Dr. Joy Elwell, associate clinical professor in the UConn School of Nursing, never thought of herself as particularly political or as a nurse leader until a course assignment in her master’s degree program required her to interview a politician on the campaign trail. Initially anxious about meeting with Nita Lowey who was running for Congress for the first time, Elwell soon came to realize that the politician needed her more than the other way around.

“I asked her, ‘Why should nurses vote for Nita Lowey?’” Elwell remembers, and two careers in political advocacy were born.

Subsequently, Elwell became involved in her New York state nursing association's efforts at legislative advocacy. Her state senator was reported to be a bill’s obstacle, so she met him at a diner to discuss the legislation. She discovered that he was not as opposed to nursing’s expanded role as everyone had thought, but that no one had personally lobbied him. “He ended up telling the general assembly leaders, ‘These girls have suffered enough. Let the bill come to the floor,’” Elwell remembers, laughing.

Because she saw the importance of advocacy, she decided to focus her doctoral studies on health policy while at Rush University. The title of her DNP capstone project was, Managing change in health policy: Eliminating barriers to nurse practitioner practice. Now teaching a policy course to UConn nursing master’s and DNP students, Elwell assigns a policy paper with a follow-up visit to a legislator or legislative aide who is connected to the issue.

Elwell has mastered – and now teaches – the usefulness of the one-minute “elevator speech” that she learned in an undergraduate public speaking course. Memorizing and internalizing it, she observes, enables nurses to get over their anxiety or reticence about speaking with decision makers or policy setters. In fact, she’s published an article on the subject in The Journal of The Nurse Practitioner Association (JNPA: The Journal).

Over the years in her primary care practice, Elwell has developed two interesting specializations: travel health consulting and faith-based communities’ nursing. Global travel requires that travelers know what vaccinations are appropriate for different locations, as well as staying healthy while traveling. Elwell notes that trauma, rather than infectious disease, is the most frequent cause of hospitalization during foreign travel. Like any nurse, she engages patients in holistic measures to stay healthy while traveling.

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Professor Joy Elwell - continued...

In addition, as a member of Lutheran congregations, she was called to begin parish-based health ministries. Recognizing the role of church nurses, for example, Concordia College offers a certificate in this specialization, which Elwell earned. Elwell has developed parish education programs for women, men and families, as well as publishing regular health tips in the Sunday bulletin and parish newsletters.

The term “scope of practice” is often used in debates about advanced practice nurses’ roles in complex healthcare settings. What Dr. Elwell demonstrates is that the scope is broad and the need for leadership and advocacy is great.