The UConn Urban Service Track (UST) educates professionals committed to serving Connecticut’s urban, underserved populations. Students from UConn’s Schools of Nursing, Pharmacy, Medicine, Social Work and Dental Medicine, as well as Quinnipiac University’s Physician Assistant Program, competitively apply annually to the Urban Health Scholars program. Those selected demonstrate a superior commitment to community service and academic excellence. Currently there are nearly 200 Urban Health Scholars; over two dozen are School of Nursing students.

The Urban Health Scholars program prepares nursing students to practice collaboratively with professionals across disciplines to achieve the common goals of quality care and improved patient outcomes. Traditionally, professional students have received varied exposure to interprofessional collaborations while trained within a specific disciplinary focus. The Urban Health Scholars program expands preparation for interprofessional practice while fostering student competencies in culture and linguistics, health policy, advocacy, quality improvement, and leadership. The goal is to better serve vulnerable populations including children, the elderly, the incarcerated or ex-offenders, individuals living with HIV/AIDS, veterans, refugees and immigrants, and substance abusers.

UST nursing student Bing Zheng ’14 (m), and pharmacy student Katelyn O’Brien (l) with senior Eileen Stock (r) during a “Spring Forward: Don’t Fall Back” presentation at the Mansfield Connecticut Senior & Wellness Center.

Photograph by Barbara J. Slater
The Urban Health Scholars are exposed to a variety of learning experiences. This spring, for example, selected scholars will join 2,000 clinicians, community board members, and educators at the National Association of Community Health Centers annual Policy and Issues Forum in Washington, DC. In addition to participating in educational sessions at the conference, scholars will join representatives from the community health centers to educate Congressional representatives about the issues affecting Connecticut’s underinsured and uninsured populations.

The students also regularly attend local community service activities, such as senior centers, and soup kitchens. Quarterly learning retreats in their first two years with faculty from the six collaborating schools and programs foster interprofessional collaborations that will affect their work as students, and ultimately, as professionals. As part of each retreat, students break into interprofessional groups to explore medical management of underserved patients, including problem-based learning activities like complex case studies and development of care plans. According to School of Nursing assistant professor and UST faculty member, Dr. Kelley Newlin Lew, “Interprofessional education is recognized and promoted, for instance, by the Institute of Medicine and the Affordable Care Act; the research demonstrates that professionals across disciplines need to work together, bring their talents, skills, and knowledge, to foster optimal patient outcomes. So UST is preparing our students to lead as nurses in the interprofessional role.”

While practice service is central to the program, Newlin Lew hopes to elevate the role of research in the UST program. Interprofessional practice, by definition, must be informed by interdisciplinary research. As we continue to expand our program, research will certainly find its complementary role. Newlin Lew also looks forward to admitting the School of Nursing’s advanced practice nursing students into UST so that they too may benefit from the program.

Nursing students who are Urban Health Scholars are helping their communities, opening doors for the urban underserved populations.

“... Urban Service Track is preparing our students to lead as nurses in the interprofessional role ...”