

Medical Assisting: Opportunities and Requirements for Growth



Medical assistants are more essential than ever in today's rapidly evolving healthcare industry, yet a convergence of educational market factors is threatening the supply of new graduates. Renewed focuses on curriculum excellence, certifications, and well-managed externships are just a few of the ways to meet the marketplace challenges.

Industry Outlook

With widespread healthcare reform underway, the healthcare industry continues to be one of the most promising and robust employment segments for the long term. Providing healthcare to an aging population and millions of newly-insured people will bolster physician practices, clinics, and hospitals—while all three must move toward smarter and more creative staffing solutions to enhance the delivery of care.

Clearly, doctors and nurses will continue to direct care; in addition, highly competent support staff will become increasingly important as population and healthcare trends play out in the future. Medical assistants are widely recognized as part of the solution needed to provide high-quality, low-cost healthcare. They provide a low-cost, flexible resource for basic clinical procedures and administrative tasks. Whether at the front desk or in the exam room, medical assistants often are the first to meet with patients, putting them in a unique position to influence the patient's perceptions of a practice and its quality of care.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) estimates that 570,000 medical assistants currently work in healthcare. Estimates for future growth are also bullish: BLS predicts 2.6 percent annual growth for the next 10 years, more than twice the average for U.S. employment growth. Job postings are growing even faster than overall employment. Job postings for Medical Assistants grew 15 percent in 2014 after growing over 10 percent per year in 2012 and 2013, according to Boston-based Gray Associates¹, a strategy and consulting firm that serves the education industry.

Federal regulations, current and proposed, are also putting a higher premium on well-trained medical assistants. Healthcare reform is bringing more patients into doctors' offices and clinics where medical assistants are increasingly prevalent. The added push by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) for the adoption of Electronic Health Records (EHR) includes financial incentives for practices and hospitals, and specifically gives credentialed medical assistants a key role in earning the incentives. The CMS's Incentive Program, commonly referred to as Meaningful Use (MU), ties financial incentives to meeting electronic order entry goals, a duty that can be performed by medical assistants but only those who have been credentialed, typically through a national certification provider. By using credentialed medical assistants for Meaningful Use order entry, a practice can earn tens of thousands of dollars in incentives while freeing its doctors, nurses, and other licensed professionals from order-entry tasks. The end result: more focus on patient care in a more profitable practice.

The Case for Certification

Medical assisting programs can give graduates a boost in the job market by stressing the importance of professional certifications. Certification credentials not only reinforce learning, but also give external validation of competency to employers and patients alike. With a certification in hand, new graduates have added confidence during their job search and certified clinical medical assistants may secure higher wages.

For example, over 25% of job postings require that graduates hold at least one certification.² Some high-performing medical

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assisting training programs even tailor their curriculum to better prepare their students for success on the certification exams.

The shift towards more coordinated care is also creating additional demand for multi-skilled medical assistants. Individuals with competencies in specialties such as phlebotomy and EKG administration, backed up by certifications or "stacked credentials", are seen as highly valuable to an organization, giving the employer flexible staffing options and confidence in both the customer service and clinical skills of their medical assistant.

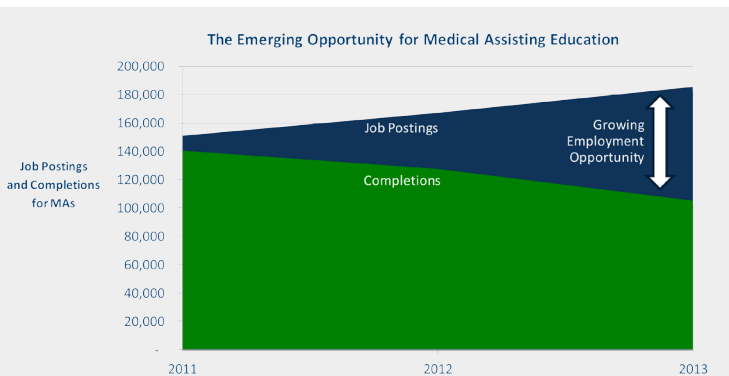


Medical Assistant Education Under Pressure

Medical assistant training is the second-largest academic program in the United States, but the large number of enrollees has also led to an unwelcome variation in the quality of programs and graduates.

Increased federal and public scrutiny has put pressure on career colleges to improve their teaching methods, as well as student success outcomes, in an effort to protect both patients and students. Proposed federal Gainful Employment (GE) regulations, put financial aid funding at risk unless career colleges can show that graduates are “gainfully employed” in their field of study in a timely manner.

As a result of tightening regulation and declining enrollment, several large medical assistant training institutions have gone out of business. Others have had to cut back or reduce offerings, and some are simply exiting the business altogether due to the perceived risks.



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Accordingly, the number of medical assistant graduates dropped from a high of 140,000 in 2011 to 105,000 in 2013³, creating a gap between openings available from employers and the number of qualified medical assistants available to fill those jobs.

The good news is that smart, well-run medical assistant programs can overcome the challenges of the regulatory environment and tap into this growth sector by focusing on student success.

Following educational best practices and setting students up for professional success are the best ways to capitalize on the growing demand for medical assistant candidates.

Keeping Placement Rates High and Driving Excellence

The Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools (ACICS) requires that accredited schools place at least 70 percent of graduates. The median among existing programs is only slightly

higher at 73 percent. In contrast, top institutions, large and small, in markets across the country, are consistently achieving placement rates well above 80 percent.⁴

These top institutions do more to place their graduates. In particular, they run effective, disciplined externship programs. Most programs permanently place fewer than 25 percent of students in their externships. Leaders usually place 40 percent or more of students in their externship site.⁵ These schools visit, select, and manage externship sites to ensure they provide a good clinical experience—and are willing to hire qualified graduates. Students are prepared for their externships, including reviews on key skills—especially professionalism—in the weeks before their externships start.

Winning schools also help with the basics. They instill the professional behaviors (e.g., punctuality) that employers expect. They help organize job fairs and interviews and help students prepare resumes. They even suggest software and methods students can use to review and clean up their social media accounts and other online identities.

The success of an externship program is highly dependent on the relationship between educational training programs and their clinical partners. They must work together to ensure that students are competently performing the skills needed to integrate successfully into the healthcare environment after graduation. At the same time, training providers must always be looking for new ways to enhance and strengthen their curriculum, skills practice, and patient care skills training so students can succeed, first at their school, then at their externship, and ultimately on the job.

Seizing the Medical Assistant Education Opportunity

Top medical assisting programs support their students beyond just the classroom experience. From business etiquette tips, to social media auditing and editing, to interview coaching, to encouraging certification, the best schools pay careful attention to the details.

Tremendous market share and revenue opportunities exist for medical assisting programs willing to invest in best practices and high standards. Demand for graduates is increasing while educational capacity has been reduced. Well-managed institutions will solidify their positions, and even expand. Others will be forced to play catch-up, or could be left behind entirely if they don’t adapt to federal guidelines and marketplace requirements.

Set up your institution, as well as your medical assistant graduates, for success. Commit the resources needed to drive curriculum excellence, promote or require professional certification, and give students the professional guidance and real world training they need through externships to secure success for themselves, and by extension, your medical assisting program.

¹Source: Gray Associates, Inc., The Medical Assisting Education Market, February 2015, page 33, and WANTED Analytics.

²Source: Gray Associates, Inc., The Medical Assisting Education Market, February 2015, page 42, and WANTED Analytics.

³Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS).

⁴Gray Associates, Inc., database of 17,000+ 2012 and 2013 placement rates by institution, program, and award level.

⁵Unidentified industry expert, as quoted in Gray Associates, Inc., The Medical Assisting Education Market, February 2015, page 102