afterthought."

Carriedelle Fusco, an FNP at MAHEC and clinical coordinator for the program, couldn't agree more.

"I'm really looking forward to making sure these students have great clinical experiences," Fusco shares. "Taking good care of patients is about more than just diagnosing and treating them. Truly patient-centered care is about understanding your patient's priorities and goals and working with them to develop a care plan that helps achieve them," explains Fusco. "That's what our FNP scholars will learn how to do here at MAHEC in addition to providing great clinical care."

Helping patients live healthier lives today

Like Kim, Angela didn't set out to become a nurse. She was a communications professional in the housing industry when the recession hit. She decided to make a change and went to work with her husband, a chiropractor, where she

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discovered that the kind of communication she really enjoyed was sharing knowledge that helped people feel better. Going back to school for nursing seemed like the logical next step, and one she's never regretted.

After graduating from WCU's Accelerated Bachelor of Science in Nursing program, Angela worked at Mission on the neurosciences unit before transferring to medical-surgical ICU a few years later.

"I've seen a lot of people in health crises that could have been prevented," she shares. "We spend so much time and energy trying to prolong life, and not enough time looking at what we can do today to live healthier lives."

Angela decided to pursue advanced training as an FNP to reach people sooner with health education and early interventions that can prevent chronic disease and enhance quality of life.

"Many people don't realize how important it is to manage their blood pressure or diabetes," she notes. Having worked as a critical care nurse, she is all too aware of what can happen when they don't.

An FNP's focus on wellness, prevention, and primary care are especially important in rural areas where access to specialty care is limited.

"I'm excited that MAHEC is prioritizing the training of advanced practice providers," shares Fusco. "It's going to take a variety

of healthcare providers working together to improve healthcare in Western North Carolina. That's the only way we're going to fix the healthcare provider shortage we're facing."

Help is on the way

All 16 of the WNC counties MAHEC serves have been federally designated as health professional shortage areas. Shortages include primary care providers, mental health professionals, dentists, general surgeons, and specialty care providers.

MAHEC's partnership with WCU includes training not only for nurse practitioners but also social work and dietitian students. MAHEC will soon welcome learners from WCU's physical therapy and other allied health programs.

Fusco believes nurse practitioners will play an important role in improving health across our region.

"The nursing profession has a long history of taking care of those in greatest need," Fusco shares. "Nurses have a heart for their communities, and they work hard to make them healthier."

With an estimated 1 billion patient visits to nurse practitioners every year, it appears this history is alive and well.

For more information about MAHEC's WCU expansion programs, visit www.mahec.net/wcuexpansion. For more information about WCU's nursing degree programs, contact the School of Nursing at wcnursing@wcu.edu.

NURSE PRACTITIONERS

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PRIMARY CARE FOCUS

NPs are choosing primary care more than physicians and physician assistants. In 2017, more than 87% of NPs were prepared in primary care programs, while only 14.5% of physicians entered a primary care residency.

MORE THAN 87% PREPARED IN PRIMARY CARE

3 out of 4 DELIVER PRIMARY CARE

60% OF NPs SEE 3 OR MORE PATIENTS PER HOUR

INCREASING IN NUMBER

The number of nurse practitioners is expected to rise by 2025:

2025	244,000
2017	234,000
2013	171,000
2010	140,000
2007	120,000
2004	106,000
2003	97,000
2001	82,000
1999	68,300

AREA OF PRIMARY CARE PREPARATION

Family	60.6%
Adult and Geriatrics	21.3%
Women's Health	3.4%
Pediatrics	4.6%

REQUIREMENTS FOR PRACTICE

- State NP Licensure/Registration
- National Board Certification
- Graduate Nursing Education
- Registered Nurse License
- Bachelor's Degree in Nursing

6+ YEARS OF ACADEMIC AND CLINICAL PREPARATION

NPs AT A GLANCE

- Over **5 decades** of improving patient access and quality care
- Over **1.02 billion** annual patient visits estimated
- Prescribe medications in all **50 states** and D.C.

NPs BY THE NUMBERS

- 85%** accept Medicare
- 83%** accept Medicaid
- 84%** accept Private Insurance
- 82%** accept Uninsured

PRESCRIPTION FOR THE FUTURE

2 out of 3 patients support legislation for greater access to NP services