

# My Professors Are Students, Too—and It Makes All the Difference

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When I started the nursing program at the University of Colorado Anschutz College of Nursing, I expected to learn from experts. What I didn't expect was to learn from people who are doing exactly what I'm doing—juggling assignments, managing deadlines, and figuring out how to fit school into an already busy life. As I started my program, I found that some of my faculty are students too; pursuing their own advanced degrees while they teach. Having similar academic goals to their students changes everything about how they show up in the classroom.

**They Know the Field—Because They're Still In It**

Before I started at CU, I assumed nursing professors had stepped away from clinical practice to focus on teaching. I had seen this decision made by many of my undergraduate professors. That's not how it works at CU Anschutz. Every faculty member I've had the privilege to work with is still active in the specialty they also teach. This makes a difference in our learning experience. The patient cases we discuss in class aren't from a textbook written years ago—they're things my professors have navigated recently, sometimes within the last week.

Jennifer Rosen, MSN, my specialty director in the Pediatric Primary Care NP program, is a perfect example. She has built years of pediatric clinical expertise as an NP before moving into academia, and she's never stopped practicing. According to her, "As an NP, I felt like it was really important for me to get a ton of clinical experience, build those skills, and see patients every day."

This statement matters to me as a student. When she teaches, I trust that what she's discussing or taking time to teach is grounded in what actually happens in

practice, not just what's supposed to happen or what we expect to see.

**They Understand the Pressure—Because They're Feeling It, Too**

The part that's surprised me most, though, is knowing that some of my instructors, in addition to being very active teachers and mentors, are also earning advanced degrees. In fact, Jen Rosen is pursuing her Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) in Public Health while running our program. Dr. Deb Kenny, who teaches in the Health Systems, Leadership, and Informatics division, is earning a Doctorate in Bioethics from Loyola University Chicago.

Dr. Kenny doesn't let us forget it either, and I appreciate that. "I tell my students, 'I feel your pain because I'm living it right now,' so they can't pull the wool over my eyes, that's for sure. But I tell them I'm also going to school, working full time, and they're doing the same."

There's something about that kind of honesty that I think makes students work harder and dream bigger. She's not asking me to do anything she isn't doing herself. Dr. Kenny has also brought teaching strategies she's experienced as a student directly into our courses. We have had synchronous Zoom sessions that she found so valuable at Loyola. She expanded them from two sessions to five per semester for the students. Additionally, she holds several smaller group discussions during those designated Zoom weeks, which have made the class feel genuinely connected.

Rosen describes her role as evolving alongside students through the whole program, and earning her DNP only deepens how she approaches this. "In my role as a specialty director, I go from being their cheerleader when they apply, to being their coach to being their mentor

throughout the program. I really love that student connection aspect, and I think this experience of earning my DNP has made me a better faculty member and better educator."

**Learning From People Who Are Still Learning**

This May, both Dr. Kenny and specialty director Rosen will walk across the graduation stage—the same one many of us are working toward. Dr. Kenny has multiple graduate degrees already, but this will be her first time attending her own commencement since earning her bachelor's degree. "I have three master's degrees, and I already have a PhD, but the only commencement I've been to is when I earned my bachelor's degree in Greeley many years ago. So, I'm excited to go and get this one."

As a student, there is something very special and unique about walking across the same stage and celebrating academic achievements with those you have looked up to during your education. It is something that many of us will never experience throughout our academic career, and I certainly didn't expect it when I started my degree path to CU Anschutz.

I applied for and decided on CU for my advanced degree so that I could learn from the experts in my field. What I found was something better—educators who are also practitioners, learners, and genuinely invested in what it means to grow in my profession.

This is the kind of place that makes you want to keep going, even when the workload is hard. I do have to honestly say that knowing my professors are right there with me makes all the difference.

Sidebar: Shape the Future Become a Nursing Preceptor

At CU Anschutz College of Nursing preceptors are essential to preparing skilled, compassionate healthcare professionals. By opening your practice to students, you're not just teaching clinical skills – you're inspiring future leaders in nursing.

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## TWO HEADS

The two-lane road, still covered with the previous night's snowfall, blends into the surrounding drifts in the predawn. My eyes search the dark corridor of trees as far ahead as I can see, watching for any movement or flash of an eye that might signal a deer about to leap. The sun is nowhere near the horizon at this hour, but I am bound for the long-term care facility in the neighboring town where my novice nursing students will continue their experiences with actual patients. They are assigned to work in pairs for these first days to facilitate efficiency, safety, and self-confidence. My task at this hour is to consult with the night shift to determine the best assignments for these earnest learners.

Our school is located in a small town that sits a mere hour north of Minnesota's main metro area. And yet, the leap from urban to rural is more than geographic. It is as if a mountain of impassable proportions lies between us. This community has its own history, shared experience, and expectations. The challenges I had found in the many countries I called home over the past decades of my life are as present here as they ever were there. If anything, there is a more resistant cultural code to crack, as to all appearances I should belong. Minnesota is the land of my birth, yet it contributed little to my upbringing – with the exception of college. But then, college is its own world.

Suitable residents selected and delegated, the students research and prepare for morning cares. Though details of each student and resident are destined to fade from my memory, one picture will remain indelibly etched there.

As I round the corridors, checking with and checking on my students, I pause outside the door of a middle-aged woman whose MS has bound her early to a wheelchair. Her relative youth contributes to her robust mind and spirit, though her body is seriously compromised. Her instructions to the two students in her room are crystal clear: after bathing her edematous legs, she would like the students to massage them with her preferred skin cream before wrapping them carefully with elastic bandages.

The students drop to their knees side by side to carry out these instructions – one beside each leg at the foot of her large electric wheelchair. And this is where the memory sears itself into my mind. I note the confident movements of their hands as they work and know that they have learned these things through practice in lab, so allow my attention to shift to their heads, which are bent intently on their task.

The head of the first sports a stylish cut and color; she is a trained beautician. She was born and raised in this area. When not in uniform, she is trendy and confident, from perfect make-up to perfect nails. Though her previous profession contributes to well-being and helps many, her ambition is to achieve this by following a different path.

The head of the other is covered with a modest hijab. I cannot see her ears or her hair. Her custom-made student uniform consists of an ankle-length skirt in the same color as her school tunic. She is Somali, the daughter of a businessman who has traveled the world. Her long-term am-

bition is to develop her chosen profession and perhaps contribute to the elevation of healthcare in her former country. She is soft-spoken, but equally confident. Her hands are tiny but competent.

I cannot imagine a more dramatic picture of two worlds meeting in harmony. It is urban and rural; it is worldly and local. And it works beautifully. These two heads are linked by one heart – a heart devoted to caring and to making a difference to this woman – and in the world. ■

I wish that everyone could see it.  
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