Founding the UMass-Worcester Graduate School of Nursing

Background: 1965-1985

Twenty-five years ago, in 1985, the Graduate School of Nursing was established at the University of Massachusetts-Worcester. The first class matriculated in September, 1986. The idea for a nursing program was first mentioned in 1965 by UM-W’s founding dean Dr. Lamar Soutter, whose vision of a multi-disciplinary health sciences campus included schools of nursing, dentistry, and even veterinary medicine. But in 1965 the professional climate for nursing differed greatly from what has emerged in the decades since then. Dean Soutter anticipated only a four-year undergraduate program for nurses.

Nursing, at the time, was structured mainly to support the physician’s goals, with far less of the professional autonomy and diagnostic skills we associate with nursing today. Nationally and regionally, however, the need to advance nursing professionalism was beginning to be acknowledged, for example in the influential Lysaught Commission Report of 1970. Leaders in academic nursing, such as Dean Loretta Ford at the University of Rochester began advocating for a new model of advanced practice nursing, specifically the “nurse practitioner.” New master’s programs for nurses would be necessary to carry out these goals. By the time UMass opened its University Hospital in 1976, these educational trends had become compelling.

The direct impetus for a graduate school of nursing at UMass, however, came from within University Hospital a few years after its opening in 1976. Gail Frieswick, Ed.D. (UMMC Nursing Administrator, later CEO), and Anne Bourgeois, EdD (Associate Administrator, later CNO and University Campus President) realized that patient care would benefit from encouraging nurses in central Massachusetts, and especially those already working at UMass, to pursue an advanced nursing practice degree. It was hoped, too, that Master’s prepared nurses could bring the latest skills in community nursing out to regional population centers. This view was shared by the UM-W Health Sciences Task Force, which issued a report in 1980 that cited graduate nursing education as a high priority for new programs on the campus.
Working with consultants such as Lillian Goodman, EdD, then Chair of the Department of Nursing at Worcester State College, and nursing leaders from Yale, Case Western Reserve, UMass-Amherst and other institutions, Frieswick worked assiduously to persuade a hesitant UMMC leadership and UMass Board of Trustees to establish the school. Bourgeois concentrated on easing the doubts of the nursing staff by explaining the potential benefits of moving beyond a diploma-school preparation. Physicians, too, had to be reassured that advanced practice nursing would be beneficial to the overall system of care. Finally in 1983 the Board voted to establish a Master’s program for nurses at UM-W, and (just in time) amended their vote on July 16, 1986 to substitute the word “School” for “Program.”

Two additional years passed between the 1983 vote and the actual commitment of funds for space, recruitment of faculty, students, staff, and equipment. After a national search, in which Chancellor Robert Tranquada, Frieswick, Bourgeois, Goodman and chairs of the major clinical departments participated, Kathleen J. Dirschel, PhD was named the first Dean of the GSN. Dr. Dirschel, the Dean of Nursing at Seton Hall University, had recently completed a program in Academic Administration at Harvard. At that juncture, two main challenges faced nursing education—to develop scientifically based, advanced practice nurses, and to turn out more baccalaureate nurses. The latter became the mandate for undergraduate nursing, while the former became the mission of graduate schools, such as the one poised to open at UMass Medical Center in 1985. Dirschel was appointed Dean in June, 1985, and the planning process began in earnest.

Growing the GSN—1985-2010

Founding Dean Kathy Dirschel learned quickly that there are two sides to the coin of a brand new school. On the one hand, she found a deep reservoir of good will and pride that UMass would be starting a graduate school of nursing, the first in the UMass system; on the other hand, “When I got to UMass, the tiny little space they carved out [for the GSN] was kind of like a locker room; it had no furniture. We had to rent furniture!” But, the opportunities seemed endless. Soon the first new faculty member, Dr. Sue Roberts, was hired and they began planning the curriculum. As Dr. Roberts commented, “We had a blank slate—what do you want to do and how do you want to do it?” The first faculty, including Drs. Susan Chase, Glensy Hamilton, Carolyn Lawless, Diane Skiba, Bourgeois, and Dirschel, developed a Master’s in Nursing Science curriculum for advanced practice nurses with majors in Acute Care Nurse Clinical Specialist, Nurse Administrator (a joint MSN/MBA with Clark University), and Ambulatory Clinical Nurse Specialist.

In 1986, the first class of 30 students matriculated. The first graduation, for the 13 students in the accelerated, one-year program, was held in the Lamar Soutter Library in the fall of 1987. As retired Professor and Associate Dean Mary K. Alexander told me, “We took only the best students.” One year later, the National League for Nursing awarded the GSN full accreditation for 8 years.

In 1991, Lillian Goodman became the interim dean, and in 1995 was made permanent Dean of the school, continuing in that role until her retirement in 1999. Many new programs were developed over the following nine years. As a small faculty in its first few years, Dr. Alexander pointed out, they could react quickly to changing needs; they could “turn on a dime!” For example, the Acute Care Clinical Specialist track was revised as a major in Acute Care Nurse Practitioner. Dr. Alexander remembered, “We created a program for acute care nurse practitioners in 3 months!” Subspecialties in HIV/AIDS, Cardiac and Geriatric Nursing and Cancer Prevention were also initiated during Lillian Goodman’s deanship.

In keeping with the GSN’s ambitious program of nursing research development, the school also launched its first doctoral program in Nursing in collaboration with the nursing school at UMass-Amherst.

When Dean Doreen Harper succeeded Goodman in 2000, she was fortunate in having both the Master’s and Doctoral programs well under way at the GSN. But, additional pathways remained to be cultivated. Two of these, the Worcester Nursing Pipeline Consortium and the Graduate Entry Pathway, responded to an acute shortage of nurses during the 1990s. As Dr. Harper commented, “Anne Bourgeois helped me understand how we could be more in sync with the clinical system...at the bedside. We had to have a pre-licensure program...We were in a nursing shortage. We needed to ramp up the production of nurses [yet] we didn’t produce what most hospitals wanted—RNs.” Today, she continued, programs like the Graduate Entry Pathway (GEP) are the “fastest growing cohort” in the profession. An independent Ph.D. program also was approved during her deanship and begun in 2005, the year Dr. Paulette Seymour-Route, a GSN graduate, was named interim dean.
Under Dr. Seymour-Route’s leadership, the GSN has again responded to changing health care needs by establishing a Doctorate of Nursing Practice (D.N.P. program). The school also has moved far ahead in research activity and funding. Today, in the Dean’s words, the GSN has “numerous faculty who are continuing the model first started well before us of working on the clinical side and the academic side. Out of 25 full time faculty, we have three who have federally funded grants,” including one for three million dollars from HRSA.

But, we’ll conclude with words from Dean Emeritus Goodman, spoken on the occasion of the school’s 20th anniversary in 2005: “The practice of nursing has changed. The advanced practice nurses, teachers and researchers who will guide these changes must be rigorously prepared in nursing programs of high academic quality….Our programs of study are designed to sharpen analytic skills, stimulate scientific inquiry and develop effective practice methods through which compassion and caring will flourish.”— Ellen More


5. Audio recording, American Archives Month event, “Look How Far We’ve Come (and How We Got Started), Celebrating the History of the Graduate School of Nursing,” October 19, 2010, GSN Collection, UM/W.

American Archives Month, 2010
Celebrating the History of the Graduate School of Nursing

On October 19, 2010 the Lamar Soutter Library in collaboration with the Office of Alumni Relations hosted an event to observe American Archives Month and celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Graduate School of Nursing. Held in the Faculty Conference Room, the luncheon and panel discussion were attended by over 100 people.

The panel discussion, “Leadership for a Future of Caring: Personal Reflections on Founding the GSN by Pioneering Deans, Hospital Administrators, Faculty and Students” was moderated by Paulette Seymour-Route, PhD, RN, MS, current Dean of the GSN. Panelists included former Vice Chancellor/CEO of UMass Medical Center Gail Frieswick, EdD, former Vice Chancellor and founding Dean Kathleen Dirschel, PhD, Associate Professor and first faculty member Susan Roberts, DNS, Karen Coteleso, MS, APRN, a member of the first GSN class, Dean Emeritus Lillian Goodman, EdD, and Associate Dean for Education and Professor Emeritus, Mary K. Alexander, EdD. Anne Bourgeois, EdD, former Chief Nursing Officer, UMMHC University Campus President, and Assistant Dean of the GSN, was unable to attend the event but sent in greetings to the group. She is widely acknowledged as having been instrumental in the school’s development.

Dr. Frieswick began by recalling that during the school’s formative years, “the obstacles were many, both internal and external.” Many of the area’s diploma schools of nursing felt threatened by the UMass hospital because many of their graduates were leaving their institutions to work at the UMass hospital. Conversely, one of the most exciting aspects for Dr. Frieswick was building collaborative clinical programs with the medical and research staff.

Dean Kathleen Dirschel then recalled that once the first faculty members were hired the next task was “to determine exactly what the Graduate School of Nursing would be. We knew it needed to be focused on the acute trauma, intense clinical, high quality care that was offered by the Medical School.” The initial work centered on designing a curriculum. Charged with having the school up and running within two years, Dr. Dirschel and her colleagues successfully opened the school in one year.

Dr. Dirschel described the excitement of the first year as a real “Wow story!” She attributed its success to a “secret formula of vision, intelligence, go to, get it done, think outside the box, don’t slow down, make sure it’s high quality, and get cooperation from all coalitions to the best of your ability.”

Professor Sue Roberts continued the discussion with her recollection of the many issues involved in creating a curriculum that adhered to the mission of “creating educated nurses who were dedicated to quality practice.” “It was one of the most fun things I’ve ever done.” Dr. Roberts also talked about the difficulty in finding space to hold classes because many of the classrooms had already been reserved by the medical school for their classes.

The conversation then shifted to Karen Coteleso, a member of the first graduating class who offered her perspective on what it was like to be one of the first students. She talked about the anxieties of the application process, and the way in which technology has changed from those early years when the school’s computers were “as big as this table!” Computers were a “huge part of what we were about to engage in…we had to learn SPSS (a statistical analysis program)…..none of us had PCs at home…it was an intriguing time for those of us trying to do research.”

Dr. Lillian Goodman spoke next about her passion for the GSN and her belief in “starting a program for nurses to move on, RNs from diploma schools or wherever, to work toward getting bachelor degrees, to become professional practitioners, to take an equal place beside medicine in the delivery of care to the people who needed it.” Goodman spoke of the major accomplishments during her deanship, including the establishment of the Collaborative PhD program with UMassAmherst, continuing accreditation from the National League for Nursing (NLN), and the implementation of the first adult acute critical care nurse practitioner program in the Northeast. Opportunities were also provided for nurses to do post masters certificate study and for studies in subspecialties such as cancer prevention, cancer control, cardiac, geriatrics, correctional institutional health, family nurse practitioner, and HIV.

Dr. Mary K. Alexander described the GSN as a “special place…although there were no obvious signs outside or even inside that there was such a school here, … prospective students found out about the school…it was the place to be accepted…GSN took only the best.” Alexander then talked about the impact of Nurse Practitioners on health care delivery and spoke of the collaborations between Nurse Practitioners here and the Department of Medicine. She discussed the way in which the GSN had the ability to rapidly change the curriculum in response to changes in healthcare delivery systems.

Dean Paulette Seymour-Route concluded the discussion with a summary of some of the accomplishments during the period that her immediate predecessor, Dr. Harper, was Dean. These include the first Commission on Collegiate Nursing (continued page 6)
Milestones in the History of the Graduate School of Nursing

1985: Graduate School of Nursing established. **Kathleen Dirschel**, PhD, RN appointed Dean.

1986: First class of 30 students matriculates. Initial Master’s degree specialties: Ambulatory Clinical Nurse Specialist; Acute Care Clinical Nurse Specialist; Nurse Administrator.

1987: First 13 students graduate.


1990: HIV Subspecialty, funded by Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA).


1994--: GSN awarded management of the Worcester State College Student Health Center.

1994: First PhD Program in Nursing in UMass system, a collaborative program with the Amherst campus.

Cardiac Nursing subspecialty, funded by HRSA.

1995: **Lillian R. Goodman**, EdD, RN appointed Dean

First Adult Acute/Critical Care Nurse Practitioner/Clinical Specialist track initiated in the UMass system.

Geriatric subspecialty established in collaboration with Fallon Elder Care.

1996: Nurse Practitioner Attending Collaborative Service (NPACS) implemented with the Department of Medicine.

1997: NLN 8-year accreditation

First nursing PhD students graduate. Cancer Prevention and Control Education subspecialty initiated


2000: **Doreen C. Harper**, PhD, RN, FAAN appointed Dean.


2002: Adult Nurse Practitioner/Gerontological Nurse Practitioner specialty established; and Acute Critical Care Nurse Practitioner/ Gerontological Nurse Practitioner, dual track specialty, funded by HRSA.

2003: First Graduate Entry Pathway (GEP) in UMass system.

2004: First GEP class admitted.

2005: **Paulette Seymour-Route**, PhD, RN named interim Dean. Independent PhD program begins. Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education (CCNE) accreditation awarded to the GSN Master’s Program.

2006: **Paulette Seymour-Route**, PhD, RN appointed fourth Dean.

2007: First GEP class graduates 27 students.

2008: Doctorate in Nursing Practice (DNP) Program approved and first DNP class accepted.

First student in BS-to-PhD Pathway program accepted.

2009: Genetics subspecialty initiated.

2010: CCNE accreditation granted to the Master’s and DNP programs.

DNP Program graduates first class.

First R01 and R21 grants awarded to the GSN.
American Archives Month (continued from Page 4)

Education (CCNE) accreditation, the establishment of the Graduate Entry Pathway (GEP) Program, the development of academic and clinical partnerships, and the support of research initiatives. Dr. Seymour-Route said that currently there are approximately 175 matriculated students and 25 full and part time faculty. Accomplishments since she has been Dean include the successful ten year CCNE accreditation of the Masters program and the founding and five-year initial accreditation of the Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) program.

Participants and attendees continued their discussions well after the formal program concluded. By all accounts it was a great success. —Kristine Reinhard

Oral History Collection Update

Our Oral History Collection has grown to 77, with 22 oral history interviews added in the past 12 months. For the researcher, oral histories are an unsurpassed way to learn about the past from the viewpoint of the people who lived through it and helped shape their times. For the archivist, they also afford the opportunity to demonstrate firsthand why we need donations to the UMass-Worcester Archives of individual and departmental papers to preserve the institution’s history. Notable among the oral histories I’ve completed so far are interviews with past Deans, faculty, students, and staff from all three schools, the Worcester Foundation and Commonwealth Medicine, plus interviews with retired District Attorney John Conte, the family of labor leader James Loughlin, and other local figures of interest to the history of UMass-Worcester. To give some idea of the scope of the Oral History collection, the very first interview I conducted was with Dr. H. Brownell Wheeler, founding chair of Surgery. The most recently completed interview was with Dr. John Sullivan, currently Vice Provost for Research. —Ellen More

Look How Far We've Come (and How We Got Started)
The Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences
October 18, 2011
11:30 AM-1:00 PM, Faculty Conference Room

A lunchtime panel celebrating the history of GSBS
Learn how the GSBS began with an assumption, turned into a program, and ended up as a school!

Stay Tuned!