It’s a Great Time to be a PA

A leader in her field, Priscilla Marsicovetere, J.D., PA-C has many hopes for growing the Master of Physician Assistant Studies program at Franklin Pierce, including returning her students to the local community to practice.

BY MATT JANIK
PHOTOGRAPHS BY LARS BLACKMORE
Priscilla Marsicovetere, director of the MPAS program
Tucked away on a side street in Lebanon, N.H., just a few throws of a stone from the sleepy Lebanon Municipal Airport, sits a run-of-the-mill office building. But, spread across parts of the first, second, and third floors of the unassuming structure, is one of Franklin Pierce University’s most competitive academic programs.

The Master of Physician Assistant Studies (MPAS) graduate program is a 27-month track that prides itself on small class sizes and experiential learning and offers a mix of both academic instruction and clinical experience. Via the front page of its website, the program seeks to help students “develop the research, education, and managerial skills necessary to be successful in the healthcare field.”

Another important feature of the program is its ability to place graduating students into jobs in the local community, particularly in rural settings, where the nation’s healthcare shortage is most acutely felt. In 2016, a University of Washington study found that, between 2000 and 2012, 60 percent of Franklin Pierce’s MPAS graduates wound up continuing their careers in a rural setting. The percentage was second nationally only to the University of the Cumberlands in Kentucky (87 percent).

Each year, the MPAS program receives more than 1,000 applications, but has just 24 slots to offer in its incoming cohort. Paring the mountain of applications down is no small task, but when talking to the staff of the Lebanon program, it becomes clear they have something specific in mind when they search for their next group of students, the nation’s next generation of physician assistants (PAs).

“We want to know how mature they seem, how motivated they seem,” says Priscilla Marsicovetere, director of the MPAS program, “and how much they truly appreciate the role of the PA on the healthcare team.”

“It takes more than book smarts to be a good PA,” adds Pamela O’Brien, the MPAS admissions coordinator. “We’re looking for interests that make them a well-rounded person as far as compassion as well as passion for the profession – and a passion for people.”

Professor Denise Froehlich looks for thoughtful students, who demonstrate a solid knowledge base but also the curiosity and drive to continue building on that knowledge. Many will meet the academic qualifications of the program, but only a select few exhibit the intangibles and personal characteristics to succeed.

A Wonderful Time to be a PA
Priscilla Marsicovetere has served as director of the MPAS program since the beginning of the 2017-18 academic year. She came to Franklin Pierce with a distinct résumé, which featured time working both as a physician assistant and in the legal field. With her background, Marsicovetere has extremely detailed thoughts on the role of the physician assistant and also on the evolution of the profession over the past half-century.

“When the PA profession was initially born, just over 50 years ago, it really was one of…a supportive capacity,” says Marsicovetere. “Over time, because of the work that PAs have done, history has shown that they’ve proven themselves to be valuable members of the healthcare team. With that comes more autonomy, more possibility, branching into more areas of practice.”

Wielding her dual fields of expertise, Marsicovetere works to advocate for the role of the physician assistant, not just in her post at Franklin Pierce, but also on the local, state, and national levels. She is heavily involved with the Physician Assistant Education Association (PAEA), one of four national organizations overseen by the physician assistant profession. Marsicovetere is a member of the PAEA’s Government Relations Steering Committee, which serves as the organization’s advocacy arm.

Working with the PAEA, Marsicovetere’s policy goals for the profession are as well-rounded as the students she hopes to attract to the Lebanon campus.

“We feel that, especially with the new Congress in Washington, D.C.,” begins Marsicovetere, before acknowledging how wide-ranging her goals are, “we are now reaching out to program directors of PA programs – and individual PAs in the various states – to try to get them to engage with their local and national lawmakers to try to effect beneficial change for PAs. That is a broad statement, but it has to be, because the needs of PAs are different in every state, depending on what the laws of a given state allow or don’t allow.”
Regardless of how it continues to evolve, Marsicovetere’s pride in the PA profession stands out in conversation. Despite the moving parts in the profession, she believes it is a wonderful time to be a PA or a student on the way to becoming one.

“Our profession has been rated among the top professions in the country in terms of job satisfaction by U.S. News & World Report, Forbes, and a number of other magazines,” she says, “and that’s been the case for years and years now. I think that speaks significantly to how wonderful a profession this is.”

Meeting the Needs of the Underserved
A core philosophy echoed again and again by the MPAS staff at Franklin Pierce is the need to serve the local community. Those steering the MPAS program are doing so with an eye toward recruiting the best applicants they can find from rural and medically underserved areas throughout the region, particularly within New Hampshire and Vermont. O’Brien estimates that as many as 80 percent of qualified applicants from New Hampshire and Vermont will receive the opportunity to interview for a spot in the program.

The staff has put together such a defined, local focus because they know students from the rural, underserved areas will be more likely to return to those areas when it is time to begin their careers, helping to make a dent in the national healthcare shortage.

“It’s about acknowledging that there really is a healthcare shortage in America,” says Marsicovetere, “but particularly..."
On a Mission
Franklin Pierce helps Russell Arpin ’16, MPAS ’19 find his future

Russell Arpin ’16, MPAS ’19, has made the most of his Franklin Pierce experience, and now finds himself on the threshold of a fulfilling future in primary care medicine.

He recently completed the last of nine clinical rotations for his Master of Physician Assistant Studies (MPAS) degree, which have included internal medicine at WakeMed Hospital in Raleigh, N.C., and OB/GYN at Monadnock Community Hospital in Peterborough, N.H. His final rotation brought him back to the Rindge campus as a staff member in the Health Services Department.

“It felt like déjà vu at first,” Arpin says, “driving the same route I used to take, studying in the same nook in the library. But I enjoyed talking to the students, especially those also interested in health sciences.”

Arpin has found his path with the help of family, friends, and faculty members at Franklin Pierce, all of whom he believes have been “strategically” placed in his life by God. Growing up in New Ipswich, N.H., Arpin says he was unmotivated in high school because he couldn’t see the bigger picture. When he met his wife, Erica, he knew he needed a plan to make a future together.

Arpin’s older brother, Ben ’13, now a practicing physician assistant himself, found a solid mentor in Thomas Bennett, a health sciences professor. Inspired by his brother, Russell Arpin entered Franklin Pierce as a commuter his sophomore year, and quickly found Professor Bennett to be the same kind of challenging mentor and guide, helping him evaluate the paths to becoming a healthcare provider.

Another unexpected supporter was Bob Smith, owner of Monadnock Security Systems and a good friend of Erica’s family. Smith provided Arpin with the part-time job that made it possible to attend Franklin Pierce, and when he discovered Arpin’s interest in becoming a physician assistant, he offered additional support. He arranged for Arpin to job shadow with his daughter, a PA in Texas, and paid for the weeklong experience. Arpin believes that experience made a crucial difference in his application to the highly competitive MPAS program at Pierce.

MPAS faculty member Amy Klingler believes Arpin has every quality a patient would want in a healthcare provider. “He’s smart, kind, funny, and empathetic,” she says. “I would trust him with my care, and I have extremely high standards.”

As he sets his sites on his career, Arpin hopes to work in rural New Hampshire, living up to the MPAS program’s mission of helping to fill the need for providers in rural areas. Arpin is proud of that mission and of the school’s foresight and commitment to advanced study in health sciences.

“For a small school in the woods of New Hampshire to be on the front lines of the medical profession with outstanding programs in both physical therapy and physician assistant studies,” he says, “is impressive.”

— Julie Rizzo
for underserved, rural individuals, so we want to be able to try to meet that problem.”

By serving the community in such a dedicated manner, the MPAS program opens the door for the community to turn around and serve Franklin Pierce in a symbiotic relationship. The program has an explicit goal of recruiting local students and returning them to the community to practice. Down the road, those who have completed the program feed back into its success. “Since so many of our students do go back into those areas,” says Froehlich, “we now have a bigger network of people who we get in touch with to either come back here and teach, which is wonderful, or to serve as mentors for our students. It’s nice to have a student who graduated come back and teach, so the students in the seats see where they could be in a few years.”

The Five-Year Plan

Marsicovetere may have less than two years on the job, but she has no shortage of goals for the future of Franklin Pierce’s MPAS program. She is also quick to point out those goals are unattainable without the support she already has experienced from the broader Franklin Pierce community.

“We are taking the time now to strengthen the foundation, to lay the perfect foundation for upward growth from here on out.”

— Priscilla Marsicovetere

“It’s important to say that President [Kim] Mooney and Dean [Maria] Altobello have been absolutely wonderful advocates and support figures for the program,” says Marsicovetere. “We have a long road ahead of us in terms of ending up where I intend us to end up. I just have to say that the support I have seen coming from the dean’s office and from the president has been significant. Without that, we would have no hope of achieving the goals I have for this program.”

About those goals — they are lofty. Marsicovetere hopes to eventually see the program outgrow its space in the unassuming office building near the municipal airport. She hopes to eventually move the program into a more intentional academic setting, as opposed to the business venue it currently occupies. She wants to increase the program’s relationships with clinical providers to give students more options for completing their clinical assignments. Internally, she wants to provide a state-of-the-art simulation center and skills lab, which would allow students to build their practical skills on campus as well. She also hopes to increase the pool of lecturers who work with the program.

More immediately though, the goal is to build the foundation on which all this future growth will sit. The five-year plan is to position the MPAS program for its future success. “I think the program will be [five years from now] in a wonderful position to grow, to increase in size, to increase in stature,” says Marsicovetere. “We are taking the time now to strengthen the foundation, to lay the perfect foundation for upward growth from here on out.”

For now, the MPAS staff in Lebanon will continue to look for PA candidates with the intangibles, compassion, and knowledge to serve the local New Hampshire and Vermont communities and their healthcare needs. And, someday, Marsicovetere and staff even hope to have more than 24 spots to offer each incoming class.