



INSPIRING STUDENTS TO FLOURISH

SON educators encourage students to think about the broader picture of health care, to challenge their preconceptions, and to hone the knowledge they will bring to the bedside.

Nursing in the Genomic Era

Professor Marcia Van Riper, PhD, RN, FAAN, has a program of research that focuses on families experiencing genetic testing or living with a genetic condition. She makes a point of sharing what she has learned about these families with her students.

Dr. Van Riper, PhD, RN, has studied how parents respond to the challenges of raising a child with Down syndrome. She is also interested in other ethical aspects of genetic testing. With a recent Fulbright award, she traveled to Ireland to study how culture, interactions with health care providers, and family factors influence adaptation and resilience in families of people with Down syndrome.

“We all carry five to 50 significant genetic alterations,” says Dr. Van Riper, chair of the Family Health Division at the SON. “Students often think that negative consequences are inevitable when a family member is diagnosed with a genetic disorder. So they are surprised to learn that many families living with genetic disorders are resilient and some actually thrive.”

In her course on family-centered genomic health care, Dr. Van Riper challenges students to think about how people with genetic disorders and their families adapt to living with a genetic disorder. Students conduct a semester-

BSN Students Amber Fesel (left) and Jesutofunmi Mabo (right) work together on an exercise during a small-group work session in Dr. Frances Hill Fox Auditorium.



Dr. Marcia Van Riper

long family and genetics group project. Each group focuses on a family with a specific genetic disorder. They assess “their” family using the Resiliency Model of Family Stress, Adjustment, and Adaptation as a guiding framework. Using this framework helps students to examine a variety of family factors that may influence how well a family adapts

to the ongoing challenges associated with living with a genetic disorder. Factors they examine include how family members view their situation, what resources they have access to, and how well family members communicate with each other. Based on their assessment, the students then identify family-specific interventions that can be used to promote adaptation and resilience.

The project culminates with poster presentations at the annual Nursing in the Genomic Era Conference organized by Dr. Van Riper. At the conference, students also hear presentations by experts as well as first-person accounts from speakers living with a genetic disorder.

“The families I work with in my research have been some of my best teachers, and they have motivated me to pass that knowledge on to my students,” says Dr. Van Riper. “I’ve seen a big change in how students respond to individuals with genetic conditions because of what they have learned in class.”

Teaching the Art and Science of Caring

Clinical assistant professor Lisa Woodley, RN, was recently recognized for her inspirational teaching with the UNC-Chapel Hill Tanner Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching. She has also received 17 Educational Excellence awards from the SON. Her success in the classroom reflects years of focusing on the quality of the content covered as well as the quality of her relationships with students.

Even though Ms. Woodley’s classes range from 50-100 students, she is committed to learning each student’s name.



Ms. Lisa Woodley

“Even in the classroom, I feel that the relationship between students and faculty is reciprocal,” says Ms. Woodley. “I learn just as much from them as they do from me, and that reciprocity makes the learning environment engaging, interactive, and fun.”

Knowing the students’ names makes Ms. Woodley more attuned to their needs. When she sees confused looks, she addresses students directly and asks if they need help. Such attention keeps students on alert knowing she can call on them to answer a question at any point during the class.

Detailed lesson plans are key as well. Much of Ms. Woodley’s effort outside of the classroom goes towards staying on top of evidence and studying new practice protocols. Plus, she believes that keeping abreast of the rapid changes in clinical technology is critical for nurse educators.

“Lisa is extremely articulate and well-read,” says Dr. Van Riper, Chair of the Family Health Division. “Her ability to make complex information understandable is remarkable. She is passionate about her work and very willing to share her vast expertise with others. Her dedication and enthusiasm for the students she works with is contagious and admirable. Ms. Woodley is an exceptional role model, mentor, and advocate for her students and colleagues. It is obvious that she wants both her students and her colleagues to succeed.”

Ms. Woodley’s teaching philosophy ultimately revolves around the human elements of practice. “Nursing is the art and science of caring,” says Ms. Woodley. “I share stories from my practice. I make sure to share things I’ve done poorly, along with things I’ve done well. By sharing personal experiences, including mistakes, I’m trying to model the reality of nursing practice. I want students to know that they can trust me with their experiences, and that they can ask questions or ask for help if they need it. I want them to know that I’m their safe zone, and they can bring anything to me.” ■