UNH Launches Graduate Program to Address Nursing Shortage

Sharon Keeler
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Master's Program Open to Those With Non-Nursing Bachelor's Degrees

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Editors/News Directors: May 6-12 is National Nurses Week. We hope you will find this UNH story timely and useful. The university is having a public information session on this new program May 17, and news coverage will help encourage interested people to attend. Digital photos are available to accompany this story. Please call (603) 862-1566 if interested.

DURHAM, N.H.--Jennifer Thompson, 38, left behind a lucrative career in pharmaceutical sales to become a nurse. She is one of 21 students enrolled in the University of New Hampshire's new direct entry master's in nursing program that is answering the call to fill the state and national need for more nurses prepared at higher levels of education.

"When I was working in sales and I would ask myself 'What did I do today?' I couldn't answer that question in a meaningful way," said Thompson, of Bedford. "Before I went into sales I worked as an exercise physiologist with cardiac patients, and I enjoyed the relationship I had with people. I wanted to get back to that, and I wanted to play a more direct role in patient care."

Like her classmates, Thompson's undergraduate degree is not in nursing. Many come from the corporate world, some from related fields like biotechnology, and one is even a geologist. These are exactly the students UNH is seeking for its program - those who have bachelor's degrees in other disciplines, but who want to enter the nursing profession and earn an advanced degree without having to complete an additional bachelor's degree.

UNH's direct entry master's in nursing program is unique in New Hampshire, and joins a growing trend of similar programs across the nation. Accelerated programs in nursing have shown a significant increase in the last 10 years in response to both the need for nurses and the interest in nursing as a result of the downturn in the economy.

The two-and-a-half year, full-time program prepares students to take the Nursing Licensure Exam (NCLEX) after the first year of courses, become a Registered Nurse, and graduate with a master's degree in the clinical nursing leadership program. The master's of science in clinical nursing leadership program focuses on the development of nurses at the advanced clinician level.

"This innovative course of study develops expert nursing practice, promotes interdisciplinary collaboration, and fosters life-long learning skills," says Dorothy Rentschler, UNH associate professor of nursing and program director.
professor of nursing and program director. "All students develop strong clinical decision-making and practice skills. The graduates of this program will be equipped to assume leadership positions in nursing service units, contribute to clinical nursing education, and function as expert clinicians in direct care roles."

The UNH program will increase the number of master's prepared nurses at patients' bedsides which, according to a recent study by Dr. Linda Aiken and colleagues, published in the Journal of American Medical Association (JAMA), leads to better patient outcomes and more cost effective care. In addition, the American Association of Colleges of Nursing states, "Graduates of accelerated programs are prized by nurse employers who value the many layers of skill and education these graduates bring to the workplace."

The association also reports that agencies are partnering with schools of nursing and offering scholarships to students as a means for recruiting highly qualified nurses. Thompson and several of her classmates have received $5,000 scholarships from the Foundation for Healthy Communities in Concord in exchange for a commitment to teach nursing courses within Registered Nurse programs in New Hampshire following their graduation.

The Foundation for Healthy Communities is a nonprofit corporation that exists to improve health and health care, and includes New Hampshire hospitals, health plans, clinicians, home care agencies and public policy leaders.

The need for nurses with master's and doctoral degrees to fill faculty positions is also critical, as more students are applying to nursing programs, but not enough teachers are available to meet the need.

Students in the UNH program spend Tuesdays and Wednesdays in the classroom under the guidance of university faculty, and Thursdays and Fridays in clinical settings throughout the state. The hospitals currently being used include Elliot Hospital in Manchester, Catholic Medical Center in Manchester, Portsmouth Regional Hospital, and Southern New Hampshire Medical Center in Nashua. The students will participate in a variety of clinical experiences at various clinical agencies.

Student Steve Abbott, 44, of Dover says coming back to school full-time presents its personal challenges, as he and many of his classmates are juggling families with studies. Even so, he says, "I'm amazed how quickly I could get back into the swing of school. The insecurity of finances kept me from doing it sooner, but it's manageable. I'm very pleased with my decision. It feels like the right thing."

Thompson agrees, and says even her nursing training has provided her with the personal fulfillment she didn't feel in her previous profession. She says she will never forget her first patient - an elderly man she cared for through surgery and then again during a home visit after discharge.

"I know I made a difference in his life," Thompson says. "I know I made the right decision to become a nurse."

UNH's Department of Nursing is one of the oldest and largest departments within the School of Health and Human Services. As the only four-year public nursing program in New Hampshire, the department is committed to providing leadership in nursing education and practice in the state and region.

The department is fully accredited by the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education. In addition to the baccalaureate programs the university offers a nursing master's degree with
programs leading to family and adult nurse practitioners as well as clinical nursing leadership.

UNH will hold an information session for those interested in learning more about the direct entry master's in nursing program. It will take place May 17 from 5 to 7 p.m. in Hewitt Hall on the Durham campus. For room location or additional information, contact Patty Jarema at (603) 862-2395 or at pjarema@cisunix.unh.edu or visit www.unh.edu/nursing.