

Certificate program combats Substance Abuse

By Karen Shugart

At the Alamance County middle school where Martina Wells works, she sees a surprising number of students dealing with substance abuse.

Whether it's their own use of drugs or alcohol or their parents' addictions, more families are dealing with such abuse than Wells once thought, and they're dealing with it in an environment where resources can struggle to meet demand.

"It seems like there are not enough substance abuse professionals out there," said Wells, a licensed clinical social worker who's also a part-time student in East Carolina University's substance abuse counseling certificate program.

Demand for substance abuse treatment professionals is growing, whether the need is for counselors at teen-oriented treatment programs, outpatient facilities or on military bases. The U.S. armed forces in particular are in need: Gen. Peter Chiarelli, the Army vice chief of staff, in a Feb. 9 USA Today article said that the Army needs to double its staff of substance abuse counselors to handle the soaring numbers of soldiers seeking alcohol treatment. About 300 more counselors are needed, he told the newspaper.

Even among the civilian population, demand for substance abuse counselors has grown. The federal Bureau of Labor Statistics notes that employment of substance abuse and behavioral health disorder counselors is expected to grow by 21 percent between 2008 and 2018, which is much faster than average for all occupations. The reason, according to the agency, as society becomes more knowledgeable about addiction, more people are seeking treatment. Also, drug offenders are increasingly being sent to treatment rather than to jail.

ECU's Department of Rehabilitation Studies has stepped in to address this need with the substance abuse counseling certificate program. The 12 credit-hour course of study, offered online and on campus, is aimed at a wide range



Dr. Mary Crozier, assistant professor and coordinator of the substance abuse counseling certificate program, facilitates discussions and posts videos for students to watch online at home.

of potential students, whether they be experienced mental health workers hoping to widen their skills or recent graduates who want to inch their way into a master's program. It is the only program in the UNC system that offers all substance abuse counseling certificate courses online.

The certificate program offers students exposure to substance abuse treatment and prevention methods. The online courses give students a chance to enroll regardless of where they work. The flexibility helps students juggle work and family responsibilities, while giving them skills needed to work in substance abuse treatment. "That it was online really made it more enticing for me," said Wells, who lives in Creedmoor, about 100 miles west of Greenville.

The courses feature online lectures from Dr. Mary Crozier, assistant professor and coordinator of the program, and other instructors, who also

facilitate discussions and post videos for students to watch at home. "These are two-hour videos with the guru of substance abuse [counseling] interviewing patients," Crozier said. "They get to hear the thoughts of federal movers and shakers."

Discussion board exchanges can get lively. "They say, 'I never thought of trying that strategy' and 'How do you think it would work with my client?' 'Well, I don't know, but the client and the counselor in my practice tried this and here is how it worked,'" Crozier recalled. "They encourage each other. They coach each other."

The students come from diverse backgrounds and bring disparate skills to the courses. "If you're a police officer or a juvenile worker, a social worker or a dentist, you're going to have a different set of [experiences.]" said Dr. Lloyd Goodwin, professor and interim chair of rehabilitation studies,



who championed the program's creation four years ago.

The program grew out of demand. Providers were clamoring for more staff trained on these issues. Though the rehabilitation studies department already offered a minor in alcohol and drug studies, as well as master's degree in substance abuse and clinical counseling, department officials wanted something that would allow working professionals to get training and expose students to the field.

"This is a way that ECU can branch out, offer courses to a whole new consumer group, basically those who might not have the time or money to get a degree such as a master's degree," Crozier said.

Clayton Sessoms, director of the Division of Continuing Studies, said certificates for years have been an avenue for ECU's goals of access, accommodation and outreach. Technology has expanded the university's reach. "The advent of the online graduate certificate is something that is more than a decade old," Sessoms said.

Fifty-four students are now in the program, quick growth for a certificate

that was first offered four years ago. "I'm as busy as I can be," Crozier said.

For one course, students have to give up an addiction, vice or crutch, such as smoking, diet soda, fast food or depression-driven late-night TV viewing. The students record their experiences, including relapses, and their feelings. "Addictions to work, exercise, food – behavior addictions – are very similar to substance addictions," she said.

A contemporary issues course invites students to discuss the big questions in the field: Should pregnant addicts be given services? Are needle exchange programs a good idea?

Roosevelt Harp, a student in the program, helped soldiers address their substance-abuse problems when he was in the Army. Now retired, Harp is a guidance counselor at Fort Bragg's Soldier and Family Assistance Center, where he helps wounded warriors and their families plan education goals. His clients occasionally confide in him about alcohol and prescription pill abuse. The certificate program has helped him learn about resources and referrals he can recommend, said Harp, who lives in Fayetteville.

The students' endeavors are paying off in the tight job market. Graduates of substance-abuse counseling programs are finding work, Crozier said. Financial stress can be a factor in substance abuse, as some people turn to drugs and alcohol abuse during hard times. That may partly explain why, even in a dismal economy, many employers are hiring. "There are a lot of clients, and there seems to be enough funding for hiring staff," Crozier said.

Harp, now a civilian, wants the certification so he can land one of the many substance-abuse counseling positions advertised on the Army's civilian employment website. "I think I'd be an asset," Harp said. "There is a need."

That need is being recognized. Not long ago, in Alamance County where Wells works, one agency finally began offering a service that had previously been unavailable locally: substance-abuse assessment and counseling for adolescents.

"There's such a need for it," said Wells, who hopes to segue from a school to private practice. "It's a serious problem in our country."

To learn more about the rehabilitation studies program, visit www.ecu.edu/rebb/.



I am an ECU allied health sciences student

Applied for undergraduate admission: 258

Admitted to undergraduate programs: 162

Average GPA of those admitted into undergraduate programs: 3.05

Applied for graduation admission: 976

Admitted for graduate programs: 167

Average GPA of those admitted to the graduate programs: 3.47

Total number of students enrolled in allied health sciences degree and certificate programs in fall 2009: 821

Female students: 680

Male students: 141

White students: 629

Non-white students: 192

Full-time students: 661

Part-time students: 160

In-state students: 731

Out-of-state students: 90

Other important statistics:

The following are departmental enrollments for the 2009-2010 calendar year. Clinical Laboratory Science: 26; Communication Sciences and Disorders: 166; Health Services and Information Management: 220; Occupational Therapy: 60; Physical Therapy: 87; Physician Assistant Studies: 97; Rehabilitation Studies: 115; Graduate Certificate programs: 50