

# Excellence for International Engagement

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Gene Harkless, professor of nursing

Some of the most engaging articles in UNH's online research journal, *Inquiry*, have been written by nursing students studying abroad and mentored by Professor Gene Harkless. They represent just a few of the scores of student nurses that Harkless has mentored in places ranging from Wales, Norway, Australia, Ghana, and Uganda.

Harkless continues to create study abroad and international research opportunities for nursing students. She has led the development of nursing's study abroad course in Ghana. In 2010, seven students signed up for the course, and this past January, fifteen. Under her leadership, the nursing program now offers senior nursing students a public health semester in India through the Alliance for Global Education. Over the past decade, she has mentored seventeen students through the IROP and SURF Abroad experience. This year, Harkless was recognized for her contributions by receiving the University's award for International Engagement.

Even before she entered nursing school, Harkless worked as a nurse's aide during high school. Between her junior and senior year at Duke University, she knew that she needed more extensive nursing experience than her previous summer jobs at a nursing home work had provided. She was thrilled to land a student nurse position for a summer in a small hospital in Ketchikan, Alaska. This experience opened her eyes to the challenges of rural, remote care and the important role nurses play in small communities.

Because of that formative experience in Alaska, her first job out of nursing school was with the U.S. Public Health Service, working in a small fourteen-bed clinic in northern Nevada, 90 miles away from the closest referral center. "Even then there wasn't complete electrification," Harkless recalls. "It was an isolated and impoverished Native American community."

Nonetheless, this opportunity had an impact on the kind of nurse Harkless would become. "We were isolated with a small, relatively inexperienced staff," she says. "We had to figure out the best way to do things. It truly was a learning organization."

Subsequently, Harkless worked with other Native American communities, moving into public health. She notes, "Early on, I knew that I wanted to work with families in the community and that hospitals back then were not a good fit for me." She went on to become a nurse practitioner, earning her doctorate in nursing science a few years later. She continues to practice as a family nurse practitioner at a local community health center.

Always, Harkless has pursued travel opportunities. One of her most influential experiences was going to Norway with the Fulbright Scholar Program. "The connections I made there ended up being the foundation for the geriatric work I continue to do with my Norwegian colleagues," Harkless says. Her second Fulbright in India connected her with colleagues across Asia and Africa. Her own research experience abroad includes stints in all the places her students now study.

She has also seen dramatic improvements in many of the countries where she has done research and mentored students. "In Ghana, all pregnant women now have access to prenatal care and access to a health care center," Harkless says, "Before

they had to prepay, which limited access for many women, but now no payment is expected and all women can give birth in a health center with a skilled birth attendant”

Many of the countries where her students do research are ones where malaria and tuberculosis are still feared diseases. Yet, Harkless is not daunted by those challenges either for herself or her nursing students. “We educate our students to work under poorly structured systems and still be safe and effective,” says Harkless.

A lifetime of traveling and teaching has allowed Harkless to visit places she loves and then revisit them through her students. She reflects, “As an educator I want to teach the next generation of professional nurses to be curious, to be engaged, and to realize their power to be effective change agents.”

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