

Interprofessional education

Nurse leader aims to improve patient care.

SHANNON COLE, DNP, APRN-BC, from Vanderbilt University School of Nursing, is an avid proponent of interprofessional education. She sees it as a crucial way to ensure better care and outcomes for patients now and into the future. A Tennessee Nurses Association member, Cole co-leads the innovative Vanderbilt Program in Interprofessional Learning (VPIL).

Can you talk about your career and current role?

This is my 19th year as a faculty member at Vanderbilt University School of Nursing. Currently, I teach in the family nurse practitioner (FNP) program, and I've practiced as an FNP for 24 years, providing care to underserved patients. My roles complement each other. Teaching keeps me current on cutting-edge, evidence-based guidelines that I can use in my practice. And my practice gives me real-world examples to share with my students.

After coordinating the clinical portion of VPIL for 9 years, I was named co-director along with Melissa Hilmes, MD, from the School of Medicine. VPIL is a longitudinal program that places teams of medical, nursing, pharmacy, and social work students in a clinical setting one-half day a week over a 2-year period. Teams also attend classroom sessions with a curriculum focusing on the patient, professions, teams, and systems. A major goal of the program is to build collaborative practice-ready workforces.

My primary academic and administrative responsibilities focus on advancing interprofessional education initiatives for health professions students at Vanderbilt and our three non-Vanderbilt partnership institutions.

What's the impact on patient outcomes?

In terms of outcomes, this is what we are working to prove. We want everyone to practice to the top of his or her respective profession. This means each member of a patient's healthcare team focuses on what they can provide for the patient that's unique from the other team members. The idea is that when this occurs,

medical dollars are saved and health outcomes are improved. Additionally, the Institute of Medicine and others have demonstrated that when healthcare professionals understand each other's roles and are able to communicate and work together effectively, patients are more likely to receive safe, quality care.

The types of patient outcomes that we are measuring include patient health status, complication rates, adherence rates, continuity of care, and use of resources.

What's the impact on student participants?

Our students value the idea of cutting-edge ideas in healthcare. By participating in VPIL, they become more aware of how other health professions students are prepared and function in practice. Students also become more confident because they have to effectively articulate their healthcare roles and contributions to other team members.

Are nurses helping to lead interprofessional efforts?

Nurses have been at the forefront of interprofessional work. This includes discussions on the development of interprofessional education at hospitals and universities around the country where they share their distinct perspective and depth of knowledge related to science and theory. Nurses are uniquely prepared for this work because we have a holistic approach and have always taken care of multiple patient issues. And we've led teams and monitored population health since Florence Nightingale and Clara Barton.

Final thoughts?

When I speak at conferences, I always encourage nursing faculty to get involved in developing and implementing interprofessional education. Getting a program started is a big task and you need buy-in from everyone, and importantly from leadership, for it to succeed. The deans from Vanderbilt's schools of medicine and nursing, along with leadership from our partner schools, have supported the VPIL initiatives because they understand that collaboration among health professionals allows teams to provide safer, higher levels of care than each would be able to accomplish working alone. ★

For more information on VPIL, visit medschool.vanderbilt.edu/vpil/

Interview by Susan Trossman, RN.



Shannon Cole