

# New DNP Program Explores Nursing Frontiers

By Alice Adams, for *Institutional Advancement*

A select group of nurse practitioners, coming to Houston's Texas Medical Center from all parts of the state, gathered in quiet anticipation on a humid August afternoon.

Fourteen were women and two were men. They represent a diversity of ethnicities with an average age of 30.

- Some are teachers who also maintain clinical practices.
- One is an occupational health nurse at an oil refinery.
- Two work in long-term care facilities.
- Four are acute care practitioners employed within the Texas Medical Center specializing in oncology, cardiology, cardiovascular surgery, neurocritical care, and emergency care at a Level I Trauma Center.
- One works at a paper mill near Louisiana, taking care of workers and their families.
- Another works in a metropolitan HIV/AIDS clinic.

All have been carefully chosen for their experience, their goals and their dreams.

It was the first day of class for The University of Texas School of Nursing's new Doctor of Nursing Practice (D.N.P.) program, the first practice (not research) doctorate degree in nursing offered in Texas; it is one of only a dozen such programs in the U.S.

Like astronauts preparing for launch into the unknown, the 16 men and women chosen to be in this classroom are eager, excited and ready to take their next steps in exploring new opportunities and yet-to-be-discovered frontiers in nursing.

"All of these students are nurse practitioners," said Joanne V. Hickey, Ph.D., and coordinator of the D.N.P. program. "Selected by our review committee from a field of 52 candidates who applied within the very narrow five-week application period, these students came from a variety of rural and urban settings and are doing important and innovative work within their individual practices," she pointed out.

Even after the deadline, the program continued to receive phone calls and e-mails from interested candidates.

Between April 20, 2006, when the new program was approved by The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board and that hot August afternoon, details and finishing touches were applied at warp speed. In their Herculean effort to meet myriad deadlines, Dr. Hickey and the program's faculty had little time to stop and acknowledge their progress.

"Getting the details in place within a compressed time frame was challenging, but

this faculty has seen this new program, not as a challenge but, instead, as an opportunity to build something with the potential of transformation," the coordinator explained.

Discussions among the program's first class of students have proven rich and robust, due, in part, to their varied experiences. This is yet another well-planned and unique aspect of UT School of Nursing's model for its D.N.P. program, a model that began taking shape five years ago when discussions began about the possibility of bringing the new degree offering to the school.

"We wanted nurse practitioners practicing in Texas who are passionate and committed to



The first class of nurse practitioners in the new Doctor of Nursing Practice Program, with Joanne Hickey, Ph.D., program coordinator, standing in the foreground. Even after the deadline, the program continued to receive phone calls and e-mails from interested candidates. Photo by Nash Baker.

careers in direct patient care," Dr. Hickey pointed out. "We conducted interviews with a very deliberate plan for the diversity we wanted – a broad representation, urban and rural, with primary, acute and long-term care experiences as well as the sub-specialties found within those categories."

To accommodate the group's geographic diversity, classes are clustered into monthly intensive blocks, ranging anywhere from one and one-half to two days in length. While some of the new D.N.P. students live within easy driving distance, many rely on air travel for their monthly commutes to the Texas Medical Center. Between trips to Houston, the students complete online assignments.

During their first semester, the students studied medical ethics in an interdisciplinary setting, involving the School of Nursing, UT Medical School and the UT School of Public Health. Instructors from UT's nursing, medical and public health faculties have assisted the students in exploring the scholarly foundations

of advanced practice, including theoretical frameworks, evidence-based practice, health policy and evaluation methodologies.

"Our goals are to engage these students in the highest level of advanced practice, leadership in patient care and achievement of quality outcomes," Dr. Hickey said. "All the other objectives fall under those goals."

During the second year, students engage in preceptorships with clinical experts to expand the depth and breadth of their clinical knowledge and patient care. Upon successfully passing oral and written comprehensive exams at the end of their second year, the D.N.P. students begin developing a

Clinical Scholarship Portfolio of scholarly projects, such as evidence-based practice innovations, interdisciplinary practice projects, in-depth case analyses, and at least one first author, peer-reviewed publication. The third year is the fellowship year of scholarly practice and completion of the portfolio.

For Dr. Hickey and members of the D.N.P. faculty, the high point of the first semester was seeing the caliber of students attracted by the new program, their personal commitment to patient care and the promise they hold for transformational change in nursing practice. "They came with such enthusiasm, excitement and joy because there was, finally, a practice doctorate," she commented.

UT's model for the new doctoral program mandates a doctorally prepared practice advisor for each of the 16 students. "A large part of doctoral education is based on mentorship by clinical expert faculty and collegiality with your classmates," Dr. Hickey pointed out. "In this

group, the rapport was immediate, and by bringing and sharing their own experiences to the group, they are able to learn from each other as well as from discussions of the various topics."

Compared to the School of Nursing's undergraduate and master's level programs, the new D.N.P. program brings a unique educational experience to its students. "Teaching in a doctoral program is different because of the dynamics contributed by the mentorship and socialization of students at the doctoral level," Dr. Hickey explained. "There's an emphasis beyond teaching facts and theories," she continued. "At the heart of this emphasis is a socialization process that refines the students' higher level thinking skills. In addition, it broadens their scope of knowledge and clinical competencies for innovative and transformational scholarship and leadership in clinical practice."

As coordinator of a program still in its infancy, Dr. Hickey and the D.N.P. faculty continually evaluate and fine-tune its direction. "One of my concerns, now that the program nears the end of the second semester, is how to maintain a sense of community with students who are working full-time, going to school part-time and scattered across the state. To address that concern, we've created high-touch personal and electronic strategies we'll use throughout the program."

The School of Nursing's model for the new program, created within the structure of nationally accepted D.N.P. Essentials guidelines, was designed with room for flexibility and creativity.

The rationale? To recognize and explore all of UT System's resources as well as those of the world's largest medical center. "In this environment and with these resources, we believe we are positioned to expand the breadth and depth of knowledge our students will take into their own practices," Dr. Hickey said.

At this point in the new program, the faculty are finalizing logistics and planning for the students' second year, when they begin their clinical preceptorships. The school has more than 200 contracts with clinical facilities for clinical practice, and it is anticipated that even more will be developed.

In the interim, the faculty's enthusiastic consensus is the program is off to a great start and on the right road. "We know where we're headed and what we need to do to create this new level of professional scholar," the coordinator acknowledged. ★

# New Imaging Research Facility Dedicated to Detection of Early Stage Disease

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Mauro Ferrari, Ph.D., professor and director of the Center for Nanomedicine at The Brown Foundation Institute of Molecular Medicine, and Peter J. Davies, M.D., Ph.D., executive vice president for Research at the UT Health Science Center, converse about the possibilities the new building will add to research capabilities.

The building also will house the health science center's new Department of Biomedical Engineering. The facility will accommodate a translational imaging core that will include technologies supplied by GE Healthcare. The core will include a cyclotron, radiochemistry modules for production and labeling with radionuclides, a combination positron emission tomography (PET) / computed tomography (CT) unit, a volume

CT unit and a magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) unit. Other technologies and applications developed by GE Healthcare and M. D. Anderson will be tested on-site as well.

"The dreams and visions from which this facility arose have no end state. As we make progress in the detection, treatment and prevention of human disease, the dreams and visions will continue to move forward, forward to new challenges and opportunities.

We also must remember that this facility is a building. It will be a magnificent building with state-of-the-art equipment. But the secret of this building, its energy and heart and soul, will be the physician scientists, scientists, and technicians who will chart the course for the future," said James T. Willerson, M.D., president of the UT Health Science Center at Houston and president-elect of the Texas Heart Institute.

According to Peter Davies, M.D., Ph.D., UT-Houston's executive vice president for Research, the dedicated facility will enable scientists and engineers to work together and accelerate the development of new technologies.

"Our goal is to bring together some of our most talented scientists and biomedical engineers in an environment that will foster their collaboration with colleagues at M. D. Anderson and GE Healthcare," he said.

With the new UT Dental Branch and two additional health science center facilities to be located in the Research Park, collaboration between M. D. Anderson and the health science center is expected to broaden applications beyond

cancer and cardiovascular disease.

These facilities will include a new Neuroscience Center, a \$42 million Biomedical Research and Education Center for stem cell discoveries and a new home for the UT Dental



James T. Willerson, M.D., left, UT Health Science Center president, chats with Jack Smith, M.D., Ph.D., dean of the UT School of Health Information Sciences.

Branch (completion estimated for 2010). The new dental school likely will cost at least \$90 million – but \$78 million already is in hand, including \$60 million in state Tuition Revenue Bonds and \$18 million in UT System Permanent University Funds. The remainder will be solicited from foundations and private individuals in the "Open to Health" fundraising initiative. ★