

UT ARLINGTON

Health

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT ARLINGTON • COLLEGE OF NURSING AND HEALTH INNOVATION • 2021



Built to Last

Read how graduate nursing programs in the College of Nursing and Health Innovation continued to thrive through the pandemic.



In spring 2021, the College of Nursing and Health Innovation was finally able to celebrate graduates in person after face-to-face commencement ceremonies were postponed at the height of the pandemic.

contents



12 Care in Action

Students, faculty, and staff put care into hands-on action throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.



18 Tried, True, and Stronger Than Ever

Thanks to a solid foundation, graduate nursing programs have thrived during the pandemic.

2 Notes
Welcome from Dean Elizabeth Merwin

3 Rounds
The latest research and academic activities

23 Class Notes
See the latest alumni accomplishments

24 Parting Shot
The Smart Hospital gets an upgrade

UT ARLINGTON health

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OVER THE PAST DECADE, the College of Nursing and Health Innovation has seen extensive growth, from enrollment to research. Our programs continue to rank highly both in Texas and nationally. We are currently ranked No. 32 among schools of nursing for National Institutes of Health-funded research. We have reached further into the depths of this state and country to train the next generation of health care providers and remain the largest producer of baccalaureate-prepared nurses in Texas. We are proud to have over 46,000 alumni representing our College and doing exceptional work across a variety of industries to improve health and the human condition.

Our programs are the epitome of innovation, as we have some of the foremost leaders in health care technology and simulation, including one of 25 advanced health care simulation operations specialists worldwide. We broke ground in spring 2021 on the new building for our Smart Hospital, that together with the School of Social Work will be relocated to this new \$76 million facility aimed to usher in critical advancements in the field of health care. The 150,000-square-foot facility will be a state-of-the-art space for our pioneering clinical simulation education to bring improved learning to students.

Researchers across the College also continue their important and groundbreaking work to improve health, overcome health disparities in marginalized populations, and advance public health. With dozens of active researchers and projects totaling nearly \$30 million in total awards, they are leading our College into a new era of improving lives and transforming health care. This year, our College was also honored as a 2021 National League for Nursing (NLN) Center of Excellence for our sustained efforts in advancing the science of nursing education. We joined a select group of colleges who have received this award, and this is now our third distinction from NLN in as many years.

Students also celebrated their first in-person commencement since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in over a year, and it was an inspirational and moving testament to the resilience of the students within our program, who have utilized remote learning to earn a high-quality education that prepared them to enter the workforce.

In this edition of *UTA Health*, our annual magazine, you will find inspiring stories about our efforts across the College to fight COVID-19, the innovation of our undergraduate and graduate programs, the incredible research being conducted, and the success of alumni as they support their communities.

It could not be a more fitting time to recognize the growth and innovation of our College as we prepare to celebrate 50 years of nursing and kinesiology education. Be sure to stay connected with us and look out for future information on this milestone celebratory year we are heading into in fall 2021.

Elizabeth Merwin, Ph.D., RN, FAAN
Dean, College of Nursing and Health Innovation



Researchers at work using the Neuro Rehab VR System.

Professor Researches Cutting-Edge Tech

Emerging technologies like virtual reality, artificial intelligence, and even phone apps are changing the face of health care, and one UTA professor's research is at the forefront of this revolution. Xiangli Gu, assistant professor of kinesiology, is exploring ways technology can help address health issues ranging from childhood obesity to improving rehabilitation for people with brain injuries.

Dr. Gu's most innovative research involves a study supported by Neuro Rehab VR. She and her fellow researchers are testing the Neuro Rehab VR System with older adults to improve quality of life. The VR system uses functional therapy games in a safe, controlled virtual environment to improve the brain's neuroplasticity and rebuild connections. The applications are vast, from helping to prevent falls in older adults to improving cognitive recovery after traumatic brain injuries.

In another collaborative project with the University of North Texas, Gu and fellow team members at UTA are developing a

phone app to help parents educate, motivate, and engage in physical activities with their children in Head Start Centers to fight childhood obesity and address health disparities. Gu's lab, the Movement and Physical Activity Epidemiology Laboratory, is also responsible for developing a mobile app-infused physical activity intervention program to increase physical fitness and reduce the sedentary behavior of older members of minority communities in the Dallas-Fort Worth area.

Addressing these issues is important not only for individual health, but also for the health of whole populations—particularly during a pandemic.

"The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated health disparities across populations and communities. We urgently need to understand the roots and location of these disparities," says Gu. "This technology is the engine driving healthy and active lifestyles. The use of relevant modern technology is a growing area of research that has the potential to address these pressing issues and promote physical activity."



Certified care

According to U.S. Census Bureau projections, by 2030 one in five Americans will be retirement age (65 or older), representing 20% of the adult population.

To address the unique care needs of this rapidly growing demographic, the College of Nursing and Health Innovation launched a graduate-level gerontology health care certificate program in fall 2020.

“We know the demand for nurses with specialized training in geriatric care will increase immensely in the coming years,” says Kathryn Daniel, associate dean of academic affairs in nursing and the director and manager of the program.

The new certificate is for nurses and health care professionals seeking to improve their hands-on experience caring for older adults. Current and prospective students are baccalaureate-prepared professionals who care for older adults in settings such as hospitals, home health, skilled-nursing facilities, or assisted-living centers. The valuable skills gained ensure students are positioned for success in the job market.

“This program prepares the best, most experienced nurses and other health care professionals to provide extraordinary care,” says Dr. Daniel. “It builds their foundation for an exceptional understanding of older adults’ needs.”

Perfecting the Process

DNP students’ commitment brings improved behavior rounds to patients



Originally from the United Kingdom, Sarah Andrews found her stride in Texas working over the last 10 years as an advanced practice registered nurse focusing on program development for stroke and brain injury survivors. Most recently, Andrews completed her Doctor of Nursing Practice through the College’s accelerated online program in May 2021.

“I have a passion for making sure all of the evidence we worked so hard to gather in research makes it to the bedside,” says Dr. Andrews. “The DNP program and my final project have really helped me put that into practice and realize that I am capable of doing challenging things.”

Currently working in an inpatient rehabilitation setting, her final project felt like the perfect fit, as it focused on reducing adverse behaviors in patients with traumatic brain injuries. The majority of the patients in this clinical setting are over the age of 65. This age group often has multiple comorbidities, which in addition to a traumatic brain injury makes

them a medically complex patient population. “I was tasked in my current job to implement structured behavior rounds, but I quickly realized the guidance and research we have available to us is not as robust as I had hoped for,” she says. In response, Andrews developed and implemented structured behavior rounds, which included an interdisciplinary team, a standardized documentation template, and a comprehensive process. “As the process continued and the team became more efficient and effective, I found that we were able to reduce adverse behaviors in our patient population,” she says.

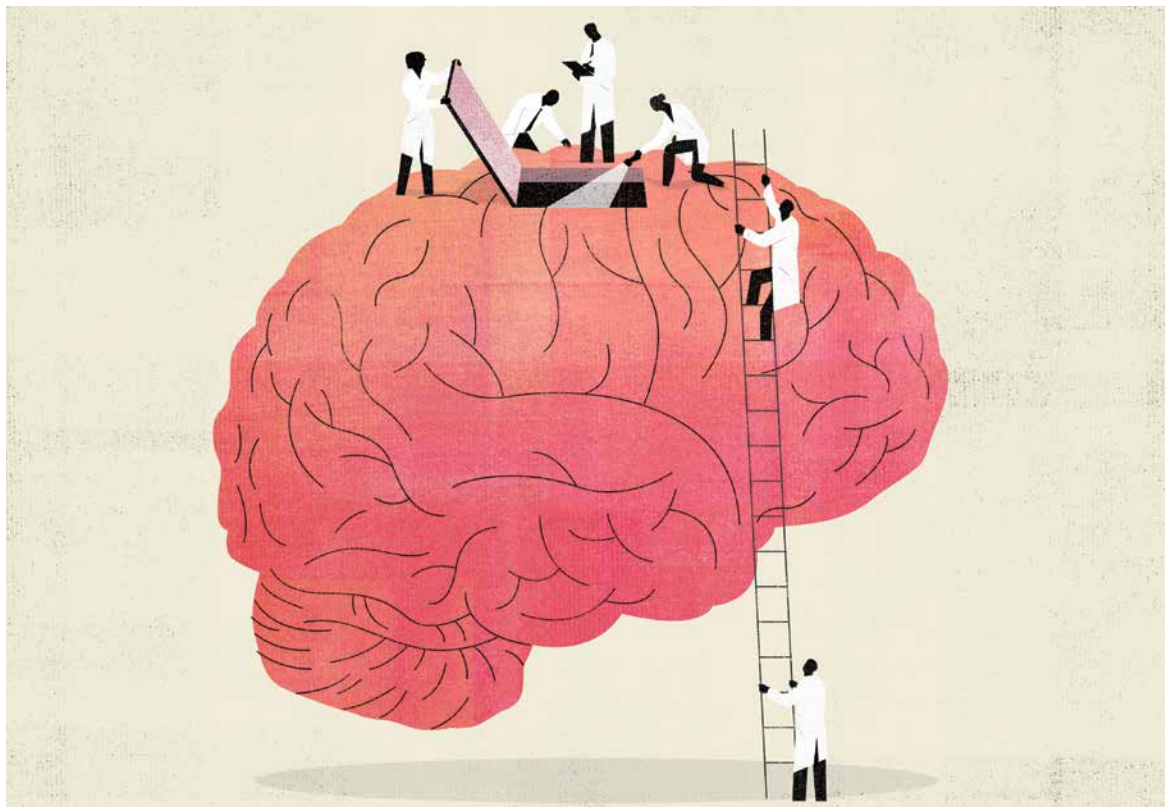
Andrews is most proud that this project implementation could help develop a standardized quality metric to disease-specific brain injury programs in the clinical setting. These metrics are important when articulating standardized quality of care. “Ultimately, the most exciting part is making a difference,” she says. “I know that I am able to offer so much more now than I was when I began my DNP two years ago. What I learned throughout this process is that I know how to implement complex evidenced-based practice in various environments at different levels of health care.”

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KEITH NEGLEY



Little Mavs Movement Academy students Karyssa Nelson and Eileen Lavin produce video content for online participants.

Little Mavs Go Virtual

Program gets kids moving all over the U.S.

The Little Mavs Movement Academy (LMMA) expanded its online presence to reach families across the country and stay connected to local participants during the COVID-19 pandemic. When restrictions on in-person gatherings prevented the program from holding traditional classes, the LMMA found new ways to record lessons and hold classes for children and adolescents with movement or coordination difficulties.

Priscila Tamplain, founder of the LMMA and director of the Developmental Motor Cognition (DMC) Laboratory, says that the asynchronous nature of the online classes works better for families with busy schedules and that asynchronous classes are less chaotic for everyone than holding live classes over Zoom.

“We now have several Little Mavs all over the country that are doing the sessions,” says Dr. Tamplain. “Now that we have this possibility, we want to explore it and see if we can reach more kids. We

want to study the best ways to deliver this content, find out what keeps them engaged, what we can do to help with their motor skills, and find out what’s good for the parents, too.”

The classes provide activities that allow participants to practice gross- and fine-motor skills at their own level and pace. Gross-motor skills require the use of large muscles for body coordination and balance, while fine-motor skills involve the use of smaller muscles for manual dexterity. According to Eileen Lavin, a student in the DMC Laboratory, some activities were easier to adapt to the online format.

“A lot of the gross-motor skills activities were the easiest to move over, because they mostly involve body movements, whereas the fine-motor skills activities had a lot more materials involved,” Lavin says. “That’s one of the things we want to be conscious of: Making sure we were using household items or items that can be purchased at a low cost.”

Driven by curiosity

A drive to answer complicated questions motivates Thy Vo, an international master’s student in kinesiology focusing on exercise science, as she conducts her thesis research in the Bone-Muscle Research Center (BMRC).

Vo graduated from UTA with a bachelor’s in biology and a minor in chemistry. She spent six months working as a tutor before she found her way to the BMRC.

“Research is really important to me,” she says. “Not only for my degree and career, but also for what it allows us to discover.”

Currently, Vo is researching biomaterials and how titanium implant coatings affect cell growth for cranial implant applications. The goal is that eventually, these materials could be placed into cranial or mandibular bone to help accelerate the process of regeneration.

“The thing about life is that you are always trying to figure it out, and that’s how I think about research,” she says. “It’s really fun trying to answer the questions we have in our head about life in general. Why is our body reacting like this? Why this and why that? It’s a curiosity that drives me.”





Bridge to success

For UTA students studying kinesiology who want to head into a career in physical therapy, there is a program providing a bridge to a successful future.

The College's Advancing Physical Therapy (APT) program is a partnership between UTA and the UT Southwestern (UTSW) Doctorate of Physical Therapy (DPT) program that allows kinesiology undergraduates excelling in their coursework to apply to UTSW for an internship to gain valuable experience before going into a DPT program.

The competitive APT program identifies kinesiology students in their junior year and offers them an internship of 30-40 hours at UTSW. This internship allows the students to attend classes, labs, and clinics while interacting with students and faculty in the DPT program. It also provides a path to admission to the UTSW DPT program if all requirements are met.

"This is an excellent program for participating students," says Judy Wilson, associate professor of kinesiology. "It provides the opportunity to get to know the faculty, observe in clinics, and meet other students."

More than 20 UTA students have successfully completed the APT program, and each one has gone on to attend a physical therapy program at UTSW or elsewhere.

"The APT program allowed me to network with leaders and educators in physical therapy," says Daniel Tran ('20 BS, Exercise Science). "Through this opportunity, I was able to strengthen my application and get my foot in the door with UT Southwestern's DPT program."

A Lifetime of Learning

Professor recognized for commitment to nursing

A nurse's career is more than helping their patients heal; it is a constant journey of learning and life lessons. No one understands this better than John D. Gonzalez, chair of the Department of Graduate Nursing and a clinical assistant professor in the College of Nursing and Health Innovation.

In his 20 years of nursing, Dr. Gonzalez's journey has included a wide variety of roles in settings ranging from large hospitals to the classroom. Recently he has been helping COVID patients return to the workplace.

Gonzalez's greatest professional interest is in nurse practitioner scope of practice, and he presents frequently for Texas Nurse Practitioners. He is currently a member of two research studies, one exploring the Texas nurse practitioner job market and another researching health inequalities in the LGBTQ+ community.

In addition to this work, Gonzalez teaches adult gerontology acute care management courses and advanced pathophysiology at UTA. He also works at his active practice with a hospitalist group at Parkland

Health and Hospital, focusing on the care of hospitalized patients and outpatient internal medicine.

Throughout his career, the one constant has been his passion for growing his knowledge and experiences.

"The thing I most love about nursing is the life lessons," Gonzalez says. "I've learned that it's important to remain objective, to continuously improve yourself, to be flexible, to be proactive, and that collaboration is a very effective tool."

In recognition of his contributions to the field of nursing, Gonzalez was honored this year as one of the best 100 nurses in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. The "Great 100 Nurses" program recognizes nurses in the Metroplex for their excellence in nursing.

"Dr. Gonzalez has been an incredible asset to our College over the years. This honor just affirms what we see every day," says Elizabeth Merwin, dean of CONHI. "He is an excellent leader, teacher, and health care provider. His passion for all three shines through in everything he does."

Remaining Independent

How one researcher uses technology to help older adults stay safe

Kathryn Daniel, associate dean for academic affairs in nursing, has spent much of her career focusing on how technology can streamline and simplify the lives of older adults so they can remain independent for as long as possible.

More recently, she has been exploring this question through the creation of and subsequent research studies in the Smart Apartment, a fully furnished, technology-enhanced two-bedroom apartment inside a retirement community in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex. The apartment allows researchers to leverage technology and innovation to improve the safety of older adults living independently in the community.

The apartment is decked out with floor sensors, motion detectors, and other devices that measure and obtain environmental-level data. Although cameras might be utilized for specific short-term projects, in general, there are no cameras in the apartment as privacy for volunteers living in the apartment is crucial.

"The idea is to have someone live there so we can learn their patterns and then see under what condi-

tions they might alter those patterns during the rest of their time living in the apartment," says Dr. Daniel. "Ideally, what we learn could be built into future retirement homes and communities to better safeguard older adults."

Her research is highly focused on technology, as she is also partnering with UTA's Computer Science and Engineering, Theatre Arts, and Psychology departments to use a humanoid robot to explore if it could help older adults with prospective memory.

"COVID-19 really impacted a lot of the research we had going. We had to envision how to collect data using the robot, and we ended up putting it on a TV screen in the Smart Apartment," says Daniel. "It's basically what it was going to do in person, but now through video. I am pleased with how we safely found alternatives to carry on this important research."

While creating new technology is not always a focus of her research, Daniel's work is all about exploring how technology can help older adults live healthier, happier, and safer lives.



A behind-the-scenes look at the Smart Apartment's technology.



First rural partnership off to strong start

A new partnership with Coryell Health in Gatesville, Texas, has opened the health care organization's doors to rural students in UTA's Accelerated Online Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) program. Students in fall 2020 and spring 2021 have attended clinical placements there.

"This partnership with a rural hospital allows students to complete their education where they are, when otherwise they may have needed to move to Arlington, leaving their family and other obligations behind," says Pamela White, Accelerated Online BSN program manager.

The 15-month program gives students as many clinical opportunities at the same facility as possible. Rural partnerships like the one at Coryell are beneficial for all parties: The hospital builds a pipeline to recruit talented individuals; the College finds clinical placements for distant students; and preceptors gain experience educating the newest cohort of incoming nurses.

"My clinical placement at Coryell Health has been an extremely rewarding experience," says Kayla Chumley, nursing student. "Living in this rural community and working at this facility has provided a unique experience that has allowed me to broaden my learning outcomes."



Real-World Guidance

Mentorship program boosts student success

Gaining hands-on experience under the watchful eye of a mentor is vital to the success of nursing students about to graduate and enter their first nursing position.

In a first-of-its-kind partnership with Medical City Fort Worth, 16 nursing students at UTA recently completed a successful rotation working under the guidance of experienced nurses in a new program, Medical City Fort Worth's Dedicated Education Unit (DEU).

Medical City Fort Worth is a 348-bed, acute-care hospital with a medical team of more than 1,000 physicians, offering a wide variety of comprehensive diagnostic and treatment services.

The DEU allows students to work directly with an assigned lead nurse mentor while being able to get feedback and ask questions in real time during each patient encounter. Throughout each semester, a trusting relationship is formed between preceptors and students, which encourages the students to freely ask questions and gain confidence in their skills.

"The DEU learning model has exceeded our expectations," says Gabriela Whitener, clinical assistant professor. "It allows hospital preceptors to take responsibility for and ownership of the experience and learning environment for the nursing students, which in turn makes the program more successful. Medical City Fort Worth has been a terrific partner."

The program has also been a hit with students both for the experience and the relationships formed with their preceptors.

"I have benefited greatly during my time at Medical City Fort Worth," says Natalie Esquivel. "The relationship I have developed with my lead preceptor has allowed me to develop my skills faster. I am now more confident in my abilities, which will allow me to hit the ground running when I get my first nursing job."

Encouraged by the DEU model's success, Medical City Healthcare has extended the program at Medical City Dallas and Medical City Plano.

Student excellence recognized

A strong desire to improve community health is what led Alexa Washington to choose a career in public health. It's also why the Master of Public Health student was awarded the competitive Texas Health Resources Gunnin Fellowship this past year.

The Gunnin Fellowship, established in 2017, annually presents one student pursuing a master's or doctorate for a career in community and public health with a \$10,000 tuition award. The fellowship also provides a 400-hour internship with Texas Health Resources.

"We are incredibly proud of Alexa's accomplishment," says Erin Carlson, director of graduate public health programs. "She has such a bright future ahead of her."

Washington says mentorship from Dr. Carlson and Brandie Green, assistant clinical professor, was key to her success.

"They helped me and believed in me, and I don't know what I'd do without them."

With plans to graduate in May 2022, Washington is open to any career opportunity but ultimately wants to work in community health.

"I'm interested in community health, specifically urban health," she says. "I want to reduce health disparities among vulnerable populations."



BRIAN STAUFFER

Student-to-Student Support

New program links students to maximize academic outcomes

Beginning college can bring unique challenges, particularly for nursing students. Not only do pre-nursing students have to adjust to college life, they also take more difficult classes, learn how to apply their knowledge in clinicals, and spend many long nights poring over books that are as thick as bricks.

To help pre-nursing students prepare for the road ahead, the College of Nursing and Health Innovation's Office of Enrollment and Student Services (OESS) has instituted its first Peer Advisor program. The program connects high-achieving upper-division nursing students with pre-nursing students before they enter the program. Peer advisors consult with their assigned students on degree requirements, BSN policies, and best practices for success while in nursing school.

"I had this vision of the program in my mind for quite some time. It was only with the approval of Dean Merwin and the hard work of my team that the

vision came to fruition," says Candice Calhoun-Butts, assistant dean in the OESS. "Our peer advisors improve the connection between advising and students and provide relatable peer perspectives. The work of the BSN academic advisors and peer advisors is propelling CONHI into the future of advising."

Kiana Atwell and Gabriela Padilla are the program's first two hires. The OESS plans to have four more student advisors added to their team for the fall semester.

Atwell hopes to use her role as a peer advisor to alleviate the anxiety of newer nursing students by creating a connection and a more open environment for support to address any concerns or needs.

Says Padilla: "I hope to be able to help students through their journey to nursing school by sharing my personal experiences, and I am excited to meet pre-nursing students and watch them grow into upper-division students."



Kiana Atwell (left), Gabriela Padilla, and Jeffrey Taylor, associate director for advising in the Office of Enrollment and Student Services.



Searching for cancer cures

Calcium isn't only necessary for healthy teeth and bones; it plays a crucial role in the body, affecting everything from heart disease to cancer formation.

Zui Pan, professor in the College's graduate nursing program, is studying intracellular calcium signaling and its pathophysiological implications in human diseases. Ion Ca²⁺, a mighty signaler, regulates a wide range of cellular processes in the body. Dysregulation in Ca²⁺ signaling has been linked to heart disease, cancer, and more.

"Calcium ion serves as a signaling molecule and controls cellular events including how our heart beats and muscles contract. It also controls cell growth or death," she says. "In a lot of diseases, those signals go wrong, and we are trying to find out why that happens and how to correct it so that we can find either a prevention or a treatment."

Dr. Pan's research includes a wide array of collaborative projects, including a grant with the National Cancer Institute to study how Ca²⁺ signaling affects esophageal cancer, a project with a pharmaceutical company to develop novel chemotherapy drugs, and several more studies with researchers at UTA and other major colleges.



A strong foundation

As Joline Byrd Lowe learned and grew as a nurse, she felt called to help other nurses learn and grow as well. To do that, she knew she needed to build on her foundational knowledge.

“I’ve been to lot of schools and I’ve had many instructors along the way—and so many were amazing,” she says. “You want to give everything you can so that students benefit from their learning experience with you.”

That was the driving force that led Lowe to the College of Nursing and Health Innovation’s Accelerated Online Master of Nursing in education program. The program prepares nurses with the knowledge and skills needed to promote student engagement, student retention, and active learning.

“UTA has a really good reputation in my circles, and that is one of the reasons it was my first choice when I was looking at getting my MSN,” she says. “The online program just really worked for me. It was more intense than my bachelor’s, but I felt like I got a lot of one-on-one attention and feedback.”

Lowe graduated in May 2021 and plans to continue in her newer role as a clinical and lab instructor. After learning so much on her journey to a master’s degree, she’s considering taking her education to the next level with a Doctor of Nursing Practice degree down the road.

Helping the Student Body

Kinesiology athletic trainers rotate in UTA Health Services clinic

Athletic trainers treat more than sports injuries. In fact, before the pandemic, faculty and students alike were helping students in UTA Health Services with orthopedic issues and providing specialized care that had not previously been available onsite.

“Our athletic trainers are highly qualified, and we wanted to be able to provide athletic training services to the general student populations,” says Laura Kunkel, director of the Master of Science in Athletic Training (MSAT) program.

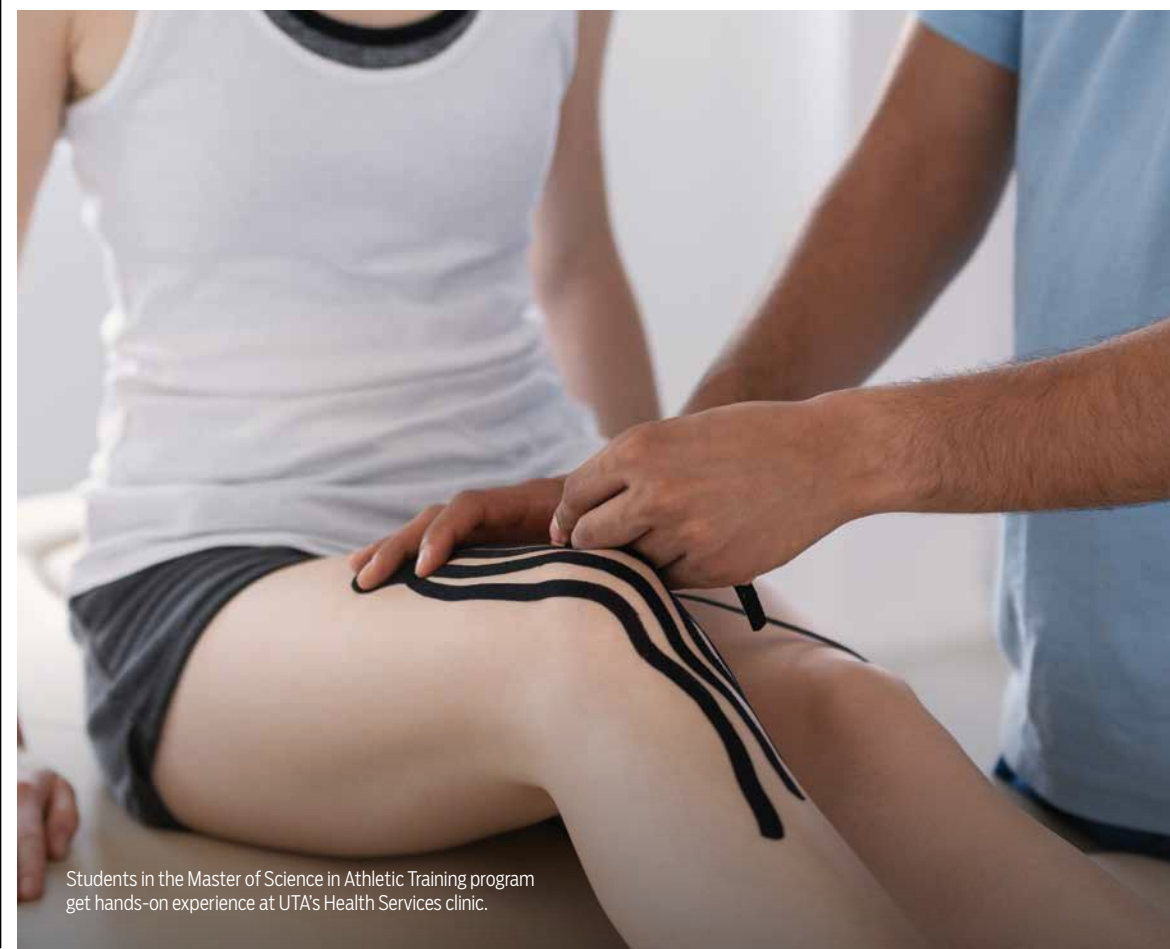
Athletic trainers are qualified health care professionals who can provide primary care, injury prevention, examinations, clinical diagnoses, rehabilitation of injuries, and more. Through the agreement with Health Services, kinesiology athletic training faculty spent clinical time treating patients, and MSAT students gained clinical experience.

“There’s an emphasis in our field for students getting experience with recreational and non-athletic patient populations,” says Dr. Kunkel. “This agree-

ment is just one of the many ways we hope to offer that clinical experience.”

The agreement and services started in fall 2019, but the program was put on hold during the pandemic. As conditions with the pandemic improve, the department’s faculty athletic trainers will start seeing patients again and serving as preceptors to additional students in the program.

“The partnership between the athletic training faculty and Health Services has been really successful. Although our family medicine provider staff is trained to diagnose and treat sports medicine problems, we frequently don’t have time in a 20-minute appointment to help our patients understand how to rehab an injury and work on prevention of future injuries,” says Angela Middleton, director of Health Services. “Our student patients have definitely benefited from having our athletic training faculty available for appointments. The patients appreciate the time and expert care they receive.”



Students in the Master of Science in Athletic Training program get hands-on experience at UTA’s Health Services clinic.



Sarah Nelson at work in the Dr. Marco Brotto Laboratory.

Research Focus Starts Early

Honors College promotes undergraduate research opportunities

UTA’s Honors College introduced a new point-based system last fall that promotes internships and other experiential learning opportunities for student scholars. The academically rigorous curriculum still culminates in the completion of a Capstone senior project. For Honors students in the College of Nursing and Health Innovation, this often means working closely with faculty mentors and researchers to develop their own research theses.

Sarah Nelson, an undergraduate nursing student in the Honors College program, is currently working as a research assistant in the Dr. Marco Brotto Laboratory. She says this opportunity has allowed her to explore her research interests and create a roadmap for developing her senior project.

“I really liked looking at how diabetes affects myogenesis, so I started crafting all of my Honors

coursework around this focus in order to help me in my senior project,” says Nelson. “That’s something that the Honors College encourages. It’s structured, but you have a lot of freedom in terms of what you’re interested in and what you want to look into.”

According to Associate Clinical Professor Maxine Adegbola, coordinator for the Honors College program for nursing, it is important to recruit and invest in research-focused students early on so that they can be prepared for longer and more impactful careers.

“When you’re behind, sometimes students tend to grab the low-hanging fruit. And that’s not going to get you far, especially in research,” says Dr. Adegbola. “You have to start young with a good foundation, have good foundational research principles. Then you can go on and impact the scientific world.”

Addressing inequalities

Many marginalized populations face disparities in both health care and access to health systems.

Brandie Green, clinical assistant professor in the Public Health program in the Department of Kinesiology, hopes to change this fact.

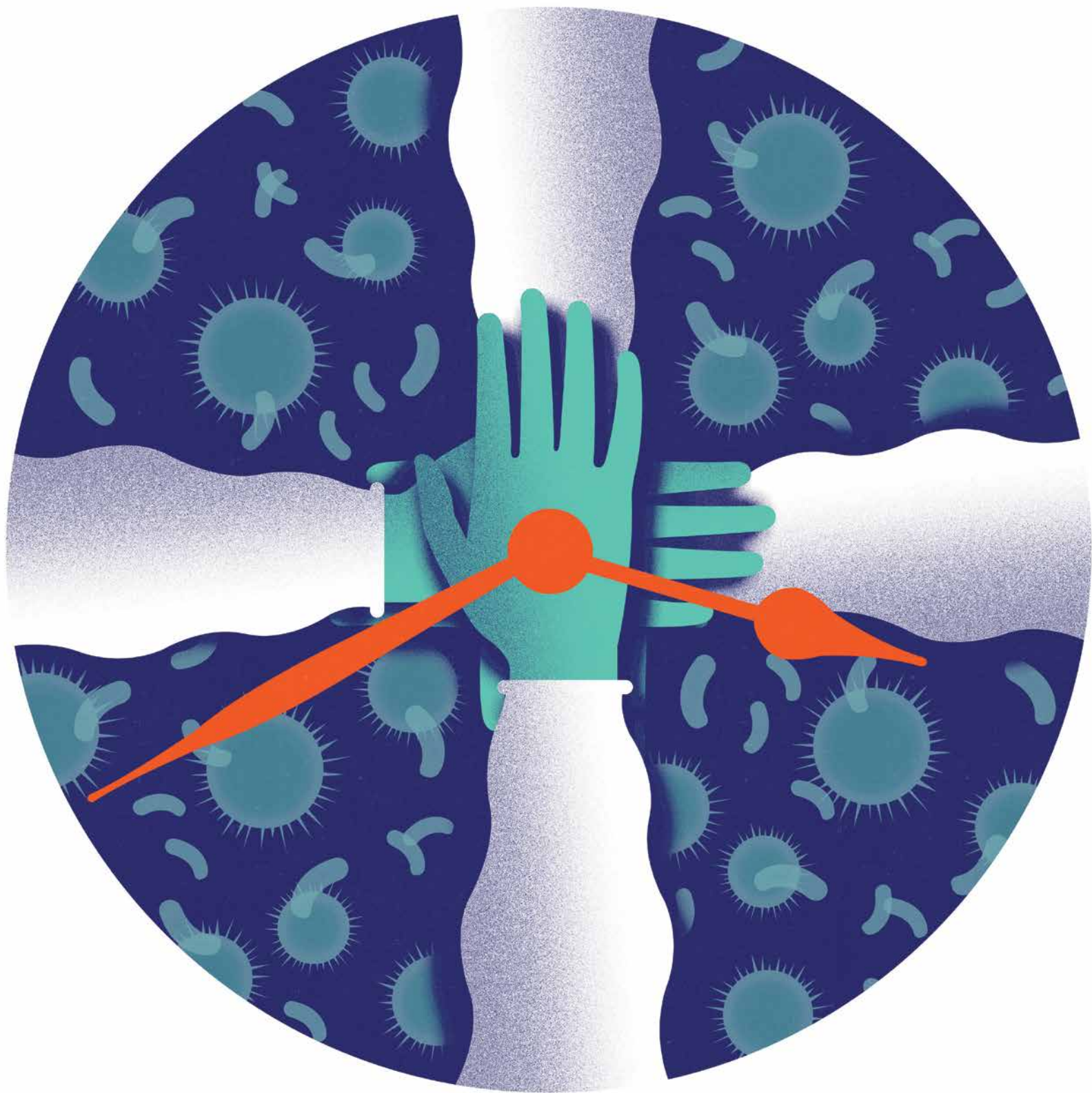
Dr. Green was chosen from among thousands of candidates to be a 2021 fellow through the Urban Leaders Fellowship program. She spent the summer working virtually with policymakers and a nonprofit organization in Tulsa, Oklahoma, to advance health policy for marginalized populations.

“My classes and research focus on marginalized populations, urbanization, and closing the gaps on health disparities,” she says. “This is real-life application of that work.”

The Urban Leaders Fellowship has named more than 600 fellows, who have made real and lasting change through supporting organizations committed to social justice and positive impact.

“Much of my work is about how we break down health disparities and gaps, and what policies we can implement to address them,” she says. “I want to be an advocate for groups who do not have a voice, and this fellowship was one more way to do that.”





NEIL WEBB

Care IN ACTION

Students, faculty, and staff in the College of Nursing and Health Innovation worked hands-on with the community to keep citizens safe, healthy, and informed throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

BY ELLEN ROSSETTI

The day passed quickly at the vaccine clinic in rural Honey Grove, Texas, but Rrijen Arevalo ('21 BSN) remembers the sense of gratitude from each person she vaccinated.

As people steadily entered the clinic, Arevalo and her fellow nursing students swiftly settled into comfortable patterns, swabbing arms with alcohol and administering vaccines. Under supervision of a clinical instructor, each student gave about 200 shots a day to people who had been waiting for months to be vaccinated for the coronavirus that upended the world in 2020.

“They were just always thankful,” says Arevalo, who administered first and second doses in January and February before earning her degree in May. “They were saying how they’re ready to go back to normal.”

Arevalo is one of many in the College of Nursing and Health Innovation (CONHI) who played a role in supporting the fight against COVID-19. Across the College, faculty, staff, and students have educated the community on coronavirus safety and prevention, assisted with contact tracing efforts, collected samples for COVID-19 testing by UTA’s North Texas Genome Center, and administered vaccines at clinics.

EDUCATING THE COMMUNITY

One of the nation’s largest producers of baccalaureate-prepared registered nurses and the home of a public health program that offers the state’s only Master of Public Health (MPH) concentration in urban health, the College is well-positioned to offer much-needed hands-on assistance. Students get the valuable training and experience they need; in turn, they ease stress on overwhelmed community organizations.

“Is there anyone better to help in that capacity than a student who is still so excited and still has their knowledge fresh in their mind and is so ready and enthusiastic about applying it?” says Erin Carlson, clinical associate professor and director of the graduate program of public health. “They were a very important part of the response—on campus, in the city, and in the county.”



Erin Carlson



Tien Ngo

Dr. Carlson, whose area of research includes infectious disease, became a highly sought expert in the pandemic, giving dozens of interviews to news organizations. She covered such topics as safely celebrating holidays, addressing vaccine hesitancy, and revealing the disproportionately high number of cases and deaths among working-age Hispanic and African American communities compared with non-Hispanic whites.

Students also joined the effort to educate others. Tien Ngo, who earned a Bachelor of Science in public health in May, translated information about COVID-19 vaccine myths and facts into Vietnamese for a virtual presentation and created a social media campaign for UTA public health sites. Ngo feels encouraged that friends have asked for the information in Vietnamese to share with others.

“I was so happy about that,” says Ngo, who plans to have a career as a community health worker. “You get the vaccine and protect the people around you. The more people who get the COVID-19 vaccine, the more we will come back to a normal life.”

“I saw very passionate, excited students actually get to experience the career they were preparing for in the middle of their education.”

MICHAEL AUSTIN

In a Population and Community Health Nursing course, students researched how COVID-19 impacted vulnerable populations and created educational presentations for those audiences, says Melissa Lagrone, clinical assistant professor and lead faculty in the course. One student spoke with elementary students through video chat, teaching them tricks—enticingly called “superpowers”—to keep germs to themselves. Others created presentations on masking, social distancing, and dispelling vaccine misinformation.

TRACING THE VIRUS

In the Public Health program, about two dozen students helped curb cases by working in contact tracing, either as volunteers or in paid positions. Contact tracers reached out to people who tested positive or had been in contact with someone who tested positive. They educated them on preventing transmission, discussed isolation procedures, and connected them to resources. They also interviewed people to determine who needed to be notified of exposure.

Kayla Demiar, who earned a Bachelor of Public Health with a concentration in epidemiology in May 2020, says she heard concern in people’s voices when she called contacts of COVID-19 cases as a volunteer for Tarrant County Public Health in the summer of 2020.

“The information you’re giving them could help slow down the spread of the disease and also could potentially help them in their recovery,” she says.

Demiar eventually transitioned into a paid role in data entry for Tarrant County’s COVID-19 efforts. She now works as an infection preventionist focused on preventing the spread of coronavirus and other infectious diseases at a Dallas rehabilitation hospital. Several other students also landed paid positions after volunteering as contact tracers.

In pre-pandemic times, most students would not



have the chance to work in contact tracing before graduation, Carlson says. But with the widespread, fast-moving coronavirus, more people were needed for contact tracing at UTA and local cities and counties.

In fact, Carlson and UTA Health Services staff developed UTA’s contact tracing protocols for COVID-19, and 13 public health students worked as UTA contact tracers each semester.

The experience accelerated the students’ learning in ways that had been unseen before the pandemic, Carlson says.

“I saw very passionate, excited students actually get to experience the career they were preparing for in the middle of their education. They didn’t have to wait to do these things until they got out and had an entry-level job for a few years. They were thrown into the kind of work that people usually get after they’ve been in the workforce for five-plus years. And they were excited to do it.”

Denise Hernandez, adjunct assistant professor in public health, helped implement training for contact tracers and other community health workers through her role as founder and executive director of the DFW-CHW (Dallas-Fort Worth-Community Health Workers) Association. Two UTA students are interning with the association as part of the Community Engagement Research Alliance, funded by the National Institutes of Health to provide information and outreach to those hit hardest by the pandemic.



Rrijen Arevalo prepares to give a COVID-19 vaccine at the Honey Grove clinic.

FACILITATING VACCINATIONS

Now, more than a year after the pandemic began, attention has turned to vaccines. As vaccine shipments rolled into the state this winter, vaccine clinics sprang up across communities. They needed thousands of helping hands. CONHI students stepped up, offering help everywhere from large sites serving more than 10,000 people a day to small clinics vaccinating a few hundred a day.

“They understood that it takes a lot of people to coordinate an effort like that,” Dr. Lagrone says. “Whether they were helping direct people where to go, sitting with people recovering and being watched after their vaccine, or actually giving the vaccine, they understood it was a very important role they were playing.”

As of April 2021, more than 540 CONHI students spent more than 4,300 hours at 20 vaccination sites, including UT Southwestern, Medical City Healthcare, Methodist Health System, Parkland, Baylor, Advent Health, Houston Methodist, and Denton County’s Texas Motor Speedway. Some gained clinical experience to further their degrees. Others had completed their clinical experience but volunteered to help.

At the Honey Grove clinic where Arevalo vaccinated people, clinic organizers explained to students how they set up the clinic from start to finish.

“Those students really got immersed in the whole vaccination process,” Lagrone says. “The pharmacist talked to students about how to mix and store the vaccine and how to deliver and administer it. They were so generous with their time.”

As clients were being vaccinated, some told the nursing students they hadn’t left their homes in months. Some—with tears in their eyes—said they had missed visiting with grandchildren or had seen their grown children only through windows while trying to stay safe, says Melynda Hutchings, clinical assistant professor of nursing who supervised students in Honey Grove. These encounters inspire future nurses, she says.

“I truly believe if we can give students these types of experiences, it will impact them for a lifetime. They’ll start leaning in and want to be a part of their own community and give back.”

Looking forward, Carlson hopes resources for public health and preparedness will be prioritized before the next emergency.

In the meantime, she knows the next generation of professionals has the technical knowledge and emotional understanding to meet challenges. Some students faced a loss of household income because of the effects of the pandemic, and some knew people who were hospitalized or died, she says.

“They understand the personal impact and toll that an uncontrolled public health event places on individual families and communities,” Carlson says. “So they are passionate about stopping this from ever happening to anyone else.”

ON-CAMPUS TESTING AND RESEARCH

The North Texas Genome Center quickly transitioned to on-site processing of COVID-19 tests after the pandemic began, running 500 tests a week for UTA. The lab is also recruiting participants and collecting samples to study genetic immunity of people with COVID-19 to find out why some may be more seriously affected by the disease than others. Recently, the clinical laboratory at the center gained accreditation from the College of American Pathologists, a notable achievement recognizing the laboratory’s excellence in testing and research.



“Whether they were helping direct people where to go, sitting with people recovering and being watched after their vaccine, or actually giving the vaccine, they understood it was a very important role they were playing.”



Tried, True, and **STRONGER THAN EVER**

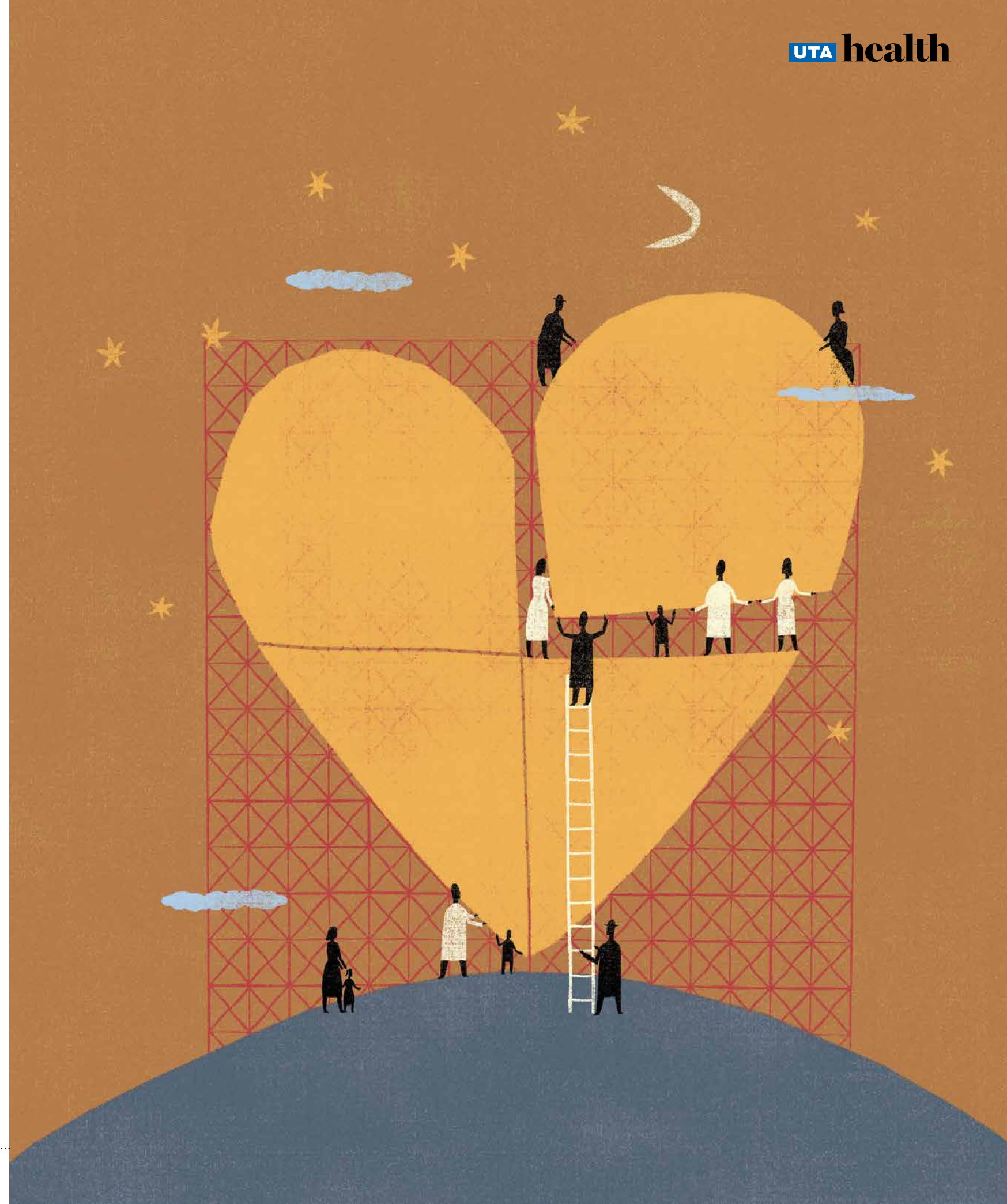
The College of Nursing and Health Innovation's graduate nursing programs demonstrate their foundational excellence and resilience during the pandemic. **BY KEITH O'BRIEN**

While few could anticipate the COVID-19 pandemic that changed the world seemingly overnight, The University of Texas at Arlington's College of Nursing and Health Innovation (CONHI) was ready to rise to the challenge. The College's graduate program was especially poised to thrive—it has long offered a mix of online and in-person education to provide greater flexibility for its students. Not only that, but the College is widely recognized as a national leader in

online graduate degree programs.

When the pandemic hit, the faculty could lean on its digital expertise to move the remaining in-person activities online.

"The faculty had to find new ways to teach very quickly," says Kimberly A. Siniscalchi, professor of practice for the CONHI Dean's Office. "Now that we're more than a year into it, it's refreshing to look back and realize the lessons learned and the great work the faculty did to transition things online."



A Strong Foundation

In 2017, the College convened a Graduate Nursing Task Force to identify better ways to increase on-campus enrollment. The task force sent to nursing students a comprehensive survey and received 1,502 responses, which provided a blueprint for how the College could attract and serve the best candidates possible.

Students predominantly wanted coursework to be 100% online, and many wanted an accelerated program. Most students were full-time working nurses and needed a curriculum that fit their schedules and obligations. A majority also wanted online access to professors.

“They didn’t want to travel for hours and stay overnight in a hotel, missing out on work when they could learn just as well online,” says Donna L. Hamby, director of the Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) program.

When COVID shutdowns began, the College already had highly accessible and flexible instructional programs in place.

“Now that we’re more than a year into it, it’s refreshing to look back and realize the lessons learned and the great work the faculty did to transition things online.”

Professors were ready to respond and adapt quickly, and students were already well-acquainted with navigating classes in an online space.

Among the standouts are the **Psychiatric/Mental Health Nurse Practitioner program, the Adult Gerontology Acute and Primary Care Nurse Practitioner program, and the Doctor of Nursing Practice program.**

1 PSYCHIATRIC/MENTAL HEALTH NURSE PRACTITIONER PROGRAM

The COVID pandemic has forced many to cope with depression and other mental health challenges while confronting isolation and loneliness. It has inspired many nurses who have witnessed the toll COVID has had on mental health to attend graduate school for this important discipline.

Even before the pandemic, Aimee Dunnam, director of the Psychiatric/Mental Health Nurse Practitioner program, had seen a pronounced increase in interest in mental health nursing.

“Undergraduate nursing programs don’t, as a general rule, provide a lot of instructions on psychiatry,” says Dr. Dunnam. “When our students come into the program, they are truly being immersed in psychiatry.”

“We wanted to make sure the students continued to get a top-notch education during this pandemic. And we allowed students to continue their clinical opportunities if they felt safe about it. They and we had to be prepared to accept an unknown level of risk.”

Given the demanding nature of the curriculum and the sensitivity of the topics covered, it is crucial to ensure that students have sufficient face time with each other and the professors to ask pertinent questions.

“We had to make sure we provided as much face-to-face time as possible. Even in an asynchronous course, students found time to meet face-to-face,” Dunnam says. “We ensure that graduate students are well-prepared to go out into the world and immediately take on the role of psychiatric mental health practitioners.”

An unintended benefit of the move online is teaching students how to better use a technology that will help them serve patients.

“There are going to be circumstances where this telemedicine/telepsychiatry will continue to be an invaluable tool,” Dunnam says.

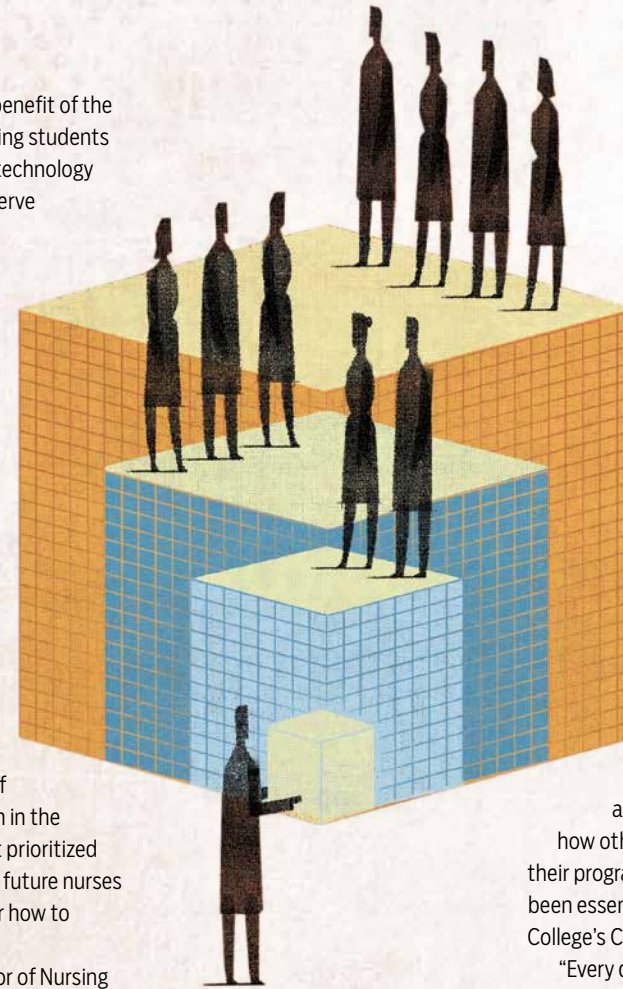
2 DOCTOR OF NURSING PRACTICE PROGRAM

In 2001, the seminal publication *Crossing the Quality Chasm* set off a scientific revolution in the nursing practice that prioritized research and trained future nurses to understand better how to interpret it.

UTA’s own Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) program is heavily structured around research and has adapted over the years to respond to changes in an ever-evolving field. One of those changes was to develop a unique asynchronous program as a way to provide greater flexibility to students. The program is also offering for the first time this fall a study abroad course and already has 40 registered students.

“It’s a continuous quality improvement of itself because health policy changes every day,” Dr. Hamby says. “We want to improve patient health outcomes. A nation with a large volume of people with illness negatively affects us all.”

The very first course students take in this program is Clinical Scholarship to Improve Health



JIM FRAZIER

Outcomes, which focuses on literature search techniques, academic writing skills, and more.

“Some of these people come from a master’s program where there is so much information to absorb, and writing is limited,” says Hamby. “Communication skills are important for leading and influencing policy change, so we work on writing and presentation skills.”

Hamby is always keeping abreast of how other schools are handling their programs. That practice has been essential throughout the College’s COVID response.

“Every quarter, I meet online with every DNP program director in Texas,” she says. “It’s nice to know that we have already addressed a lot of concerns other programs are having.”

3 ADULT GERONTOLOGY ACUTE NURSE PRACTITIONER PROGRAM

The Adult Gerontology Acute Nurse Practitioner program has long demonstrated thoughtfulness in how it combines the practical and the theoretical.

“We take a very realistic approach to our lectures and engage with the students and allow the students to engage with us,” says Monee’ Essence Carter-Griffin, director of the program. “It’s a great opportunity for students because everyone in the faculty

still practices in the clinical setting, and we lecture on things we deal with regularly in clinical settings.”

Dr. Carter-Griffin says the use of scrambled classrooms, which feature mini-lectures interwoven into case studies, helps drive home the currency of the lesson.

“The cases I use are from real patients I’ve had to interact with and care for,” she says. “Students are learning how I cared for that patient and how it relates to the guidelines.”

During COVID, that same focus on practical learning continued. On-campus students were able to resume classes via Teams. They were also able to resume on-campus simulation labs.

“Throughout the pandemic, we made specific adaptations without compromising the integrity of the program,” Carter-Griffin says.

Prioritizing a strong bond with its alumni has shown to be a tremendous asset, especially during the pandemic.

“My students and I keep in touch and share what we’ve learned,” she says. “When COVID first hit, our graduates came up with crafty ways to roll with the new situation. One graduate told us they developed travel kits for when they had to run to a code blue specific to the needs of someone suffering from COVID-19.”

Others taught themselves quick and effective ways to safely turn patients from their back to their stomach, while keeping themselves and the patients safe. They also shared with their peers what they learned in group chats by making videos of their innovations.

The pandemic has reinforced Carter-Griffin’s long-term message about the ever-changing dynamic of medicine.

Looking Ahead

UTA broke ground in February 2021 on a new building that will house the College’s Smart Hospital and the School of Social Work. While the College has long provided simulation hospitals and labs, this update will increase the capacity of these facilities while adding a new simulation area designed to replicate a person’s home.

“The goal is to prepare nursing and nurse practitioner students for the challenges with taking care of the elderly or patients with disabilities or chronic disorders in the home environment,” says Dr. Siniscalchi. “Our focus is to use new technology to pursue innovative ways to connect students, faculty, and patients in a virtual environment.”

UTA continues to create innovative programs, the latest being a one-year fellowship program in partnership with the UT Southwestern Department of Psychiatry.

“We want our graduates to get jobs, so we continue to tailor our programs to match market needs,” says Siniscalchi.



Rendering of CONHI’s new simulation lab under construction at UTA.

In its students, the College looks for those who understand the commitment it takes to succeed in a graduate program.

“It’s an intense program that demands 15-30 hours a week of work; they need to feel they’re in a good place in their lives to dedicate the necessary time to this,” Hamby says. “For those who can do it, it’s an incredible payoff when they finish, with professional rewards and increased contributions to health care.”



Nursing Faculty Give Back

Becky Baird and Ceil Flores are honoring their loved ones by giving back to UTA students

The Tonry/Orr Veterans Endowed Scholarship in Nursing, created by Becky Baird, a clinical assistant professor, supports military veterans pursuing a pre-licensure Bachelor of Science degree in nursing and recently became fully endowed. She created the scholarship to honor Lianne Tonry, a colleague, and James Orr, her uncle, both of whom were military veterans.

Baird, a member of the UTA Veterans Connection Committee, was working at the Dallas VA Medical Center when Tonry joined the College as a medical/surgical clinical instructor in 2013. Since Tonry had clinical students in the Dallas VA, Baird was tasked with orienting her to the unit.

“I just bonded with her very, very quickly,” says Baird. “I think of her as a nurse’s nurse.”

Baird’s uncle was a veteran of the Korean War. He died in 2015, making her the beneficiary of his VA life insurance policy. When Tonry died four months later, Baird wanted to honor their lives and their service. After learning about the financial needs of many veteran students, she “put two and two together.”

“Military veterans get education benefits from the GI Bill, but there are a lot of costs that aren’t covered,” says Baird.

“In many cases, they may need supplementary scholarship money.”

Ceil Flores, director of student support for Undergraduate Nursing, created the Courage in Adversity: Billy Flores Scholarship to honor her brother-in-law, whose actions helped to save several of the lives of his fellow crewmates when the United States Coast Guard Cutter Blackthorn collided with a tanker in 1980. Billy Flores was one of 23 coast guardsmen who made the ultimate sacrifice that day. In May 2021, Flores was posthumously awarded the Texas Legislative Medal of Honor for his heroic actions.

The scholarship benefits nursing students who are members of the Hispanic Nursing Student Association and who have overcome adversity in their life or have made enduring personal sacrifice to attend nursing school. The scholarship was fully funded in 2018 and has recently been amended to include students with a lower GPA who experience financial need.

“That’s how he will live on, through us,” says Dr. Flores. “We wanted to give back, to recognize Billy, and also to support people and help them as they overcome adversity to be successful and become a nurse.”

THE COLLEGE OF NURSING AND HEALTH INNOVATION celebrated commencement in person in May 2021 for the first time since 2019. Hundreds of students showed up to Globe Life Field in Arlington to walk across the stage and receive their diplomas in front of friends and family. It was an exciting day for all who attended.

Here is just a snapshot of what our graduates have ahead of them.

Estefania Cobb graduated with her BSN in 2021 and began working at a local hospital in Victoria, Texas. She is also pursuing her IBCLC certification.

Meredith Decker, a clinical assistant professor in CONHI since 2014, received her PhD in kinesiology in 2020 and continues to teach in the Master of Science in Athletic Training program.

Yesenia Garcia graduated with her BSN in 2021 and accepted a job in the Neuro ICU at Baylor University Medical Center in Dallas.

Adriana Guerra graduated with her BSN and psychology minor in May 2021 and started her nurse residency at Children’s Health Medical Center in Dallas this summer.

Marco Lopez graduated in December 2020 with his Bachelor of Science in exercise science and recently started UT Southwestern’s Doctor of Physical Therapy program, which he will complete in December of 2023.

Kaylee Maldonado graduated with her BSN in 2021 and went on to the Graduate Nurse Residency program at Baylor University Medical Center in Dallas.

Jennifer Schoenfield passed her nurse practitioner board exams in December 2020, before graduation, and obtained a job as one of two providers at a private practice in Rockwall, Texas, the day her license was official.

WHAT’S NEW?

We love to hear about the achievements of our amazing alumni. Send all your latest and greatest career news to classnotes@uta.edu.



class notes



Smart Hospital Upgrade

As early as next year, nursing students at The University of Texas at Arlington will be upgrading their skills with high-tech training in a new, cutting-edge facility. The facility will update UTA's teaching technology and replace the current Smart Hospital to help meet the needs of the College of Nursing and Health Innovation's growth.

UTA leaders broke ground in February 2021 on the \$76 million building that will house CONHI's Smart Hospital as well as the School of Social Work. Expected to be completed by November 2022, the 150,000-square-foot development will host technology-enriched learning spaces; teaching and research labs; a simulation learning center; student engagement, study, and support spaces; and faculty and staff offices.

The new Smart Hospital will be a model facility for equipment and best practices in clinical skills, teamwork, and simulation-based instruction.

The addition of this training facility continues the

College's longstanding history of incorporating technology to enhance teaching alongside traditional clinical rotations. With the ability to set up controlled scenarios in a safe environment, nursing students will be able to experience a wider variety of clinical situations than ever before.

Using state-of-the-art hospital equipment and the latest technology currently used in hospitals, students will be able to gain real, hands-on experience and apply what they've learned. They'll provide care to AI human patient simulators, practice nursing skills, and make clinical judgments to develop the insight and abilities needed to provide safe, high-quality nursing care to their patients in actual health care facilities.

"This new building will greatly benefit our nursing students and other clinical students by providing them access to greater clinical simulation experiences as a part of their clinical education," says Elizabeth Merwin, CONHI dean.

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Foundational Excellence



As the College of Nursing and Health Innovation wraps up another great year, we are looking forward to a major milestone: We will be celebrating our 50th anniversary beginning in fall 2021. Our rich history in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex began in 1971. The Kinesiology Department saw its first students that year, and the nursing school was authorized to start nursing courses in September 1972. By the fall of 1972, 67 students were admitted to The University of Texas (undergraduate) Nursing School in Tarrant County, which later was renamed The University of Texas at Arlington School of Nursing in 1976. It then changed from School to College in 2010. Most recently, our College took on its current name in 2014 when we combined the College of Nursing and the Department of Kinesiology into the College of Nursing and Health Innovation.