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One year at Avery Point can mean a second career as a nurse

By Matt Collette



University of Connecticut nursing student Lauren Breor, center, and her "patient," fellow student Heidi Mowell, listen to instructor Maria Sparmer as they practice taking vital signs Thursday at Avery Point.

UConn's accelerated master's program is launched in Groton.

After two decades working as an administrator in a law office, Heidi Mowell was ready for something new. "Nursing was always something I've wanted to do, ever since I was a little girl," said Mowell, who lives in Mystic. "And I was able to take this time to leave my job and start something new. I'd like this to be my last career, you know? I want to be helping people."

Mowell is one of about 20 students - young and middle-aged, male and (mostly) female - who are enrolled in the Master's Entry Into Nursing program, now in its first semester at UConn's Avery Point campus. The accelerated, yearlong program - already offered at UConn's main Storrs campus and its regional campuses in Stamford and Waterbury - gives students with a bachelor's degree the opportunity to learn and train to become a professional in the nursing field.

"We all have bachelor's degrees in some other field, or sometimes something similar to nursing," said Lydia Lee, a nursing student from Groton. "And we all felt that we could benefit from this."

The master's degree program covers a wide range of topics, preparing graduates to work in nearly any field of medicine.

"It's such an open profession," said Michelle Allyn of Lisbon. "You can do so many different things with your nursing license."

The program includes a full day of lecture each week, two days of clinical spent in local sites like hospitals and retirement homes, and weekly work in the nursing skills lab. By the end of the three-semester program, which runs from January through December, the students will have logged 800 hours of field experience working one-on-one with patients.

One year at Avery Point can mean a second career as a nurse

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The program takes a multicultural approach to nursing education, preparing its students for careers working with a diverse patient base. A new lab space, which resembles a modern, well-equipped hospital ward, is equipped with high-tech mannequins that resemble people of varying age, gender and race.

“You constantly have to focus on providing quality, unbiased care, regardless of whether the patient is male or female, black or white or any culture,” said Maria Sparmer, an associate professor of nursing, during a roundtable discussion at the start of class. “You have to look past those barriers.”

Throughout a class on Thursday, Sparmer reminded students that their role as nurses is not just to monitor a patient and administer medicine.

“One of the big things that separates nurses from other professions is our ability to assess,” Sparmer said.

Nurses, she said, should always be on the lookout for changes in a patient’s condition and can be held liable if they do not identify a problem that could have been caught earlier. “Every time we interact with the patient, from the moment we walk in the door to the time that we leave, we need to assess. Anyone can ‘do.’ We need to ‘assess,’” she told the students.

On Thursday, students practiced checking vital signs of patients along with daily tasks such as bathing patients and getting them in and out of bed. Sparmer advocated a real-world, not textbook, approach to practice, advising a questioning student to do what felt right rather than return to her locker for her notes and book.

“In the real world would we always do it the textbook way?” Sparmer asked the class. “No, we don’t have time. We just have to learn to do it the right way and in a way that works.”

Just as nurses look beyond vital signs when checking out a patient, Sparmer said she was using the simple lab exercises to get an overall look at her students’ progress after just two weeks of classes.

“Basically they’re learning to go from head to toe,” Sparmer said. “And since they’re so new, I’m looking at their ability to interact with each other, to touch each other. Because they are skills they will need from day one as a nurse.”

The MEIN program was first offered at UConn’s Storrs campus in 2004 when hospitals in Connecticut reported a major shortage of registered nurses. Over the following years, the program was expanded to the university’s satellite campuses and is popular both among recent graduates and older workers looking to develop the skills needed to become a nurse.

“The Avery Point MEIN program will allow individuals interested in pursuing careers in nursing an opportunity to obtain the knowledge and skills they need close to home,” said School of Nursing Dean Anne Bavier. “The new simulation lab will provide UConn students an opportunity to apply their newly acquired nursing skills in a safe and controlled environment.”