

Pandemic Prompts USU Student to Pursue Healthcare Career in Navajo Nation

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LaQuinlynn Francis

earned her undergraduate degree from USU Blanding in April 2024.

Selecting a college major is a pivotal choice with far-reaching implications for one's future. For Utah State University student LaQuinlynn Francis, the commitment to pursue a degree in health education and promotion with an emphasis in health science within the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services (CEHS) carries a deeply personal significance. Because she is from the Navajo Nation, Francis's decision is fueled by a profound aspiration to comprehend and address prevalent health issues in the community where she grew up.

"The impact of the pandemic on the Navajo community was devastating," Francis said. "Losing two cherished individuals, both grappling with diabetes and losing their eyesight, propelled me into a quest for ways to address their health issues. Despite my efforts, COVID claimed them, leaving me feeling powerless. Those losses helped me make my decision to return to school, driven by the urgency to seek answers and solutions for the pressing health challenges affecting my community."

Inspired by a profound interest in human diseases, epidemiology, nutrition, and health and wellness, Francis found solace in acquiring knowledge that extended beyond textbooks. Her educational journey became a place of inspiration as she delved into the intricate connections between health, culture, and community.

Francis's pursuit of knowledge and the challenging coursework not only allowed her to enhance her own

health, but she also discovered a passion for sharing her experiences and cultural insights. Her instructors at USU became mentors, bolstering her enthusiasm because of their teaching styles and real-world experiences. The support and feedback from these professors empowered Francis to express herself effectively, creating a platform to advocate for health education. She also credits much of her educational success to a USU professor and mentor who encouraged her to become part of the Women Who Succeed program, which provides young women in Utah with mentorship, leadership opportunities, and access to events that empower, build self-confidence, and grow their academic and professional skills.

Francis graduated with her bachelor's degree in Spring 2024, but her educational journey began where she grew up in Chinle, Arizona, on the Navajo reservation. Her excellent grades in high school, particularly in her career and technical education courses, provided her a modest scholarship for the College of Eastern Utah's campus located in Blanding, Utah (now USU Blanding), where she earned an associate degree in 2010. She went on to earn an automotive technology certificate in 2012 from Navajo Technical University and a medical assistant certificate in 2013 from USU. A decade after her initial exposure to college life, Francis embraced the flexibility of USU Online learning programs to attain her long-awaited bachelor's degree from USU.



Francis, a member of

the Navajo Nation, found inspiration in her community as she pursued her bachelor's degree.

Throughout her educational journey, Francis has been thankful for the scholarships that helped her realize her goals. "I am so grateful for the many scholarships that have eased my financial burdens over the years," Francis said. "The scholarships kept me motivated because I knew that someone believed in me enough to help support my education. Today, I want to do my best to carry their generosity forward by making a positive difference in other people's lives after I graduate."

As Francis looks into the complexities of health issues impacting the Navajo community, she sees a future where

change is not just a possibility, but a necessity. She credits the amazing professors and advisors at USU for setting her up for success.

"I am considering pursuing a master's of public health, inspired by the encouragement of my USU professors," she said. "Their words planted the idea in my mind, affirming my capability."

While pursuing her associate degree, Francis resided on the Blanding campus. Later, during the completion of her medical assistant certificate, she continued to live on the USU Blanding campus. This phase included engaging in externship activities and nursing clinicals that required her presence in hospitals and clinics across Montezuma Creek, Monticello, Mancos, Blanding, and Dove Creek.

Her outlook on healthcare has been significantly shaped by influential TV shows like *The Good Doctor* and the hands-on experiences gained while enrolled in USU's medical assistant program. These experiences have expanded her perspective, guiding her towards a promising future in the crucial field of healthcare.

With aspirations to become a naturopathic doctor, Francis wants to dedicate herself to diagnosing, treating, and managing health conditions through natural and herbal medicine. She has even contemplated the prospect of venturing into surgery. To fulfill her dreams, Francis emphasizes the importance of perseverance, dedication, and seeking support. Her advice to future students echoes the transformative power of networking, getting involved in school activities, and maintaining a consistent focus on studies.

"Living on campus was an amazing experience," Francis said. "I would tell anyone looking to go to college to put themselves out there and get involved in school activities, make connections, and keep up with their studies. And never be afraid to ask for help. Yes, it takes time, effort, discipline, and consistency—but it is all worth it."

Francis's story serves as a testament to the resilience embedded in her Navajo spirit and the transformative power of education. As she envisions a healthier future for her community, Francis stands as an inspiring example of how knowledge, coupled with determination, can be a catalyst for positive change.