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College of Allied Health Sciences Establishes Interdisciplinary Core Curriculum

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The need to revise curricula at the college and discipline-specific levels is supported by many recent reports, including the Report of the National Commission on Allied Health (1995), the Pew Health Professions Commission (1991, 1993, 1995) and reports from the six Futures Symposia conducted in 1995 by the College of Allied Health Sciences (CAHS). According to these and other studies, traditional allied health and nursing education programs have been perceived as too inflexible and discipline-specific, minimizing the kind of interdisciplinary education needed and required in the evolving patient-centered care workplace.

The National Commission's report specifically recommended that allied health and nursing programs "emphasize cross disciplinary topics, as well as multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary team care" and "strengthen and expand interdisciplinary and core curricular offerings and clinical practice programs to meet workforce needs." In 1995, the CAHS took the lead in developing a fast-track process of restructuring its curricula and programs to incorporate College-wide interdisciplinary Core Curricula at the baccalaureate and graduate level. Curricula and selected syllabi from health professional disciplines in each of the five departments of the College were reviewed. Common content areas and competencies that crossed disciplines and programs were identified. Each department undertook massive revisions in their programs to create space for the new Core Curriculum.

The ultimate goal of these changes in CAHS curricula is to produce health professionals who have learned a set of core competencies that are central to the effective functioning of all health professionals, including an ability to work as part of an interdisciplinary team in managed care settings. While shared interdisciplinary learning experiences are a vital component of the changes it is also essential that interdisciplinary, team, and patient-outcome perspectives are integrated throughout the students' educational program.

Specifically, graduates should be able to:

1. communicate clearly and with empathy when interacting with patients, families and other health care professionals;
2. demonstrate critical thinking and writing skills;
3. make appropriate interdisciplinary clinical decisions based on an understanding of health and illness;
4. build and work effectively as part of the health care team, including understanding the roles and knowledge domains of other health professionals;
5. adapt and function effectively in the dynamic and broadly defined health care system, including practicing in the managed care environment;
6. make ethical decisions;
7. demonstrate a commitment to professional career development and self-directed and lifelong learning;
8. demonstrate a commitment to leadership development;
9. use research findings and scientific principles in the delivery of health care services;

10. work efficiently and effectively in diverse patient-centered care environments;
11. manage information effectively, drawing on computer technology as appropriate; and
12. identify and describe community health care needs and serve as advocates for consumers and health promotion.

From the process of issues clarification, curriculum revision, logistical challenges and faculty selection, there emerged four Interdisciplinary Core Courses and a set of Competency Modules that began phasing in to each of the department curricula in the Fall of 1996. The first course, Dynamics of Health Care, examines the structure, processes, outcomes and dynamics of health care delivery and their implications for professional practice. In spring 1997, the Research Principles and the Scientific Methods course introduces research methodologies widely applicable to all health professionals and especially emphasizes outcomes assessment.

In the next academic year, the Healthcare Informatics course will apply computer information science to the management of information essential to the delivery of health care, and the Interdisciplinary Clinical Care Management course will prepare students for active roles in health care planning teams. Graduate level courses will focus on Health Policy, Ethical and Legal Dimensions of Care, Application of Scientific Principles to Clinical Practice and Problem-solving and Community-based Care. Each of these Interdisciplinary Core Courses is supported by prerequisite Competency Modules that will require students to demonstrate proficiency in electronic communications, information retrieval skills, health care safety, basic patient care skills and medical terminology.

The College of Allied Health Sciences' Interdisciplinary Core Curriculum represents a significant step toward and a major commitment to meeting the health care workforce needs of the 21st century. In addition to evaluating courses as they are offered, the College will continue to review the progress of its graduates and the outcomes of this curriculum through its Longitudinal Study to assure that this curriculum helps to prepare graduates who are effective health care practitioners.

College of Allied Health Sciences Departments:

- Diagnostic Imaging
- Nursing
- General Studies
- Occupational Therapy
- Laboratory Sciences
- Physical Therapy

Total CAHS Student Enrollment: 1175

About the Author

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