IMPROVING MA OUTCOMES

Instructor Shares Top Tips for Elevating the Skills, Pass Rates – and Careers – of Future Medical Assistants

The Community College Workforce Alliance (CCWA) is a partnership between Brightpoint and Reynolds Community Colleges in the Greater Richmond, Va., region and offers professional development training and preparation for high-demand careers in healthcare, including phlebotomy, EKG technician, and medical assisting. Here's one CCWA instructor's story of practical tips and best practices and how she uses NHA resources to help her students in the medical assisting program learn, prepare, and achieve 100 percent certification exam pass rates.

As an assistant coordinator/instructor for healthcare programs at Community College Workforce Alliance (CCWA) in Chester, Va., Shannon Lillard is passionate about medical assistant training, and it shows. Over the course of her 14 years of teaching, 100 percent of her students who have tested for the Certified Clinical Medical Assistant (CCMA) credential, have earned it.

Like most great instructors, she cares first and foremost about her students as people, as individuals working to improve their skills, capabilities, and job opportunities for themselves, their families, and their communities.

Lillard is also motivated by the fact that these students and their skillsets are in high demand, and the healthcare industry needs them desperately.

The number of jobs for Medical Assistants is projected to grow by almost 20 percent over the next 10 years. But poor retention rates for both students and current MAs exacerbates the shortage. Unprepared or inadequately trained MAs cause clinical quality problems and drive higher turnover that costs employers, on average, $14,200 per Medical Assistant.

"Through experience and paying close attention to what works, I've found that NHA's learning tools and resources really help our students get started on the right foot with our programs, get through them successfully, and get hired in the industry," Lillard said. "And that's why we're here."

Lillard and NHA leaders recently shared their "Top 10 Instructor Tips for Preparing Future Medical Assistants" in a webinar you can watch here. We asked Lillard to further explain the secret to her success, and she said that of the 10 tips highlighted in the webinar, there are really five that are "essential and non-negotiable" in her program. Here are those five.

Tip #1: Incorporate NHA's Medical Terminology Into Your MA Curriculum

Lillard says medical terminology is like a foreign language for any new student, therefore, it's important to get them exposed and learning it as soon as possible.

"The NHA modules break down medical terms by root, by prefix, and by suffix, which gives students valuable clues to the systems and organs they refer to," Lillard said. "So even if they don't know an exact definition, they can work through it based on fundamentals and usually arrive at the right answers during quizzes, labs, and exams."

NHA's 16 Medical Terminology modules address Greek and Latin root words, body systems, diseases, and treatments. Activities and quizzes throughout check learning and comprehension. And system-specific modules



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Shannon Lillard, Assistant Coordinator
CCWA

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allow the instructor to focus on one area of anatomy at a time, such as cardiovascular, digestive, brain, and musculoskeletal components.

"The CCMA exam is written in medical terminology so learning medical terminology early and using it often is critical," Lillard said.

Tip #2: Give Students Access to MA SkillsBuilder™: Clinical

Lillard says the NHA MA SkillsBuilder: Clinical videos and interactive learning tools are excellent for giving students an overview of lab activities and what to expect in these sessions.

"This is new, and I jumped on it immediately. I make sure that students watch these videos so they can get a quick virtual overview of a lab and practice through interactive quizzes that warn them of "patient harm" and other key principles," Lillard said.

The 12 MA SkillsBuilder: Clinical modules cover important tasks such as vital signs, eye charts, and injections so, when a student gets into a hands-on lab situation, they know what the task is, why it's performed, and what to expect.

"Since students can watch and learn beforehand, it gives them more hands-on time rather than having to listen to me lecture on steps and techniques," Lillard said.

Tip #3: Ensure Completion of CCMA Study Guide

Staying up to date on coursework and homework is critical for student success, according to Lillard. Getting students into a rhythm and cadence balances out learning and keeps them on track.

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Coding, billing, and electronic health record overviews are included, along with all the necessary clinical components on anatomy, physiology, and phlebotomy. Quiz scores and student engagement are measured, and automatic reporting tells the instructor who's on pace, who's not, and what remediation is needed.

Tip #4: Require Students to Take the CCMA Practice Exams

Six practice exams are available to students through the NHA CCMA study resources. These are timed exams and have 150 questions each which helps students acclimate to the speed, rigor, and variety of the national credentialing exam.

"My course is 18 weeks, so every three weeks, I require students to take a practice exam for benchmarking and practice," Lillard said. "Their score isn't used as a grade, but it does get them used to taking long, difficult exams, and shows them what content areas they need to work on."

Tip #5: Support and Celebrate Student Success

Lillard believes that all students need to know their teacher is in their corner, and they need to be reminded of that point often. She gets to know her students, listens to their challenges and concerns, and then does her best to encourage and guide them.

Lillard says, "We all need someone who believes in us, especially when we have doubts about our own talents and abilities."

"We get a wide variety of students in our programs, some of whom have lots of confidence, and some who don't," Lillard said. "But all of them get nervous so I make a point to tell them I believe in them completely and that they should also believe in themselves. And when they're laughing and crying with joy after they pass the important exam, they often say, 'I couldn't have done it without you,' and that means the world to me. That's what it's all about."

Comprehensive Learning Track Drives Medical Assistant Student Success

- **Ambition:** The goal at CCWA's 18-week Medical Assisting program is for every student to earn the Certified Clinical Medical Assistant (CCMA) credential. Certification ensures a better future for the student, assurance of competency for the healthcare employer, and better patient care for the communities they serve.
- **Action:** CCWA instructor Shannon Lillard has made NHA's CCMA learning tools and resources an integral part of her online and in-class curriculum, requiring students to complete core modules in medical terminology, clinical skills, and hands-on lab in addition to study guide and practice exams best practices.
- **Outcomes:** In 14 years of teaching, Lillard and her students have achieved a 100 percent CCMA exam pass rate.

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