

2003 Infusing Geriatrics in Nursing Curriculum
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Abstract. The gerontologic nursing curriculum is integrated throughout the nursing students' three years of clinical nursing. Specific objectives in the nursing courses provide students an opportunity to understand and appropriately handle the needs of older adults living in the community or located in acute care or long-term care facilities. First year students focus on developmental content related to older adults. Clinical practice in acute care settings allows students to recognize the importance of treating each older adult as a unique person with individual needs. In the second year, a core gerontological nursing course provides experiences using different nursing roles and settings. Students help older adults adapt and cope with the spiritual, physical, social, financial, and emotional changes that come with aging. They care for frail older adults who are further compromised by multisystem failures. The gerontologic curriculum focuses on: (1) healthy aging; (2) assessment; (3) pathophysiology of acute and chronic diseases; (4) treatment and nursing interventions; (5) advocacy, (6) development of family and community resources; and (7) ethical, legal, and end-of-life issues that confront older adults and caregivers. By graduation students have spent many hours with both healthy older adults and those with compromised health. In addition, they will have worked at least eight times in faculty run nursing clinics with older adults who are homeless and four times in cross-cultural experiences with older adults in faculty run nursing clinics in Mexico. Students have repeatedly verbalized the differences they have made in the lives of older adults and the impact older adults have made on their lives. All graduates of this program are equipped with the comprehensive gerontological nursing skills necessary to work with older adults in a wide variety of health care settings. Surveys of students, before and after completing this curriculum, have shown increased positive attitudes toward older adults and increased interest in providing nursing care for older adults.

Innovation. A faculty member who is a geriatric nurse practitioner, certified by the ANCC as a gerontological nurse, and holds a PhD with a focus on gerontological development initiated this new curriculum because of concern related to deficits in the quality of nursing care provided for older adults. Student enthusiasm is high when working with older adults because of the variety of activities designed for experiential learning with older adults at various points along the illness wellness continuum. This curriculum gives students a sense of power in their ability to make positive changes for older adults through use of the advocacy role. The curriculum develops students' abilities to educate older adults in how to be active participants in their health care, providing older adults with tools, which empower them to make informed decisions. Use of selected Scriptures helps students relate to the religious perceptions of older adults, thus increasing quality of spiritual assessment and care. Students get in touch with their own aging process and gain understanding of their parents' and grand parents' aging processes through a variety of role-playing activities. These include experiencing cognitive impairment and using adaptive equipment for functional deficits. As graduates, these students will be working with clients who have been through and/or are currently impacted by war. The Greatest Generation Project increases their awareness of the short and long term effects of war, the trauma of war, relationships during war time, impact on the emotional well-being of older adults and their families, and increases students' ability to assess signs and symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome, to better understand the impact of PTSS on older adults and their families, and to make referrals as needed. Students participating in this curriculum also reported increased understanding and knowledge of (1) healthy aging; (2) ways to meet the needs of older adults; (3) signs and symptoms of problems that require medical attention; (4) community resources; (5) the need to decrease stress through open communication about their own needs; and (6) utilization of respite care.

Replication. A committed faculty member with administrative support and expertise in geriatric nursing can easily replicate the curriculum. No advance technology or expensive equipment is needed. The spiritual approaches could be replicated in programs with Judeo-Christian worldviews or modified to accommodate other worldviews.