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Release No.16-07-01

July 1, 2016

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Nursing Students Learn Public Health, Zombie Style

Bethesda, MD – A course at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences (USU) is teaching students global health care delivery in a unique way that's sure to be a "thriller."

Students in USU's family nurse practitioner Doctorate of Nursing Practice (DNP) program must take a Population Health course as part of their degree requirements. This online class outlines key principles in responding to and understanding population health – the overall health of a group, be it a group of employees, a community, or entire nation. Students must apply what they learn about theories and models of public health care through debate, small group work, and a series of creative scenarios --including a zombie pandemic.

"We use the narrative device of a zombie pandemic in animations and assignment to help engage students in content," explained Catherine Ling, assistant professor and family nurse practitioner for the DNP and PhD programs, in USU's Daniel K. Inouye Graduate School of Nursing.

The students watch video clips of scenarios, including one of the nation's "President" delivering a brief "State of the Zombie Pandemic" address. They see the impact that a fictitious zombie virus has made on a population, the fear it's created – along with "anti-zombie" posters strewn all over cities. These scenarios reinforce teaching materials regarding various tools that shape population health planning and interventions.

The zombie coursework keeps the material interesting, Ling said, and the underlying zombie "theme," throughout each lesson in the module makes it more cohesive. In turn, narrative cohesion makes it easier to remember the material and, therefore, easier to apply should there ever be a real-life population health emergency.

As part of a fictitious Department of Defense division, "HHIT," the students draw on what they've learned throughout the course to enact a quarantine, administer widespread vaccines, and obtain international resources, Ling explained. Meanwhile, she added, they must remember to follow actual DoD guidelines, when responding to the "growing zombie pandemic."

The purpose of the course is to provide a working understanding of essential competencies in population health. This skill set is critical in an era of increasing antibiotic resistance, emerging infectious diseases and pandemics like Ebola and Zika.

Ling said she's always looking for ways to keep students engaged by keeping the material relevant and interesting. Adult learning can be enjoyable as well. Those who aren't into zombies don't have to watch the videos – they can read the storyline instead. Students have consistently had positive feedback, Ling said, commenting this is "the best online class" they've taken.

A student in the DNP/FNP who has taken the course, Air Force Capt. Marcie Hart, echoed those sentiments. As a big fan of the TV show “The Walking Dead,” Hart said she was very excited when Dr. Ling mentioned the course would involve a “zombie apocalypse-type scenario.”

“The videos are very tastefully done,” Hart said. “The ‘infected’ can be cured later in the scenario, so the characters are not using deadly force, and it is not overtly violent.” Hart added the videos are suspenseful, and exciting. They take somewhat bland, abstract information and make it interesting and concrete. “I thought it was a wonderful, fun twist to this course,” Hart said.

While the course is interesting, it also allows the students to use “the other side of their brain,” Ling noted. It gives them a chance to think creatively – and that certainly enhances their problem-solving and critical thinking skills, she said. The online course is also necessary, as a third of the students travel on a temporary duty assignment during the semester.

Ling continues focusing on student engagement, looking for ways to make course work interesting and thought provoking. So far, her imaginative efforts have earned her the Teaching with Sakai Innovation Award (TWSIA) for 2015. The award recognizes educators from institutions around the world for their excellence in teaching and learning.

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About the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences

The Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences, founded by an act of Congress in 1972, is the nation’s federal health sciences university and the academic heart of the Military Health System. USU students are primarily active duty uniformed officers in the Army, Navy, Air Force and Public Health Service who receive specialized education in tropical and infectious diseases, TBI and PTSD, disaster response and humanitarian assistance, global health, and acute trauma care. A large percentage of the university’s more than 5,200 physician and 1,000 advanced practice nursing alumni are supporting operations around the world, offering their leadership and expertise. USU also has graduate programs in biomedical sciences and public health committed to excellence in research, and in oral biology. The University’s research program covers a wide range of clinical and other topics important to both the military and public health. For more information about USU and its programs, visit www.usuhs.edu.