



# Celebrating

Ten years after admitting its first students, the DNP program reflects on its achievements and alumni

# Success

BY HOLLY LEGER

Barbara Cherry, DNSc, MBA, (Nursing '97) far left and Mary Fenton, DrPH, RN, (far right) pictured with the first DNP class.

After a decade of working on special projects in the president's office, including developing the Garrison Institute on Aging, Barbara Cherry, DNSc, MBA, (Nursing '97) was handed another big assignment in 2006—to start a new doctoral program for the School of Nursing.

Though PhDs were already available to nursing students at the time, the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) recognized the need for a practice-focused doctoral program. Nursing professionals needed to integrate the clinical setting with the research completed by those with PhDs.

“As a practice doctorate, nurses focus on evidence-based practice, how to lead change, lots of leadership, how to work in a professional team, quality improvement, population health, access to care and innovation,” Cherry said.

Using the AACN's Essentials of Doctoral Education for Advanced Nursing Practice released in 2006, Cherry, along with a team of faculty, developed and established the DNP program at TTUHSC. As department chair, associate dean and a professor, Cherry said the degree gives nurses a stronger voice to lead and make a difference in health care.

“With the DNP, nurses are fully equipped with the knowledge they need,” Cherry said. “They are equals at the table with other doctorally-prepared clinicians such as physicians and pharmacists

and are highly respected for their expertise. People listen to them.”

The first class graduated in 2010. Since then, the program has produced 180 graduates.

Reflecting on the program's history, Cherry said she has noticed a greater value placed on the degree over time. At first, the program was new and unknown, but now employers often prefer to hire a candidate with a DNP, especially for leadership positions.

Michael Evans, PhD, RN, dean of the School of Nursing, said he continues to be impressed with the program and its graduates.

“We are so very proud of the impact our DNP graduates are making in a variety of settings all over Texas and beyond,” he said. “This program continues to evolve as nursing and health care change.”

Cherry is most proud of the alumni the program has produced over the past decade. She continues to see students and graduates leading positive change in health care throughout the state and nation, either through their doctoral projects or their current roles as leaders in the field.

“When you look back at our students' accomplishments and what they're doing in the workplace now, we have amazing alumni,” Cherry said. “It's really been the most rewarding thing I've done in my career to be a part of this.”



We'd like to introduce you to just a few of the program's graduates, here and online. Visit [www.ttuhs.edu/alumni/pulse.aspx](http://www.ttuhs.edu/alumni/pulse.aspx)



**Bob Dent, DNP, MBA, RN**

**Senior Vice President,  
Chief Operating Officer and  
Chief Nursing Officer,  
Midland Memorial Hospital,  
Midland, Texas**

**President, American Organization  
of Nurse Executives**

**American Academy of Nursing  
Fellows (2017)**

**DNP Graduate: 2010**

Bob Dent, DNP, RN, also a fellow in the American Academy of Nursing, hit the ground running in 2018. The newly-elected president of the American Organization of Nurse Executives (AONE) begins his one-year term for the organization, which consists of about 10,000 members globally. Dent is looking forward to advancing AONE as the voice of nursing leadership across the country.

During his term, he hopes to implement a new AONE fellowship program, launch new programs for aspiring and novice chief nursing officers (CNO), as well as appoint a front-line nurse to the AONE board.

“One of the things I like to do is recognize that leadership doesn’t require a management title,” Dent said. “We have great nurse leaders across the country, so to be able to pull or draw upon what they’re doing, and sharing that with others, only strengthens our nursing leadership across the country.”

Dent will also stay busy in Midland as Midland Memorial Hospital implements a new electronic medical records system. Dent will help oversee the transition and continue his work as the senior vice president, COO and CNO. It’s a lot of work, but Dent said the knowledge he gained from the DNP program helps him stand tall in his profession.

“(The DNP) puts you on the same playing field as others, and it enhanced my credibility with colleagues, whether it’s at the senior level of nursing or working with my medical staff and partners,” Dent said. “The DNP provided me a framework to be able to execute on a lot of those actions and help me along.”

As a member of the first graduating class of 19 students, Dent said he still stays in touch with many of his classmates and attributes that strong sense of community to his success.

“It doesn’t end after you complete your DNP,” Dent said. “It just takes you to a different level. I think there’s a higher level of commitment and ownership, not only in your education, but in giving back to the nursing profession.”

Linda Lawson, DNP, RN, remembers the difficulty of stepping out of her comfort zone in the DNP program; it is something the faculty constantly ask of their students. But five years later as the first CNO at a new hospital in El Paso, she understands how valuable those experiences were.

“Looking back, I’m glad they did that,” Lawson said. “Follow (the professors’) recommendations, because it truly is when you get out of your comfort level that you start to grow.”

The Hospitals of Providence Transmountain Campus opened in January 2017, and Lawson said that, as the CNO, she had to start from the ground up. Whether it was the development of policies and procedures for the nursing team or where to place equipment in each room—even equipment as small as toilet paper holders—everything needed a plan.

She knew the job would be challenging from the get-go, but that is why she wanted the position in the first place.

“I really did seek this opportunity out because I wanted to be in the new facility. I wanted to set that foundation. I wanted to do this, and I needed to do it right. This was from the ground up, and I really don’t know if I would have these skills if I did not have my DNP.”

Lawson said she is excited to go to work each day, because she is excited to move forward with the hospital’s direction. As an assistant professor for the last three years, Lawson said she is excited to build a strong relationship between the new campus and the nursing school.

“I’m thrilled to be associated with the Transmountain campus and (TTUHSC),” Lawson said. “It’s giving back, and I love it. I loved my experience. I would do it again in a heartbeat.”



**Linda Lawson, DNP, RN, NEA-BC**

**Chief Nursing Officer,  
Hospitals of Providence Transmountain Campus,  
El Paso**

**Clinical Assistant Professor,  
Gayle Greve Hunt School of Nursing**

**Robert Wood Johnson Foundation  
Executive Nurse Fellow (2012)**

**DNP Graduate: 2012**



**Seth Stephens, DNP,  
ACNP-BC, CCRN**

**Nurse Practitioner for Medical Quality,  
Baylor St. Luke's Medical Center,  
The Woodlands, Texas**

**DNP Graduate: 2011**

Seth Stephens, DNP, ACNP-BC, didn't just complete the required projects during his DNP program; he took them to the next level. Tasked with developing an intervention for patients with chronic diseases during his Chronic Disease Management course, Stephens designed a heart failure clinic for Baptist Hospitals of Southeast Texas in Beaumont, where he had hospital privileges while earning his degree.


Though it was not required of him, Stephens wrote a proposal for funding through the Texas 1115 Medicaid Waiver in hopes of making his design a reality. The waiver allows the state to expand Medicaid-managed care while preserving hospital funding.

"That was just something that I was quite passionate about," Stephens said. "My clinical area of expertise has always been in either cardiology or cardiovascular surgery. It was just a great opportunity for me to use that work that I had already started through the program at (TTUHSC) as a structure to request those funds."

His proposal was approved, and Stephens was able to build a hospital-based clinic in Beaumont.

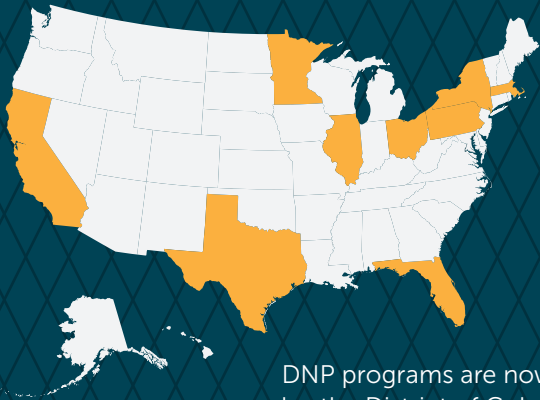
"Having not gone through the (DNP) program, I would not have even known where to start to write that proposal," Stephens said. "And that's not the only grant funding I've been awarded since leaving (TTUHSC)."

Stephens currently works at Baylor St. Luke's Medical Center, but he still credits his education and experiences in the DNP program for giving him more of a macro view of health care.

"I've been able to use the tools learned at (TTUHSC)," Stephens said, "to design interventions, treat large groups of patients and large populations of patients, and affect multiple individuals with one intervention, as opposed to just treating one patient at a time." 

## Facts from the American Association of Colleges of Nursing

Schools nationwide that have initiated the DNP program are reporting sizable and competitive student enrollment.



DNP programs are now available in all 50 states plus the District of Columbia. States with the most programs (10 or more) include California, Florida, Illinois, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Texas.

# 303

DNP programs are currently enrolling students at schools nationwide, and an additional 124 new DNP programs are in the planning stages.

From 2015 to 2016, the number of students enrolled in DNP programs increased from **21,995 to 25,289**. During that same period, the number of DNP graduates increased from **4,100 to 4,855**.