The Value of a Multidisciplinary Approach to Health

By Thomas Prohaska, Dean, College of Health and Human Services

The George Mason University College of Health and Human Services takes a broad ecological approach to health. That means we view health as more than the absence of disease and disability; it is the total well-being of the individual and the community.

We also recognize that the complexity of health and the factors associated with the management of disease and disability often require a multidisciplinary approach. Good health care requires coordination of care and services that may include all the professions in the college: social work, nursing, nutrition, public health, rehabilitation, and health administration. The college continues to train health professionals with skills in each of these areas; however, the workforce of the future will also need health professionals trained to be multidisciplinary clinicians and researchers.

Multidisciplinary teams in health care have been incorporated throughout the health care system, from hospital discharge planning to chronic disease management to community-based health care coordination and case management. Each member of the team contributes to the health of the patient, client, or group from his or her professional perspective and ensures that the proper care is provided across the spectrum of need.

The next step is to have a trained health care workforce composed of practitioners who not only are well prepared in their fields, but also understand the care perspective of one or more other disciplines. For example, health care professionals who understand business management and health economics are more prepared to adapt to changing models and advances in health care delivery. Nurses who understand health education strategies will be better able to motivate patients to change poor health practices and more prepared for chronic disease management of persons with diabetes and hypertension.

Our college is designing curricula and programs to give students the opportunity to develop multidisciplinary skills so they can effectively participate in the workforce of the future.
With a new “health college” on the horizon, George Mason University is positioning itself to become a hub for Northern Virginia health care.

By Colleen Kearney Rich, MFA ’95

Space on college campuses is always at a premium, but when a college is growing as rapidly as George Mason University’s College of Health and Human Services is, space—and time—really are of the essence.

For years, the college’s faculty, staff, and students have been spread out in office and classroom spaces on the Fairfax and Prince William Campuses and in the City of Fairfax. With the help of donors such as the Toups family and Reston Hospital Center, classroom space has been converted into labs necessary for students to learn the practical skills so vital to their future careers. But now it is time to give the college the space it needs to grow.

With the help of $20 million in funding from the Virginia General Assembly, the college is finalizing plans for a new 160,000-square-foot building that will put all of its programs under one roof with room to expand. As the college increases its role in promoting healthy communities and educating tomorrow’s health care practitioners, this academic and research facility will change the look of the university and its role in the region.

The building, now called Academic VII, will sit at the entrance to campus on University Boulevard. More than a traditional academic building, this building will have five signature spaces that will help the college move to the forefront of the health sciences: the Nutrition Kitchen Lab, the Health Informatics Learning Lab, the Functional Performance Lab, the Nursing Simulation and Skills Lab, and the Community Health Institute. The college is well on its way to becoming a comprehensive health care research and clinical practice enterprise.

Dean Thomas Prohaska says the new labs and clinics will offer cutting-edge training for students and provide more opportunities for the college to contribute to the well-being of the community and pursue interdisciplinary research.

The state funding reflects George Mason’s essential role in contributing to Virginia’s health care system and its economy, says Prohaska. “We are the health college for the community. One of the most important jobs we do is to contribute to the health care workforce.”

If you would like to contribute to the building fund for Academic VII, visit giving.gmu.edu. For more information, email dkumar@gmu.edu.