New Dean Brings a Vision of Improved Health Care for Nebraskans

UNMC’s College of Nursing recently added something more than another honor to its portfolio of accomplishments. The College’s national reputation helped in recruiting a new dean: Dr. Virginia Tilden, formerly associate dean for research at Oregon Health & Science University School of Nursing.

A nationally known expert in end-of-life care, she was a founder of the Center for Ethics in Health Care and a recipient of the Distinguished Faculty Award for Research. “Bringing in someone of Dr. Tilden’s stature will strengthen our faculty and other students through an online discussion board.” Franzen applies the theory she learns online to diverse clinical experiences in the community. “What I’ve learned in the classroom has made me a better nurse,” she said.

Many UNMC College of Nursing Students Hope to Return to Their Home Communities When They Graduate

Nathan Mattox took it one step farther—he completed his nursing degree program, including his clinical experience, without ever leaving his hometown of Scottsbluff. Mattox took classes at the College of Nursing Scottsbluff campus, participated in two distance education courses the College offered and completed his clinical rotations at local medical facilities. “Highly educated people in the medical field are staying in the area, eliminating local ‘brain drain,’” he said. “Plus, it is a great bonus to have local people caring for local people.” Mattox is one of a growing number of men entering the nursing field, and UNMC has been recognized nationally for its efforts to increase the number of male and minority students. Formally a paramedic, Mattox was accustomed to dealing with critical health problems, but was rarely able to follow his patients through to recovery. Today, with a degree in nursing (awarded in December 2003) and a focus on critical care, he can do both. Mattox and his wife, a family practice physician, will stay in Scottsbluff.
Average class size at UNK is 16 students; Longo's classes routinely exceed that number. Students clamor to get into Longo's classes not only because he clearly knows the subject matter, but also because his passion for knowledge is contagious. "He probably is, well, he is the motivating factor that sent me to law school," said Anthony Schutz, a 1998 graduate of UNK. Schutz, who grew up on a farm near Elwood, said that before he took classes not only because he clearly recognized that I had the ability to do well in law school, and he told me that," he said. "He planted that seed." Schutz ultimately graduated number one in his UNL law school class and now clerks for Judge Arlen Beam, of the 8th Circuit Court of Appeals. Other students say the same—Ely Colindres, a UNK sophomore from Lexington, is the first in her family to attend college. Longo has "made a difference," she said, whether it is encouraging her to attend a pre-law institute, writing her a letter of recommendation or teaching her in class. Consequently she is now also considering a career in law. "He reached out and helped me a lot," she said. "He's always very supportive, and I'm thankful for that." Longo is quick to return the praise, calling UNK students "a good-natured, kind, gentle, inquisitive community of students." And he praises the University's values, on campus and off, rooted in the old-fashioned notion that if you send your children to college, you can expect them to receive a solid undergraduate education. "Your teaching had better be good here," Longo said. "That's the culture." That back-to-basics philosophy is reflected in UNK's improved ranking in the most recent U.S. News and World Report "America's Best College" issue. The report noted UNK's high freshman retention rate (80 percent), its high percentage of full-time faculty in the classroom, and its very low percentage (6 percent) of classes with 50 or more students. As a state-supported university, some say it's simply the obligation of the faculty to provide an excellent experience for students. Longo would take it a step further. "We don't find that to be a burden," he said. "That's a labor of love."
Here, UNO’s service-learning curriculum injects students into the community to experience real-life situations.

Political science curriculum to help integrated service-learning into his anonymous donor. He partnered with spearheaded by the Service-Learning on affordable housing. This focus is part of an interdisciplinary service- opportunities with nonprofit agencies. UNO injects them into the community where take students out of the classroom and disciplines. The courses are designed to different courses during the 2002/2003 years, the UNO assistant professor has Latino Politics course. For the past two years, Dr. Jonathan Benjamin-Alvarado’s assignments facing today’s college Aware of housing and employment translating a legal document for a non- People and the UNOTransforms Benjamin-Alvarado’s efforts are part of an interdisciplinary service-learning team at UNO whose focus is an affordable housing. This focus is spearheaded by the Service-Learning Academy at UNO with support from an anonymous donor. He partnered with various organizations in the Latino community, including Family Housing Advisory Services, the Chicano Awareness Center and Nebraskans for Immigrants’ Rights to expose his students to the top three issues facing Omaha Latino — immigration, employment and housing.

"I front-loaded my course with lots of reading on the issues facing Latinos," said Benjamin-Alvarado. "Then after a midterm at four weeks, I send students into the community to make a concrete connection between the literature they’ve read and where they will be working." Benjamin-Alvarado’s students are required to work a minimum of four hours per week for the organizations with which he has partnered. Students are also required to report back to Benjamin-Alvarado via an online journal, provide examples of accomplishments with the organization and complete a research report. Additionally, students are evaluated by the organization for which they work. Many of Benjamin-Alvarado’s students provide more than the minimum four hours of work each week and at least one uncovered an employment opportunity (see sidebar story). All are changed by the experience.

"It’s a very transforming experience," Benjamin-Alvarado said.

"Some of the students had never visited the neighborhoods they were serving, and were not aware of the conditions and issues facing residents. Their experiences gave them a better understanding of situations in Omaha’s Latino communities and as a result, made them better people and better citizens." Benjamin-Alvarado actively recruits students for his service-learning course and plans to continue teaching it. He also is in contact with colleagues at other schools to help them adopt similar curriculums.

"Universities today are being challenged to be responsive to the needs of communities. This is a means for us to apply all that we know, in a way that hasn’t been done before. It is a new mode of civic involvement that is helping to change people’s outlooks and create a new level of understanding." Since implementing service-learning courses in 1998, more than 2,700 UNO students have completed the classes.

Arturo Miranda turned his UNO service-learning experience into a new career.

As a student in Dr. Jonathan Benjamin-Alvarado’s Latino Politics Course, Miranda performed his voluntary work for a number of organizations focusing on immigration rights. During that time Miranda learned that Family Housing Advisory Services, an organization for which he was not volunteering, was hiring. The organization’s mission statement—“Helping people secure and maintain decent, safe, and affordable housing and strengthening our community through education, counseling, dispute resolution and advocacy”—caught his attention.

“I am very interested in housing issues, and when I heard they were looking for someone bilingual I applied,” Miranda said. With Benjamin- Alvarado’s recommendation, Miranda won the job. Since December 2002, Miranda has been an Intake Specialist with Family Housing Advisory Services, taking and directing incoming calls, and handling special discrimination cases that fall under the fair housing law.

“I love what I do,” Miranda said. “I am able to apply what I’ve learned in class and help other people in the community. This really gives me a satisfaction, and helps me pay back the community for what it has done for me.”
"We involve undergraduates at a much deeper level, and we expect them to make a contribution," said associate professor of physics Dr. Diandra Leslie-Pelecky. "We involve them in the science." Leslie-Pelecky’s area of research, in nanomagnetism, is a good example. The ultimate goal of the research project is to improve the detection and treatment of cancer. Specifically, she’s working on nanoparticles that only attach to certain types of tissue, such as tumors. The idea is to put the nanoparticles in the human body to improve a new magnetic imaging technique. If the image comes up clear, there are no cancer cells. If there are cancer cells, the nanoparticles can be used in their treatment.

Her type of research is also an example of why UNL likes to get students started as freshmen in undergraduate research projects. "Science doesn't go quickly," Leslie-Pelecky said. "You want them to have the opportunity to stay with it and see the results. That keeps them motivated in the sciences, and that's what science is all about—discovering things. Why not introduce them to that at the earliest point in their career?"

Students not only make fundamental discoveries within their disciplines, but the research affords them the opportunity to pick up other skills as well. Raymond Lemoine, a senior physics major, started doing research with Leslie-Pelecky his freshman year. This year, another undergraduate student and a high school teacher joined the research team. Lemoine leads the group’s effort to develop a new way of creating nanoparticles.

"Regardless of where you go, the ability to communicate with people and work as a team to get something done is one of the most important skills you can have," Leslie-Pelecky said. "That’s true whether they stay in science or go into something else."

Students who think like Lemoine do exist at UNL and they are encouraged to stay. Leslie-Pelecky makes it clear she expects students to contribute to the science as well. So Lemoine has been working on design elements related to the nanoparticles involved in her research. He’s addressing issues like the size of the nanoparticles, how to make them compatible with the body, how to make sure they don’t clump together. Lemoine also has built a vacuum chamber needed to actually create the nanoparticles, a critical first step in the research, Leslie-Pelecky said.

Perhaps the ultimate test of whether undergraduates are making meaningful contributions with their research is summed up by Leslie-Pelecky this way: "Ray is an integral part of the lab," she said. "I would hire him as an employee right now."

Undergraduates Find Enriching Research Experiences at UNL

"We clean out beakers and vacuum parts might pass for an "undergraduate research" project at some universities, but don’t try that at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln."