How to attract graduates to rural medicine? wisPACT@UW-Platteville turns that question on its head.

Incoming student Ally Jansen, PA-S, x’25, has been looking forward to returning to her hometown of Benton, WI. As one of 10 students accepted into the newest distance campus established by School of Medicine and Public Health Physician Assistant (PA) Program, she can now live and spend time with her family while attending the wisPACT@UW-Platteville program some 20 minutes away.

Certainly, she enjoyed her undergraduate years in Madison, Jansen adds. But now she hopes to practice as a PA in a smaller community, saying, “The dream would be to find a job close to my family!”

Like most of the rural U.S., the tri-state area of Wisconsin, Iowa and Illinois lacks adequate access to quality health care. While aging Baby Boomers require increasingly more care, the number of providers is waning. Meanwhile, patients presenting with diabetes and other chronic conditions have reached epidemic proportions while preventive care and early treatment often goes unmet.

If there is good news, it is that physician assistants — who often provide primary and preventive care — can help fill this gap. In fact, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics has projected that the profession is expected to grow some 30 percent by the end of the decade, much faster than the average for all occupations.

But there’s a hitch: Newly minted graduates — often burdened with student debt and eager to start families — can be reluctant to practice in rural

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areas where salaries are lower and social and educational opportunities less varied. Turns out, students like Jansen may hold the solution.

THE DRAW OF THE “DISTANCE CAMPUS”
“We have long understood that distance tracks can help bolster rural access to health care,” says PA Program Director Ginny Snyder. Designed for aspiring PAs from medically underserved areas, or who require the flexibility of a part-time program, distance tracks allow students to remain in their home communities while receiving the same top-notch training as those on the Madison campus.

In fact, incoming student Tierah Ostrander, PA-S, x’25, says she was looking for just that: an exceptional education within daily driving distance from her home in Prairie de Chien. It was her own provider, a graduate of the PA Program in Madison, who told her she would be “a perfect fit for the new Platteville program.”

Like those enrolled in its sister program, wisPACT@UW-Stevens Point at Wausau, students in Platteville will participate in didactic coursework through videoconferencing with the main campus in Madison. Curriculum like Gross Anatomy and Human Dissection, history and physical exams, clinical labs and workshops, will be led by faculty at UW–Platteville or others traveling from Madison.

BRIDGING THE GAP
However, distance programs do more than simply spare students the expense and hassle of relocating. Offering clinical rotations primarily around the southwest part of Wisconsin, wisPACT@UW-Platteville is forging new opportunities to work with the region’s Amish and growing Hispanic populations. In turn, these rotations offer unique training experiences. And these students get it.

With a few years under his belt as a certified nursing assistant in his hometown of Darlington, about 30 miles east of Platteville, Quade Wiegel, PA-S, x’25, sought just this kind of training. “I understand the patient populations of the rural communities that this campus plans to help serve,” he says. “I wanted to have more clinical experience with rural providers who are very resourceful and occupy many roles, which is very reflective of the education PAs receive as generalists.”

While some, like Wiegel, may apply this training elsewhere after graduation, many plan to stay put. Ostrander, for example, specifically sought out a program that “understood how vital health care is to rural communities.” Having set down roots in Prairie du Chien, she says, “the more practice I have treating patients from those areas, the better prepared I will be.”

Incoming student Eric Albrecht, PA-S, x’25, too, plans to stick around. Having grown up in nearby Mount Horeb, he saw firsthand the disparity that rural communities experience. What’s more, he says, “I’m more drawn to the small-town community and close bonds they can create for people.” For Albrecht, Platteville was simply the best place to “learn to practice family medicine in rural areas.”

PRACTICE BEGINS AT HOME
“Underpinning all of our distance programs,” Snyder says, “is the belief that if we help students maintain their existing relationships and ties to their community, they will be more likely to secure, and welcome, employment opportunities nearby.”

So far, it is working. Of the last three classes who graduated from existing wisPACT programs, 70 percent now practice in areas with a shortage of health professionals. Nearly half of those work in primary care.

Armed with the knowledge that some 80 percent of PA Program graduates receive job offers from their clinical rotations, Platteville’s program, too, is on course to relieve at least some health care disparities in southwest Wisconsin — with providers who want to be there.

Reflecting on her return to Benton, Jansen says, “There is a certain appreciation for rural areas that can only be earned from growing up in a small town.”

Learn more: uwplatt.edu/uw-madison-physician-assistant-program-uw-platteville
AT TOP:
The Class of 2023

MIDDLE ROW:
TJ Lewin, Kathleen Eich and Jacob Enz (not pictured) receive Capstone Awards from Kevin Wyne; Ginny Snyder presents the Jerry Noack Friend of the Program Award to Emelle S. Holmes-Drammeh, PA

BOTTOM ROW:
Commencement 2023 Guest Speaker Amy Parins; Michael Richardson, PA, receives Preceptor of the Year Award from Bev Speece; a toast to the graduates
CLASS OF 2023

Aisha Ahmed
MaryStella Anidi
Alexandria L. Augustus-Hunter
Alanna Bade
Miguel Barraza Chavez
Brenda Bird
Brianna Dominique Cameron
Jake Cohen
Jamie Cummings
Matthew Dombrowski
Morgan Domnisse
Kathleen Eich
Jake Enz
Beck Eshtemirov
Nadine Fakhran
Amelia Flocchini
John Flood
Lauren Frankenfield
Jennifer Glaser
Sarah Nichole Gorall
Jessi Guden
Gabby Henshue
Matthew Hoover
Alexys Hoppman
Brianna Jankowski
Jessica Jordan
Noah Kieffer
Bri Klopfer
Becca Levshetz
TJ Lewin
Mandy Luebker
Mason Lukas
Isatou Marong
Sheba McCants
Jenna A. Menadue
Casey Michelic
Hannah Mikunda
Keng Moua
Julia Oanes
Maritza Pallo
Demitra Philosophos
Elizabeth Pretto
Danielle Priesgen
Kayla Rogan
Kelsie Rustad
Aly Saari
Hannah Jean Samowitz
Delsin Sanghvi
Anne Schuelke
Sydney Stein
Ilona Topolnitska
Anh Tran
Abigayle Wellnitz
Brianna M. Wied
Kieran Wilson