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New adult/gerontology program serves nurses, society

By Karen Hildebrandt, contributing writer

University students make some of the toughest choices of their lives during their college years. That is why Oakland University provides options – clearly-defined, career-focused options supported by faculty and closely aligned with students' lifestyles and goals.

OU's School of Nursing's (SON) newly established MSN Adult/Gerontological Nurse Practitioner degree is all about options. This nurse practitioner track allows students to focus on advanced nursing care for either adults or the geriatric population. Students who wish to earn a dual degree can do so by completing additional clinical hours focused in gerontology, which allows them to sit for both the adult and gerontology certification exams.

"Our new adult/gerontology degree gives students an opportunity to broaden their education," explained SON Associate Professor Barbara Harrison. "This specialty was designed to meet the needs of students who prefer more experience with older populations. Nurses who select this specialty option often have clinical experiences in ambulatory settings, hospitals and extended care facilities where they have come to recognize the need for advanced nursing care for this growing population."

That need is great. Older adults represent 46 percent of all hospital stays, 80 percent of homecare visits and 90 percent of long-term care residents, according to the National Center for Health Statistics. And yet, only 3 percent of all advanced practice nurses, certified nurse specialists and nurse practitioners, are certified in geriatric nursing, according to the American Nurses Credentialing Center.

The new program also helps OU address the critical shortage of geriatric nursing faculty in the U.S. Statistics indicate that one quarter of nursing programs in this country lack any gerontological faculty members.

The adult/gerontology program provides choice in clinical experience, as well. Through strong partnership with all the major hospitals and clinics in the area, OU can provide placements in many different settings. Students are encouraged to choose a placement well-matched to their skills, strengths and career interests.

"Our strength is that we are student centered," Harrison said. "Students are encouraged to choose a clinical site to suit their interests. Many other schools have pre-set lists, leaving little choice for students. At SON, we treat them as adult learners invested in their future. We want them to take an active role, but we also guide them in this decision. They must explain in writing how their choices match their goals. The SON faculty also visits students in the field to evaluate if the choice truly is the best placement for the student."

Learning is achieved in multiple ways within this "hybrid" track, which fuses online courses, clinical experience, role playing and simulation exercises. Many classes are offered online, but students visit campus to role play with "patients" suffering from common ailments and work with a high-tech simulator that provides realistic patient care scenarios.

"As students move along in the program, they must do clinical experience two days a week, plus the online courses. To do traditional coursework in the classroom can become redundant. We prefer to provide more interactive classroom experiences, which will allow students to practice geriatric skills they may not have received in their clinical placements," Harrison said. "We have people visit and pretend to have an ailment so the students can practice good nursing skills. Simulators, like SimMan, also give them experience with the diagnosis and treatment of common complaints."

Providing options seems to work for OU and its students.

"The adult/gerontological track made me more marketable and gave me more flexibility in choosing my career interest," said Lynn Etters, a geriatric nurse practitioner at the Detroit Medical Center-Huron Valley-Sinai Hospital-Krieger Geriatric Center. Etters, who graduated in April, 2007, completed a dual major, focusing on both the adult and gerontological populations.

"While my main interest is in geriatrics, the adult certification allows me to work in other areas if I choose to change my focus," she added.

With only two graduating classes under its belt, SON's new adult/gerontological track has already achieved great success. With a 100 percent pass rate, the graduating classes have earned a mean score higher than the national mean.

SUMMARY

Oakland University provides options – clearly-defined, career-focused options supported by faculty and closely aligned with students' lifestyles and goals.

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