SHU to Offer New Master of Physician Assistant Studies Program

Teresa Thetford, Sacred Heart University

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Sacred Heart University’s College of Health Professions is working with Stamford Hospital to launch a new full-time, 27-month master of physician assistant studies (MPAS) program, with an initial class of 28 students starting in fall 2016, pending accreditation.* Already more than 800 applicants have applied to attend the program since the application process opened last April, reflecting the rapid nationwide growth in demand for physician assistants (PAs). Up to 150 people will be interviewed for 28 seats in the inaugural class.

The SHU MPAS program will be located in Stamford, on the second floor of Stamford Hospital’s Tandet Building located next to the main hospital on West Broad Street. The 13,000-square-foot space is in the process of a full renovation and will include a state-of-the-art lab, classrooms and a patient-assessment suite. The program will consist of a 12-month classroom phase followed by a 15-month clinical phase providing 2,000 hours of experience in several medical specialties. All students will complete clinical rotations primarily at Stamford Hospital as well as other SHU-affiliated hospitals and health-care sites.

Teresa Thetford, department chair and founding program director of SHU’s PA program, explains that students will be prepared to practice medicine on health-care teams with physicians and other providers. A PA-C (physician assistant-certified) is a graduate of an accredited PA educational program who is nationally certified and state-licensed to practice medicine in a variety of settings with the supervision of a physician. PAs practice and prescribe medications in all 50 states.
A key goal of the SHU MPAS program is to improve access to quality health care in Fairfield County and surrounding communities, including rural and urban medically underserved populations. Thetford notes that SHU will emphasize primary care and population health and wellness as well as patient-centered care that is individualized for each patient's needs.

Students will be required to complete a master's capstone service-learning project focusing on a public health need and solutions.

“What makes us stand out will be our focus on patient-centered primary care and addressing the needs of the medically underserved,” says Thetford.

“As health care in the United States continues to evolve, the need for primary care providers, both physicians and physician assistants, will grow,” says Henry Yoon, M.D., associate director, Family Medicine Residency Program, at Stamford Hospital and medical director of Sacred Heart University’s MPAS program. “As a teaching hospital of Columbia University’s College of Physicians and Surgeons, medical academics and a sense of continuously improving the care we provide now and in the future are deeply engrained in our culture.”

The aging of the population, chronic health needs and increasing demand for health services driven by the Affordable Care Act are primary factors in the decision to establish the MPAS program at SHU. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics projects job growth of 38 percent for PAs between 2012 and 2022, and according to the American Academy of Physician Assistants (AAPA), only 22 percent of Connecticut PAs work in primary care.

Nationally, research has shown an increasing physician shortage. Additionally, according to the CT Department of Labor (2014) report, there is a rising need for primary care providers within the state of Connecticut. The future needs of the state’s population demonstrates a need for preventive and primary care services. The utilization of physician assistants will help bridge this gap in preventive and primary care.

* Sacred Heart University (SHU) has received CT state program licensure, and applied for Accreditation - Provisional from the Accreditation Review Commission on Education for the Physician Assistant (ARC-PA). SHU anticipates matriculating its first class in fall 2016, pending achieving Accreditation - Provisional status at the March 2016 ARC-PA meeting. Accreditation - Provisional is an accreditation status for a new PA program that, at the time of its initial accreditation review, demonstrated its preparedness to initiate a program in accordance with the accreditation Standards.