

Modeling success

Interdisciplinary courses urge students and teachers to collaborate



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—Karin T. Kirchhoff

Once each semester, students in a course on end-of-life care taught by Professor Karin T. Kirchhoff, PhD, take a field trip to a Madison funeral home. There they learn, among other things, how bodies are prepared and cared for after death. It may be a slightly unconventional means of teaching nursing students about end-of-life care, but the lessons hit home.

“Nothing like walking around embalming tables and coffins to put it right in your face,” wrote one student in the course evaluation.

“Thanks for the trip to the funeral home,” wrote another. “I learned a lot there, both in terms of content and in watching how other students took in and processed the info[rmation].”

Kirchhoff’s course, “Interdisciplinary Perspectives on End of Life,” is meant to do just this: show students the myriad professions involved in end-of-life care and encourage them to share their personal and professional experiences with fellow students—many of whom hail from different health sciences disciplines.

Kirchhoff’s course is one of several interdisciplinary courses that the UW–Madison School of Nursing has begun to offer in the past few years. Others address such disparate subjects as health and disease in Uganda and substance abuse among women. But while their subject matter may differ significantly, their methods and goals are the same.

Complementing more conventional curriculum, interdisciplinary courses introduce nursing students to guest lecturers from various arenas. Students also could take field trips, read novels or watch films. And, just as important, they share the experience with students from a range of other disciplines, including social work, medicine, occupational therapy, physical therapy, business and law.

Elfa Gretarsdottir, a School of

Nursing graduate student who took Kirchhoff’s course recently, extols its interdisciplinary methods because it made the subject matter “so connected to real life.” Not only were the presentations from different lecturers helpful, she says, but also the assignments introduced students to resources from a range of venues.

In one assignment, for example, students were asked to choose and watch a mainstream film that deals with death.

“That really made some students think about how many of the films we watch every day can be teaching us something,” says Gretarsdottir. “Now we see their messages about death.”

Also striking for Gretarsdottir was a lecture from a dying patient, who discussed not only the experience of knowing that he was dying, but also his connection and experience communicating with health care workers.

“It’s been a phenomenal experience for me,” says Kirchhoff, who considers the topic of end of life to be especially well-suited for such an approach. “I don’t think any discipline functions independently at the end of life. This course shows the interrelationship between attending physicians, nursing, social work, maybe pharmacy and even chaplains.”

Approach is part of bigger picture This approach is part of a larger initiative of the University of Wisconsin’s Interdisciplinary Health Sciences Committee, which has worked to define the term “interdisciplinary” as well as create practical ways for health science disciplines to offer these opportunities to their students. One of their most effective accomplishments has been simply to establish a universal time slot. By offering interdisciplinary courses at the same time each semester, different schools can avoid faculty and student

schedule conflicts.

Nadine Nehls, PhD, associate dean for academic programs at the School of Nursing, has been a long-standing member of the committee. She says that the drive behind this educational approach is practical.

"We know that interdisciplinary practice is an important trend in health care," says Nehls. "And we want our students to have this expertise."

This does not mean simply bringing a diverse group of students into conventional courses.

"When we say 'interdisciplinary,' the ideal is for students to experience education from professors from various disciplines and to sit in classes with students from varying disciplines," says Nehls.

Cooperation is essential

In her view, interdisciplinary cooperation is essential to a functional workplace. Encountering students and professors from a range of disciplines helps students learn how their work will fit into the larger team and how they can best facilitate teamwork to serve the best interests of the patient, client or consumer. This reduces conflict in the workplace, making one's practice more rewarding.

"I believe you have to understand what the various roles are before you can appreciate your own role," says Nehls, who, as a psychiatric nurse and a psychologist, has experienced firsthand the importance of interdisciplinary efforts.

Nehls demonstrates this in the course that she teaches with Joy Newmann, a professor in the Department of Social Work, and Alev Wilk, a physician who practices at the UW Health East Clinic. Their course, "Trauma, Mental Health and Substance Abuse: Prevention and Early Intervention for Women," stems from a two-year grant for which the three developed an interdisciplinary

seminar and integrated substance abuse content into their schools' curricula.

Students' responses to the courses have been overwhelmingly positive, not only because of the dynamic classroom settings, but also because of the hands-on work that they do. In Nehls' class, for example, student groups venture into the community to demonstrate what they learned in class to professionals in rape-crisis centers and domestic abuse intervention services.

In Kirchhoff's course, students give presentations on an aspect of end-of-life care that interests them, such as the different rituals surrounding death in various cultures. Gretarsdottir, whose presentation addressed do-not-resuscitate (DNR) policies, found the presentations engaging and novel.

"That was the beauty of this class," she explains. "You could create a bit of it yourself according to your own interests and strengths."

Interaction reaps rewards

Rewards for the teachers can be equally great. Kirchhoff says that she continues to interact with former students from different disciplines. Now, when she sees them on campus, she enjoys taking the time to stop and catch up.

"I wouldn't have had that experience before," she says.

Her relationship with faculty in other departments also has deepened; she now talks with colleagues whom she had previously known only as fellow committee members, not as teachers.

"This is the way that health practice works," says Nehls of such faculty interaction. "We want to mirror this in the learning environment. Besides," she adds, "it's exciting to be part of a teaching team."

-Masarah Van Eyck



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