



# Building Bonds and Fostering Belonging: An Undergraduate Capstone Course

Anita Esquerra-Zwiers, PhD, RN, CBS

## BACKGROUND

- Job satisfaction
  - Healthcare ranked last for employee satisfaction with pay compared to 27 other industries (Qualtrics, 2023)
  - RNs: Moderately/Extremely satisfied declined by 8.9% (HRSA Health Workforce, 2024)
  - Physicians: 2022 dropped to 68% (Berg, 2023)
- Turnover Rates
  - RNs: range 8.8% - 37.0% (Haddad, 2023)
  - Physicians: 7.2%, an increase from 5.3% (Bond et al, 2023)
- Expected shortages by 2036
  - RNs: 337,970 full-time equivalent (FTE) (HRSA, 2024)
  - Physicians: 68,020 full-time equivalent (FTE) primary care by 2036 (HRSA Health Workforce, 2023)

## PURPOSE

Develop an undergraduate course to challenge students to create a sense of belonging in their professional careers and beyond.

## SETTING

- **Hope College** is a private four-year liberal arts college with academic excellence and a vibrant Christian faith in a supportive, welcoming community.
- **General Education**, the Anchor Plan, is the heart of a Hope education in which students explore fundamental and emerging questions about humanity, the natural world and God.
- **Capstone Course**, Senior Seminar, senior students gather in seminars to forge communities and again explore big questions about humanity, the natural world, and God through different modes of inquiry.

## STAKEHOLDERS

- College- need faculty to offer more Senior Seminar courses
- Division- need divisional representation of Senior Seminar offerings
- Nursing Department- need adequate staffing to release faculty to teach the course
- Students- topic needs appeals to them

*“When employees feel like they belong, they have a sense that their identities at work are safe, accepted, and welcomed. It’s a social need that affects all parts of life, from home to community. You can achieve a sense of belonging by ensuring employees feel accepted, respected, and valued.”*  
(Modern Health, para 3, 2023)

**Nurse and physician job satisfaction is decreasing, turnover and expected shortages are increasing.**

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## STEPS

- Met with college programs
- Discussed options with nursing department chair
- Obtained nursing faculty input
- Attended Senior Seminar training
- Develop course in alignment with Senior Seminar expectations
- Implement the course Spring 2026
- Evaluate course each semester offered

## THE COURSE

- The BIG Question: How do you build bonds and foster belonging, now and in the future?
- Topics
  - Unpacking you
  - Can you achieve cultural competency?
  - The what, why and how of belonging?
  - Communication- Addressing difficult topics
- Course Materials (ideas)
  - Books:
    - "My Beloved World" by Sotomayor
    - "The Scalpel and the Silver Bear: ..." Alvord & Van Pelt
  - Movies:
    - Everybody’s Work, Shift Films
    - Picture a Scientist, Uprising Productions
  - Experiences:
    - Model in the classroom
    - Simulation/Observation of an “uncomfortable situation”

## CHALLENGES

- Negotiating with administration
- Course release
- Student interest
- Had to shift the primary focus to a topic of the course

## SUCCESSSES

- Discussion vs lecture- Can go deeper with students
- Opportunity to impact more than just nursing/pre-health students



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### Biography

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**Dr. Esquerra-Zwiers holds a BSN from Calvin University, an MNS with a concentration in Health Care Education from the University of Phoenix, and a PhD in Nursing from Rush University. She is an associate professor, registered nurse, lactation specialist, and human milk researcher. She received training in human milk biochemistry, metabolomics, feeding, and milk removal at The University of Western Australia and advanced data analytics, artificial Intelligence, and machine learning with AIM AHEAD All of Us, funded by the National Institute of Health. Her current research program focuses on lactation outcomes, predictive factors, human milk biomarkers, human milk microbiome, and lactation point-of-care technology. Her passion for diversity, equity, and inclusion lead to her participation in the American Association of Colleges of University's PKAL Summer Leadership Institute and the AACN Diversity Leadership Institute. As she wraps up her year-long sabbatical, she looks forward to integrating the skills and knowledge learned in these two programs into her teaching, scholarship, and service.**

### Contact Information

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