

FLASH PASS



Medical Assisting Educator Blazes Accelerated Track for Students



By Cathy Cassata

After working as a paralegal and obtaining a bachelor's degree in political science, Jessica Balladares, RMA (AMT), decided to pursue medical assisting. In 2008, she started her career working in internal medicine, nephrology, and cardiology clinics.

In 2017, her alma mater Santa Fe Community College asked her to take on an adjunct faculty position. After two years of adjunct teaching, she began working full time as an educator and has been the academic program director for the last three years.

"Bringing well-qualified medical assistants into the health care field is essential, and my experience helps prepare students for real-world scenarios," says Balladares.

She spent a year developing an accelerated program with her colleague Toni Coffman, CMA (AAMA). They launched the program in 2023. Instead of taking three semesters to complete, the condensed program takes 18 weeks and includes eight classes divided into three blocks. Students also participate in practicum hours in an ambulatory care

setting. When they complete the program, students graduate with a certificate and are prepared to sit for the CMA (AAMA) Certification Exam. To date, the program has graduated 32 students, and 30 of these graduates have secured employment.

"We really wanted to make sure that the quality of education was still highlighted and students were going to come out with effective education and training—not just a fast course to get them out into the field, but something that they can actually pursue a career in," says Balladares.

Balladares and Coffman developed the program in response to the shortage of medical assistants across New Mexico. "We were hearing from our community partners who hire our students that they needed them to enter the field a little sooner," says Balladares.

She also wanted to accommodate the needs of students. "I noticed that students were dropping out or taking semesters off because they were losing interest or facing life challenges like childcare responsibilities or needing to work," she says. "They wanted to finish sooner so they could start their careers."

The program's setup also allows students to enroll more frequently. "When we offered [the program] in three semesters, we were only able to enroll students in the fall, so students who were interested in going into the spring semester had to wait. By that

time, many had moved on to other schools or lost interest," she says.

She is constantly working to improve the program and meet the demands of employers by getting their feedback on what additional skills medical assistants need to be trained in. "For example, a lot of our partnership employers said it would be helpful for students to have awareness of Narcan [naloxone] training, so we implemented that into our program. Others said they needed more administrative skills like checking in patients and navigating [electronic health records], as well as soft skills, including how to communicate with colleagues, time management, work ethic, and adaptability," says Balladares.

She takes pride in preparing medical assistants to meet the needs of today's employers and succeed in their careers. Her commitment to being the best educator and program director she can be has inspired her to complete a master's degree in education.

"It feels full circle to help new medical assistants flourish in their careers," says Balladares. "We have many employees who work at the school who get care from our graduates at a local clinic or hospital, and it warms my heart to hear how well they are doing. It also makes me excited to keep sending qualified medical assistants out into our community." ♦