

Improving care for an aging population

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Pickard Hall, home to UTA's College of Nursing and Health Innovation. Credit: The University of Texas at Arlington

In her brief but prolific nursing career, Briana Hodson has witnessed a lack of understanding for the geriatric population, resulting in less-than-ideal outcomes for patients. To address this challenge, she believes gerontology nursing must be approached holistically.

At age 27, The University of Texas at Arlington graduate has worked in seven U.S. states, numerous hospitals, a handful of rural medical centers and one jail. She's been a travel nurse, a school nurse and a case manager and has treated patients in medical-surgical units specializing in postoperative and orthopedic-neurologic care.

But her passion lies in meeting the complex needs of America's rapidly growing population of older adults.

"I've seen all types of patients, but I find the geriatric population particularly engaging. I just seem to click with them," said Hodson, whose current position includes geriatric care at Seattle's Northwest Hospital, a branch of University of Washington Medicine. "There's a lot of research to be done in this field, and I wouldn't trade this career for any other in the world."

In August, she completed her master's degree in UTA's Adult Gerontology Primary Care Nurse Practitioner program. She also earned her Bachelor of Nursing degree from UTA, graduating summa cum laude in 2016. Hodson said the adult gerontology program prepared her to examine the field from both individual and public perspectives.

"I know this program will benefit not only the individual patients and their families who come into contact with its specialty-trained providers, but the general public as well," she said. "By decreasing the stigma of aging, reducing the morbidity and mortality of chronic diseases, and promoting good physical and [mental health](#), the UTA program produces students who will be sure to leave an impact."

Through its nationally ranked graduate offerings, UTA's College of Nursing and Health Innovation prepares nurses for advanced practice, management and research endeavors to address a changing health care landscape. Kathryn Daniel, associate professor and director of the Adult

Gerontology Nurse Practitioner programs, emphasizes that the college's graduate programs enable students to delve into specialized areas of nursing.

"Undergraduate offerings create a breadth of knowledge for nurses," she said. "But degrees at the master's and doctoral levels create opportunities for students like Briana to focus on and dive deeper into issues facing their chosen areas of expertise."

Daniel's philosophy on graduate programs mirrors a growing trend among nursing schools across the country. The need for health care that understands the unique differences in each stage of life is significant, and as generations continue to age, the concern for better treatment of older adults intensifies.

"In nursing education, we focus on meeting the changing needs of society by preparing nursing professionals with relevant knowledge and expertise, including in areas such as gerontology," said Elizabeth Merwin, dean of the College of Nursing and Health Innovation. "To that end, creating more specialized instruction and more scholarship opportunities so our students can concentrate on their studies is of utmost importance."

The number of Americans age 65 and older is projected to double by 2060, according to the Population Reference Bureau. As life expectancy increases, the need for passionate and highly skilled graduates like Hodson becomes more critical.

To help meet this growing demand, the college received a transformational \$4.7 million gift from the Deerbrook Charitable Trust to further develop its adult gerontology graduate programs. The trust saw the need to create a stronger pipeline of professionals and recognized UTA as a leader in the field.

"We were impressed by the foundation UTA had created in improving the quality of care for our aging population," Executive Director Art Sundstrom said. "We view our relationship with UTA as an opportunity to expand the pipeline of more qualified professionals in taking care of older adults."

The trust's gift will fund scholarships, create an endowed [faculty position](#) and grow all gerontology-focused graduate nursing programs.

"I am extremely proud of, and grateful for, the tremendous efforts being made by the faculty in the College of Nursing and Health Innovation in addressing the state's and nation's need for highly trained and skilled nurses," said UTA President Vistasp Karbhari. "Their focus on the highest levels of excellence has already been acknowledged by plaudits and rankings, including their recent designation as a Center of Excellence by the National League for Nursing, and the increasing demand for their graduates by hospitals and health care providers across the state and nation. Their focus and leadership on gerontology meets a growing need, and the generous gift by the Deerbrook Charitable Trust will be transformational in enabling UTA to not only expand our focus in this area but to simultaneously fund scholarships for deserving students and recruit top faculty to join our exemplary group of internationally renowned and dedicated faculty in this area. I'm deeply grateful to the Trust for its faith in the college and UTA and its vision in ensuring that this critical area was expanded to meet the needs of our aging population."

Merwin said the Deerbrook Charitable Trust's gift "will solidify UTA's nursing program as a center of gerontology excellence."

"Its support represents strong validation of our work in this space while advancing one of the University's key strategic priorities of health and the human condition," she said.

Provided by University of Texas at Arlington

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