
September/October 2008

2008

9-2008

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Recommended Citation

Liberty University, "COMPASSIONATE CARE: LU remains committed to clinical nursing program" (2008).
September/October 2008. 2.
https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/lj_2008_sep/2

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COMPASSIONATE CARE: LU remains committed to clinical nursing program

September 01, 2008 | Tara Maxwell

Compassion. Clinical competence. Work ethic. Liberty University nursing graduates are a cut above when it comes to these critical skills, making them ideal candidates to staff the world's leading medical facilities — but it's their attentiveness to body, mind and soul that truly sets them apart.

Hands-on experience. Seeing students putting their classroom knowledge to the test is part of what professor Jerry Harvey says makes his job fulfilling.

"After you take them to the hospital and they have clinical [experience] it's a complete 360," Harvey said. "They think 'God has called me into this; I am here. I can do this.'"

Harvey, a retired Lt. Col. who spent more than 20 years as a U.S. Air Force nurse, began his nursing career after taking a job as an orderly and later becoming an EMT. He started teaching at LU in 2007. He said Liberty's commitment to clinical nursing experience drew him to the position.

Liberty University's Department of Nursing offers a B.S.N. program, an R.N. to B.S.N. track and a Master's program. Both the R.N. to B.S.N. and the Master's program are offered through Liberty University's Distance Learning Program.

Students in the traditional B.S.N. program enter the nursing major in the first semester of their sophomore year and progress through three years of nursing and general education courses prior to graduation.

The nursing curriculum focuses heavily on clinical practice, placing students in the hospital setting once a week in the sophomore year and two or three days a week in the junior and senior years.

“Our graduates are usually head and shoulders above other students that graduated at the same time because they’ve got those 800 hours of clinical,” said Department of Nursing Chair Dr. Deanna Britt. “As sophomores, they’re just learning how to listen to someone’s heart — doing simple things. By the time they are seniors they are in intensive care units taking care of very complex illnesses, learning to operate ventilators and other complex machinery. They are amazing; they learn so much in those first couple of years.”

During senior rotations, half a semester is spent working in a critical care unit and the other half is spent taking care of mentally ill patients. The second semester is spent working in community health.

The final semester for seniors is spent on leadership, allowing students to select their clinical site.

“They usually choose something close to their job goals,” Britt said. “They spend the semester working as an R.N., they are doing all the R.N. roles, so when they get out they have a taste of what it’s really like.”

LU’s two-year R.N. to B.S.N. program began in 1983 with five students — Britt was among these students. In 1989 the full four-year program began with a class of 40.

Since 2007, 129 nursing students have earned their degree through Liberty, and this fall the department will include 20 full-time and 30 adjunct faculty.

Higher purpose. In addition to high academic standards, Liberty’s Department of Nursing aims to prepare nurses who are committed to Christian ethical standards and view nursing as a ministry of caring.

“The graduates are known for their compassion,” Britt said. “They see nursing as a ministry — not just a job, so when recruiters call me about our graduates they always talk about that.”

Britt said a few years ago the department found that 60 percent of its students plan to use their skills in the mission field. The department helps facilitate this goal by offering a cross-cultural nursing certificate.

“We’ve got several students who came into nursing specifically because they know that there’s no nation in the world that will reject a nurse.”

Community ties. Students gain clinical experience locally in Lynchburg, Va., by working at Centra Health facilities, Lynchburg General Hospital and Virginia Baptist Hospital.

“They are completely immersed in reality … in the life of a nurse and the life of a patient,” said Centra Health Senior Vice President and Chief Nursing Officer Patti McCue, R.N. “We have a great cooperative relationship with Liberty. Several faculty members work closely with us.”

McCue said the demand for nurses is on the rise and projected to increase dramatically over the next few decades. McCue said this year Centra Health hired 104 new graduate nurses, and about a third of those hires were Liberty graduates.

Jessa Sprouse, R.N., a 2005 Liberty graduate, has worked at Lynchburg General Hospital since she graduated. A Lynchburg native, Sprouse said the senior rotation at the hospital prepared her for her career and gave her the tools to succeed.

“I know in nursing everyone says they want to take care of people and it’s true,” Sprouse said. “You see someone come in not doing well and take part in their recovery. It’s really cool.”

A new partnership. “Around 2000, Jerry [Dr. Jerry Falwell Sr.] wanted 25,000 students, so we started to grow,” Britt said. “Over the last four years we’ve grown to about 165 new students each year. We have pretty much saturated clinical spots in Lynchburg.”

This fall nursing students will have the opportunity to gain clinical experience at St. Mary’s Hospital in Richmond, which Britt said is an answer to a prayer.

“One day I got an e-mail from the director of nursing at St. Mary’s in Richmond. She has hired two of our graduates and was so impressed with their clinical skills and also their ministry that she contacted me and said they would like to be a clinical site for us.”