Rx for Health Care

One of UC Santa Cruz’s fastest-growing programs is good medicine for California’s escalating health-care crisis

By Gwen Mickelson

Diego Inzunza grabbed a laptop on his way past the laboratory inside Plazita Medical Clinic, where jaunty Mexican music danced from a large speaker on the counter. Holding the computer open like a clamshell in one hand, the 21-year-old UC Santa Cruz student walked briskly into an office. Chatting with the patient waiting inside, he quickly typed up her medical history.

Inzunza is a student in UCSC’s innovative Health Sciences program, one of the fastest-growing majors on campus and among the 10 most popular majors at UCSC despite only being established in 2003. The program—giving students hands-on experience by requiring an internship at a local or regional health-care facility—reflects the campus’s commitment to help meet the future health-care needs of a growing, increasingly diverse population.

In addition to an internship, UCSC’s Health Sciences students must complete both a Spanish-language and a writing requirement. Because of the internship and language requirement, students can effectively apply the knowledge they gain in the classroom to the real world, said Dr. Jeffrey Solinas, owner/director of the Plazita clinic, a privately owned family practice in the Santa Cruz County city of Watsonville.

“An internship was important for me when I did it,” said Solinas, who earned a bachelor’s degree from UCSC in 1974, as an independent-studies major. Solinas volunteered for two summers at a United Farm Workers clinic in Delano in 1976 and 1977. “It became clear that it was the best way to combine science information you could get at school with the challenges of working with people.”

Health-care-professional schools are looking for people with just the kind of field experience the Health Sciences program provides, said Grant Hartzog, associate professor in UCSC’s Molecular, Cell, and Developmental Biology Department, who sits on the program’s three-member faculty advisory committee.

“It’s one way of measuring someone’s commitment, and making sure people have a good understanding of what they’re getting themselves into,” said Hartzog.

The other distinctive characteristic of UCSC’s Health Sciences curriculum is the requirement that students learn medical terminology and conversational skills in what, for many, is a new language. The internship allows them to see the day-in, day-out practice of a working health professional, and they must also hone their written communication skills and learn scientific writing conventions.

“Health Sciences has allowed me to think of how to approach the system as a whole, not just the pieces,” said student Ahoo Karimian, 25, who’s now finishing up her final program requirements and applying to medical schools.

In the 2004–05 year, UCSC produced six graduates of the program, according to Hartzog. In 2005–2006 there were 29; in 2006–2007, 42. “Obviously, the numbers are going up as word spreads of our special program,” Hartog said.

One goal of the program is to encourage graduates to consider a career in the Monterey Bay region, where there is already a shortage of trained health-care providers, according to Hartog.

The seeds for the major were sown close to the beginning of this decade. “Though the campus had a long tradition of contributing to the health-care work force through majors such as biol-
Projected Nursing Shortages, California will need more than 116,000 additional nurses to meet demand in 2020.

Studies predict California will need more than 116,000 additional nurses to meet demand in 2020.

By 2015, more than half the state's population will be of Latino or Asian descent.

Dr. Nanette Mickiewicz never got to do an internship herself. The president of Dominican Hospital in Santa Cruz had her first real experience in a hospital in her second year of medical school. Interns at Dominican generally shadow physicians, nurses, and physical therapists, observing them in daily activity. They also usually have a project, work on their term paper, and check in with Mickiewicz once a week.

The hospital tries to help them observe as many procedures as possible.

For some students, learning about the science of health care is more than an educational opportunity. It's a personal mission to help others. In her second to last quarter in the program, student Karimian was diagnosed with thyroid cancer. Last spring, surgeons removed her thyroid, 12 lymph nodes, and a parathyroid gland. Despite her health obstacles, she was able to continue with her studies. When she chose her health-sciences internship, she went with Dr. Jennifer Choate at Cancer Research and Prevention Center of the Central Coast, in Soquel.

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Local health-care organizations Sutter Maternity & Surgery Center and Central Coast Alliance for Health partnered last year to sponsor the Primary Care Physician Award, a $10,000 scholarship meant to support graduates of the Health Sciences program who plan to focus on primary care medicine and intend to come back to the Central Coast to practice after completing medical school.

The shortage of primary care physicians is a growing national problem that is exacerbated in areas such as the Central Coast by low Medicare reimbursement rates, according to Larry deGhetaldi (B.A. biology and chemistry, Merrill ’76), CEO of Sutter Santa Cruz.

About 10 percent of the doctors in Santa Cruz County are UCSC alumni.

Allison Abresch-Meyer, who graduated from UCSC in December 2006, was the first recipient of the award.