Turner Leaves DNP Program with a Solid Foundation and a Bright Future

In 2004, nursing leaders issued a challenge that would forever change the face of advanced nursing practice — and Duke University School of Nursing (DUSON) answered the call.

That year the American Association of Colleges of Nursing recommended all advanced practice nurses be trained at the Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) level. By 2006, DUSON was exploring the option, and in 2008, the online program opened its doors. Today it’s ranked No. 3 out of 202 existing programs nationwide.

Much of its success can be attributed to the expert leadership of outgoing DNP Program Director Barbara Turner, PhD, RN, FAAN, the Elizabeth P. Hanes Professor of Nursing. She’s been at the helm since the design phase and has overseen its growth. This year she will pass the torch.

From the beginning, she helped blaze a trail to create a 35-credit, five-semester program that built upon the School’s substantial master’s track. Under her guidance, the task force charged with designing the program decided on four focus areas: translation of evidence to practice, leadership, advanced practice and health policy.

Concentrating on these topics has made the DNP program highly popular among nurses looking to augment their education, said Turner. Over the past decade, the DNP program has graduated 189 students and currently has 146 enrolled.

“We got the program and the four foci right. It resonates with applicants,” said Turner, who also chairs the Health of Women, Children and Families Division. “We got it so right that instead of initially admitting seven students as we’d planned for the first year, we admitted 25. We had 125 applicants, and they were such high caliber that we couldn’t hone it down further.”

There have been growing pains, however, she said, and she has worked with the faculty to navigate the challenges. At the outset, DUSON launched its DNP program without any DNP-prepared faculty. No one had a firm grasp of how to design a proper DNP project, and they made the mistake of fashioning it after a PhD dissertation. It took a few years to correct course. After much discussion and redesign, students now complete clinically-focused projects.

“We needed to pull the students back from going down the research road and move them back to clinical inquiry,” said Turner. “We had to find that right balance.
between a dissertation approach and process-inspired work.”

For example, one student concerned about the one-third death rate among newborns in Zambia developed a process to implement the “Helping Babies Breathe” intervention and teach Zambian midwives how to help newborns breathe on their own immediately after delivery. Thanks to her intervention, there were no deaths among the 62 babies delivered during her intervention.

Beyond course design and curriculum structure, students have brought their own sets of challenges. The chief concern, Turner said, has been writing.

“Almost every student has worried about writing. They don’t remember how to do it,” she said. “We’ve had to initiate a writing course to get our nurse practitioners back into the scholarly writing mode. They’re too accustomed to writing in shorthand for medical records.”

To help students Turner hired a medical editor who reviews student papers and offers feedback. Today all students submit papers for publication, and almost all are successful.

These changes and advances have strengthened the program’s reputation over the years, but, despite the growing popularity, she said, there are no plans to expand enrollment. The goal is to keep the faculty-to-student ratio at a level where instructors can still provide personalized, one-on-one guidance to every student.

Other enhancements are coming, however. As the health care industry morphs in response to the Affordable Care Act, the role of advanced practice nurses is expanding across the country. More and more, nurse practitioners are being called upon to assume leadership positions, Turner said, and DUSON wants to ensure its graduates are prepared to take on this responsibility.

“As we continue with faculty expertise, we will offer courses in health policy to stretch nurses in ways they never thought they could stretch,” she said. “This will be out of their comfort zone — to learn to talk about health policy and to discuss topics with legislators — but these are necessary skills.”

In fact, she said, the program is actively working toward launching an executive nurse leadership track, adding to its existing list of specializations such as global health and informatics. Bringing the leadership track to fruition will be the responsibility of the DNP program’s next director.

It’s steps like these, she said, that give interested and enrolled students the confidence that if they embark upon the program, they will be successful in their careers. With its strong foundation and progressive plans, there’s no doubt the DNP program has a bright future ahead, Turner said.

“The program is out of its teenage years and into its late 20s. I think the next 10 years will see a real maturation of the program,” she said. “It’s going to be the top in the country. It’s No. 3 now, but the next director will bring it to No. 1. There’s no question about that at all.”