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Filomena Flores,
associate professor of nursing,
on helping students from diverse backgrounds realize their potential



It was an early December morning. For most of us the day hadn't even begun, but that was not the case for Filomena Flores. She and two of her nursing students were already making their rounds at the Veterans Administration Medical Center.... That's when we saw her.

The associate professor's white jacket fluttered in the breeze created by her brisk walk. Wordlessly, she guided her students so the patients were unaware of their inexperience. She greeted everyone with a warm, caring smile — the kind of smile we like to see on the faces of the nurses who take care of us when we are sick or hospitalized.

Filomena Flores understands the concept of "reaching out." She does it

all of the time — in hospitals, in nursing homes, and in her classrooms and labs. She reaches out to her patients with a tender hand, and then offers that same hand to her students, teaching them invaluable lessons they couldn't possibly learn from their textbooks.

Recalling her own educational experiences in her homeland, she explains, *"In the Philippines, one cannot become a teacher of nursing without taking education courses. I studied the principles and practices of teacher education. Consequently, I use conceptual methods, teaching students similarities and differences of diseases, for example."*

However, similarities and differences aren't limited to the *"lesson of the day."* Professors are constantly challenged by the everchanging make-up of the student body. In five short years, Flores has seen an astonishing increase in minority students enrolling in the nursing program. Today, Hispanics, Asians, and African-Americans sit in 47 percent of the chairs in her classroom, compared with four or five minority students per class in 1985.

Because of language barriers and, in some cases, differences in social and economic standings, these students sometimes need help with the difficult courses that are required early in the nursing program. But Flores, a pioneer in the field of educating minority students, asserts that they have as much potential as their American-born counterparts.

"All it takes is a different teaching approach," Flores says. *"I understand it because I'm a minority myself; I know how they feel. English-speaking students find it easier to understand or grasp what's in a textbook or what is explained because this is their language."*



Nursing students Bernadette Guevara (left) and Nancy Kwong-Rasmussen discovered that laughter is the best medicine, especially when it's provided by the patient. Sharing this moment is associate professor Filomena Flores (far right).

But ethnic students require a special way of teaching. When I write a difficult word on the board, I ask them what it means to them, so there will be a literal understanding.

"I don't want to say that ethnic students are not bright," she continues, *"because they receive some of the best grades in class. I speak for those who came to this country when they were older ... those who were not born here. Imagine, nine years ago some of these were non-English speaking students. Now, they're in a nursing program, with all of its difficult terms, and they're succeeding."*

They're succeeding because of people like Filomena Flores, who is interested in *all* of her students and finds herself putting in extra hours to tutor anyone who seeks help. She established the Faculty Support Program that provides supplemental review classes for first-year nursing students. Students who have participated in this program have raised their grades significantly.

But Flores doesn't stop here. In addition to the review classes, she encourages students to meet with her on a one-on-one basis. Student demand for this type of tutoring is substantiated by her appointment schedule; it's booked to the max.

"What did I get myself into?" she asks, admitting that it's not unusual for one lesson to be repeated six or seven times. *"You see, I've presented the material in class. Then I have to do it again and again."* Looking up from her desk, Filomena Flores reveals that warm, caring smile and continues, *"But when I see the joy in their faces because they were able to understand the lesson ... and when the grades are out, and they squeal with delight, 'I made it' ... that, to me, is why I do it."*