THE UNION-RECORDER

GCSU nursing students learn real-life skills through escape room scenarios

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GCSU nursing students respond to a series of questions about their 'patient' before determining that he has measles. (Natalie Davis Linder/Staff)

Just before Halloween, nursing students from Georgia College & State University assessed a series of pretty serious health scares live and up close.

Fortunately for all involved, the risk was contained.

It was all part of the GCSU nursing program's Trick-or-Treatment experience at the college's Simulation and Translational Research Center.

Undergraduate nursing students, 257 in all, navigated four medical escape rooms featuring emergency scenarios where they were tasked with answering medical questions to help treat their "patient" by recognizing safety errors and responding accordingly. After solving each case, the students, in groups of four or five, moved on to the next room.

Amelia Tyler and Madelyn Leroux are both fourth semester nursing students. They arrived at 7 a.m. and were among the first to take part in the simulations.

In one room, a zombie nurse Florence Nightingale relays a series of symptoms at Central State Hospital, and the students had to evaluate them for a patient. After answering a series of questions, they discover that their "patient" has measles.

Tyler said the simulations are an engaging way to learn. Although utilizing the simulators is a part of the nursing program instruction, this is the first year she has participated in Trick-or-Treatment.

"It was really cool," she said. "They've put a lot of work into it."

Leroux agreed.

"I think that it makes it a fun way for us to get hands-on experience while learning," said Leroux. "This experience prepares us for the real world, but we aren't at as much of a risk. We get to make mistakes with no repercussions, and we get to debrief afterward to speak with our professors and other staff to decide what we could have done better to learn what we did wrong."

By late afternoon, every undergraduate GCSU nursing student had gained hands-on experience through the simulations.

The GCSU Simulation and Translational Research Center provides students with hands-on learning opportunities such as these in clinical spaces to better prepare them for real-life work in the field in professional settings such as hospitals and health clinics. Inside the SIM center, located on Roberson Mill Road in the former Department of Labor Office, students complete an average of more than 27,000 total contact hours in simulation experiences each year. The second component, the Skills Acquisition Lab, features functional nursing stations with bays, beds and skill stations where students get to practice their skills with instructors on hand.

The center was previously located on the third floor of Atrium Health Navicent Baldwin hospital before relocating to the building on Roberson Mill Road.

This is the fourth year for Trick-or-Treatment.

"This is our annual patient safety event," said Tiffany Bell, simulation operations manager. Bell helps run the day-to-day operations at the SIM center. "Each semester we take patient safety scores, and the areas where we see that the students are low, we as a team get together to brainstorm ... and we try to create areas where they can learn but in a fun environment."

Patsy Hicks is the simulation and moulage specialist. She helps create the realism pieces such as the simulated injuries and wounds on the manikins used in the simulations.

She said the Trick-or-Treatment escape rooms simulate a hospital setting and allow the students "to come into a safe environment and learn the skills to be able to put them into play."

The simulation experience gives the students the opportunity to make mistakes and learn from them, said Hicks.

"Then we can just flip that switch and start again," she said. "Because the mistakes that you make — those are the ones that you are going to remember so you won't do that again. We've learned that with our students and they like that. ... They get excited if they go in [after making a mistake the first time, and the second time — they've got it. They get really excited about that.

"It makes them take those clinical skills that they've learned ... they have to use the clinical skills in order to solve the case and get through the game and escape. They don't feel as much of the anxiety ... our students feel like they can go and have fun ..."

The scenarios set up in each of the rooms are also based on issues prevalent in the health care field.

"We also pull from what we hear going on in communities and what we feel like our students need to know," Bell said. "Every year it changes."

One room was set up with several safety errors.

"They have to recognize all of those mistakes and correct them in order to get out," said Hicks.

The entire experience is student-driven, Hicks said. Everything from decorating the rooms to conducting the debriefings was led by the students.

While the students learn in a fun environment, for their instructors, the experience is about teaching not only the textbook skills but also the practical skills needed to be successful in the field.

"We want our students not only to know skills but to be able to go into a hospital and be a leader, to walk into a floor and be a team player," said Hicks. "Of course the skills are important, but we want a well-rounded student."