

UW-Eau Claire: Nursing grad builds holistic care goals around Honors course experiences

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While the field of public health may have only become widely familiar with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, soon-to-be University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire nursing graduate Nicole Wolfe has been interested in a career in public health since 2019.

“In 2019, I took a University Honors course called Global Health Issues which truly inspired and directed my interest in public health,” Wolfe says. “Learning about prevention efforts worldwide prompted me to set a personal life goal to participate in a global vaccination campaign.”

When she set that goal, Wolfe says she was thinking of it as an early career goal.

“I certainly wasn’t expecting to accomplish this goal while still in college,” the Holmen native says. “During the pandemic, I was able to volunteer at COVID-19 vaccination clinics held by the Eau Claire City-County Health Department and FEMA located right here on campus. I even had the special honor of administering Chancellor Schmidt’s vaccine.”

To help slow the spread of the virus during the pandemic, Wolfe worked as a COVID-19 contract tracer for the Eau Claire City-County Health Department.

“The numbers of cases and exposures in the county were really high, so as students we took the call list for campus members. Being a nursing student and having a good understanding of the medical facts was helpful on the calls,” says Wolfe, who understands that communication skills will be of paramount importance in the

public health field.

Three honors courses with big impact

In addition to the Global Health Issues course Wolfe took as part of the University Honors Program, she says two other courses in the Honors Colloquia have had a significant impact in shaping her career goals in nursing.

“I took HNRS 345: Empathy Enhancement for Helping Professionals in the spring of 2020 and went back to become an Honors tutor for the course in 2021,” Wolfe says. “As a tutor, I utilized different discussion techniques to engage the class in discussions of human responses in theater as well as taboo topics to further their understanding of empathy and how to apply it as a future helping professional.”

Wolfe explains that the course uses various methods to tap into empathy, including the practices used by theater professionals and students to “get into the head” of a character. While this course is open to students in many majors, Wolfe says it made a strong impression on her as she prepares to enter the field of health care professionals.

“That course really helped me develop my emotional intelligence and the skills to attend not only to the physical ailments of patients but also become adept in dealing with their human responses to the many aspects at play while a patient is under medical care,” Wolfe says. “This is an important part of being a nurse.”

The most recent University Honors course that Wolfe says was “life-changing” for her was the spring 2022 session of HNRS 133: Religion, Healing, and Medicine.

“That course largely focused on how the meaning of health and health care practices vary among cultures, “ she says. “Traditional cultural healing practices have different goals compared to that of Western medicine.” She adds that “the topic that intrigued me the most was the concept of the mind-body connection.”

Unveiling her own mind-body connections and need to heal

The Religion, Healing, and Medicine course not only helped Wolfe broaden her perspective on health, healing and spirituality — it also played a major role in taking a look inward at her own need to heal from the trauma of childhood illness.

“A really big inspiration for me to become a nurse is that I’ve recently celebrated 21

years living cancer free,” she says, further explaining that the medical supplies she used to practice nursing care on her toys were leftover supplies in the home from her time with cancer as an infant.

“The material in that course sort of brought out emotions I’ve been holding in my body that I’ve been unaware of for over 20 years,” she says.

After living in a pandemic while excelling in every aspect of nursing school, from courses and extensive collaborative research to tutoring and immersion learning, Wolfe says a combination of factors brought her to the Counseling Services office on campus.

“I’d love to give them a shoutout because they really helped me better deal with not just the past emotions, but current stressors as well,” she says. “They helped me develop tools for moving forward, practicing self-care and establishing healthy habits. They also connected me with someone on campus offering services as a healing touch practitioner, Dr. Der-Fa Lu in the nursing department.”

Lu, a professor of nursing at UW-Eau Claire is also a practitioner and Level 1 certified instructor of healing touch. Lu offers her practice to interested campus community members free of charge. She says it allows her to maintain her skills while giving back to the community.

Lu, a Buddhist, describes her practice as connecting the energies of the “spirit, mind and body, so they can work together, not against each other.”

“I tap into the universal energy, but it is not a cure,” Lu says. “It’s simply a way to help someone under a lot of pressure to release energy that has been stuffed down.”

Wolfe says the sessions have been very beneficial in her healing process. Additionally, tapping into her own inner energy sources and learning to balance them, especially as she moves forward into the field of public health in complicated times, is something Wolfe says she is grateful to have been able to learn while studying at UW-Eau Claire.

“Seeing and treating patients as a ‘whole person’ is so valuable. Diving deep into human responses is so important that it is actually part of the definition of nursing care from the American Nurses Association,” Wolfe says. “My ultimate passion is

public health. There are solutions to the many public health crises we are currently facing; they are upstream approaches, and we will need to think together as coalitions and rely on research to guide us.

“I know there are ways to improve overall health at the community level,” Wolfe says. “I look forward to working to help find them.”

Important community research highlighted by UW System

As Wolfe sets out to tackle matters of public health as a practicing registered nurse, she can take pride in knowing she has already done work that can help with one area public health goal — reducing the access by teenagers to commercial tobacco products.

In March 2022, Wolfe and her research team presented their findings on commercial tobacco at the annual UW System Research at the Rotunda event in the Capitol building in Madison. Along with Grace Neugebauer, a senior nursing major from Chaska, Minnesota, and faculty research mentor Dr. Lorraine Smith, assistant professor of nursing, the team conducted a study examining the retail placement and promotional patterns of commercial tobacco products located near high schools and middle schools in Eau Claire County.

[A UW System video summarizing this research can be viewed here.](#)