



AZITA EMAMI REMEMBERS HER FIRST, EYE-OPENING TOUR OF THE MAGNUSON HEALTH SCIENCES BUILDING AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON.

EMAMI EXPECTED TO SEE A GLEAMING, HIGH-TECH, WELCOMING SITE—ONE THAT MIRRORED THE EXCELLENCE OF THE UNIVERSITY THAT HAD HIRED HER. WHAT SHE SAW, INSTEAD, WERE WINDOWLESS CLASSROOMS, MAZELIKE HALLWAYS AND ISOLATED LEARNING SPACES.

“I THOUGHT THAT I’D GONE BACK IN TIME,” SAYS EMAMI, THE EXECUTIVE DEAN OF THE UW SCHOOL OF NURSING. “I TOLD MY LEADERSHIP TEAM THAT FUNDING AN ADVANCED, MODERN LEARNING SPACE WAS GOING TO BE MY FIRST PRIORITY.”

Technological shifts

When the Magnuson Health Sciences Building opened in the 1960s, it reflected the needs and standards of the day. Over the past 50 years, those needs and standards have changed considerably.

“If you look at educational technology, especially in nursing and medicine, there has been a massive shift in the last decade or so,” says Shari Ireton, assistant dean of marketing and communication. “In some ways, today’s students are like pilots—they learn and practice their skills in high-tech simulation labs, and they increasingly use augmented and virtual reality.”

Unfortunately, the Health Sciences Building—which now houses the schools of nursing, pharmacy, medicine, dentistry, and public health—lacks the capacity to keep up with technology. Nor does it accommodate robust remote learning access, essential to the students and professionals who participate in the university’s regional medical education programs.

“Our students deserve the best, most advanced learning spaces to prepare for their careers,” says Emami. The other health sciences deans were in full agreement. In August 2020, the university broke ground on a \$100 million health sciences building for high-tech, interprofessional teaching.

“This new site will help us create an environment where we can change the culture and mindset of healthcare,” says Emami.

Changing the culture

Just as the last half-century has seen enormous advances in technology, it has also seen fundamental changes in the practice of teaching and in health care. Both fields have experienced a shift toward collaboration and teamwork.

For instance, teachers are no longer moored behind a lectern in a huge hall—at least, not all the time. Instead, modern teaching also requires flexible spaces that allow teachers and students to transition to small-group work, discussion and interaction.

With classrooms of various sizes, and with multiple seminar rooms, collaboration spaces and study areas, the new building will accommodate new styles of learning. It will also encourage the growth of interprofessional education, where students from different health sciences disciplines can learn and work together, breaking down the silos among the professions.

Breaking down these silos is crucial to the future of health care. Fifty years ago, a healthy person might receive care from three health professionals; today, that number has risen to 16. What’s more, studies show that roughly 80% of patient safety issues are related to miscommunication among health care providers.

“Our new facility will allow us to educate these students together, to have them solve problems as collectives, so that they’re ready for the teamwork needed to care for their patients,” says Emami.

The COVID-19 effect

If COVID-19 has highlighted the importance of teamwork in saving lives, it has also put the weaknesses in our health care system, such as racial inequity, on clear display.

At the same time, the pandemic has brought another emergency to the fore: a critical lack of nurses.

Resolving the nursing shortage is such an urgent need that the UW’s Center for Health Workforce Studies has convened a task force—including representatives from the UW School of Nursing, hospitals, insurance providers, other nursing colleges and professional nursing organizations—to form a plan of action. The new facility, which will help the UW recruit students, then teach them team-oriented practices, will be an integral part of that plan.

“We know teamwork is crucial to good health, and nurses are the center of those teams,” says Ireton. “This new building is going to help the university set the foundation for 21st-century health care.”

Reaching for the sky

On August 27, 2020, Dean Emami and fellow health sciences deans donned their masks to attend a small, socially distanced groundbreaking for the new health sciences building.

The facility is not yet fully funded—the Washington State legislature contributed \$70 million to its creation, and the university is looking to a generous community to contribute the remaining \$30 million—but Emami knows that donors will take up the challenge. The stakes are high, as are the rewards.

“There’s so much potential here,” says Emami. “Thousands of students will pass through these doors, and when they graduate, they will be taking care of our communities.”

With the new building, Emami envisions a future where more classes will become truly interprofessional, where students will learn and achieve together, build teamwork among the professions and above all, improve health care for everyone in our society.

“The sky will be our limit,” says Emami.

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