Recent graduate Kimberly Breunig, MPH/MPAS ‘21, hopes to practice in a rural Wisconsin community similar to the one she grew up in. That is one reason why she jumped at the chance to do her clinical rotation at Red Cliff Community Health Center in Bayfield, WI. While working toward her dual master degrees in physician assistant studies and public health, Breunig had learned about the health disparities that Native populations face. With the opportunity to care for patients from the Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, she could move that education from the classroom to the clinic. A grant from the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) allowed the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health (SMPH) Physician Assistant (PA) Program to cover the costs of Breunig’s transportation and housing. Under preceptor Khou Xiong, PA-C, Breunig gained hands-on knowledge of how to best treat chronic health conditions like hypertension, diabetes and heart disease caused by years of intergenerational trauma and
poor nutrition due to forced assimilation, poverty and other factors. Equally important, Breunig says, she gained a better understanding of those traumatic histories themselves, “If I didn’t make a point of learning about the factors that contribute to health disparities, then how could I work effectively in any clinic — rural or urban?”

Melissa Metoxen, academic support services coordinator in SMPH’s Native American Center for Health Professions (NACHP), agrees. Particularly for those planning to practice in Wisconsin, she says “providers will more than likely come across a tribal member of a Native community, and they will need to know the historical factors that have contributed to certain health conditions they face today.”

Founded in 2012, the mission of NACHP (pronounced “NAY-chip”) is to improve the health and wellness of American Indian people through initiatives including increased educational opportunities and enhanced recruitment and retention of students from Native communities. Thanks to the same HRSA grant that supported Breunig’s rotation, Metoxen, who is a member of Wisconsin’s Oneida Nation, has begun to work directly with the PA Program’s coordinators of admissions and clinical rotations to increase these opportunities for PA Program students specifically.

For Metoxen and her colleagues, all of whom hail from families with deep roots in Wisconsin tribes, that means developing relationships with tribal leaders throughout the state with the aim of establishing opportunities for all students in the health professions. It also means reaching out directly to prospective Native students, and ensuring that those admitted have the support they will need to thrive in their educational careers. “Students love hearing there is support available for them,” Metoxen says of NACHP’s culturally specific programming, which includes visiting speakers and outings to Wisconsin’s tribal communities.

“We really believe in growing the next generation of Native providers because we want to see Native people serving Native people in these roles.”

“Now, thanks to these long-standing, trusting relationships,” she says, “we’re at a point when we can reach out to tribal health clinic directors and they know who we are.”

Given the history of mistrust and mistreatment, those relationships can go a long way.

“When we go to a tribal chairman or health director, they think, ‘We know NACHP keeps each tribal communities’ interests at the forefront of all the work they do,’” Metoxen explains.

For Breunig, the opportunity to learn about the cultural and historical background that contributes to a patient’s health is central to providing excellent care. After all, she says, “to ignore that is to ignore part of the person.”

Karen Krabbenhoft Recognized for Contributions to Anatomy Education

On May 17, 2021, the PA Program welcomed 58 incoming students. Returning to in-person instruction, they, like hundreds of students before them, will begin their studies this summer with the seven-credit course Anatomy 629: Human Anatomy Laboratory for Physician Assistants. Karen Krabbenhoft, PhD, developed the course, which she taught since 1992. Krabbenhoft retired last spring.

By dissecting cadavers and examining specimens, students learn to describe the anatomical organization of the human body, apply anatomical information to clinical practice problems and work effectively as a team. The course also serves as a foundation for the following semesters’ “big three”: Medical Microbiology, Clinical Pharmacology and Diagnostic Methods.

Last May, PA Program Director Virginia Snyder, PhD, PA-C, presented Krabbenhoft with the Jerry Noack Friend of the Program Award.

“Karen has set so many of our graduates on a path of excellence,” Snyder says. “We couldn’t be more grateful.”

A senior lecturer of anatomy in SMPH’s Academic Affairs unit, Krabbenhoft also directed and taught courses for undergraduate and medical students. In recent years she also oversaw the Anatomy Teaching Group and directed the Body Donor Program.

Known for her dedication, positivity and sense of humor, Krabbenhoft received the Wisconsin Medical Alumni Association’s Distinguished Phase I Teaching Award in 2020. Sarah Traynor, PhD, who has lectured in anatomy for SMPH since 2017, will continue Krabbenhoft’s vital work.

Celebrating the Class of 2021

At a virtual commencement on May 7, 2021, the PA Program recognized 52 students for completing the Master of Physician Assistant Studies degree and honored many award recipients. See page 4 for the list of graduates. Welcome new PA colleagues!