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### **Shirley Comer: Combining Health Care Leadership and Legal Expertise**

Office of Marketing and Communications

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# Shirley Comer: Combining Health Care Leadership and Legal Expertise



Shirley Comer combines health care leadership and legal expertise to bring a broad perspective to her classroom as a nursing lecturer at [Governors State University](#). After experiencing burnout as an Intensive Care Unit nurse, Dr. Comer earned a law degree and opened her own law office. Later, she returned to nursing, began teaching at GSU, and earned a Doctorate of Nursing Practice.

Comer, now in her 15<sup>th</sup> year at GSU, guides the University's use of simulators—lifelike mannequins with advanced mechanical qualities—for the [College of Health and Human Services](#). Students in the [Nursing](#), [Occupational Therapy](#), [Physical Therapy](#), and [Social Work](#) departments use the simulators to practice diagnostic and treatment techniques before working on real patients. She recently coordinated a five-hour event that introduced 100 local high school students to medical simulation—one of the reasons Comer's colleagues recognized her with a 2020 Faculty Excellence Award.

**GSU Newsroom: After spending so much of your career in nursing and law, what brought you to teaching?**

**Comer:** It was one of those serendipitous things. I had my own private law office for a while. One day, a nurse friend called to ask whether I would be willing to take a clinical group in the associate degree in nursing program at Indiana University.

When I started working with the students, I realized that was what I had been preparing myself for. All the work I had done prior was leading me to teaching. It was nice to know that I could pass on what I'd learned through all those years of experience at the hospital to a new generation.

### **GSU Newsroom: How do you use simulators in the courses you teach?**

**Comer:** I come up with clinical scenarios where the simulator needs medical attention and the students have to assess his condition. One we call "Sim Man" is our most advanced simulator. As the instructor, I can talk through him to tell students about the patient's symptoms. He has his own heartbeat. His chest rises and falls when he breathes. His eyes dilate. You can get a blood pressure off him.

It is a little freaky at first to watch the mannequin do things that humans can do. Students have to get past the fact that it's a simulator to think about it as a person so they can learn how to treat a real human before they're in a clinical environment.

I also work with GSU's Occupational Therapy (OT) and Physical Therapy (PT) faculty to use the simulators for their students. For example, PT faculty wanted to ensure that the students they sent to the ICU wouldn't be freaked out by all the monitors and tubes on the patients. OT wanted their students to work with mannequins for practice before treating real people.

### **GSU Newsroom: What is it like teaching students about health assessment virtually?**

**Comer:** I've been teaching health assessment at various universities for 25 years. You have to learn these skills hands-on. If you're learning how to assess someone's chest, you can read in a book where the hand goes and where the stethoscope goes, but it's a lot different when someone shows you.

We've had to go to online courses during the pandemic, of course. I've been trying to work around the fact that I can't meet with students in person by making a lot of videos to explain things. It's gone well so far, but when the COVID restrictions loosen up, I can relate those skills that you have to pass from nurse to nurse.

### **GSU Newsroom: In addition to teaching students at other levels, you teach doctoral nursing students. How do those courses differ?**

**Comer:** In the doctoral program, I teach some of the nurse educator courses and classes on vulnerable populations and spirituality. Those are my favorite to teach. That's when I can start mixing in more of my legal knowledge. There are fewer students in those classes, and many of them are in administrative roles, so they understand they have to know more of the legal side of the profession.

The spirituality course isn't about religion, per se, but it includes spirituality, diversity, and social justice. It's an interesting course to teach because there are so many topics involved, and students do a lot of self-reflection. In other courses we're trying to teach clinical skills, while in this class we're asking them to look back to see how they've incorporated these additional elements into their practice.

In the vulnerable populations course, we look at what makes specific populations vulnerable within the health care environment — whether we're talking about prisoners, children, or the fragile elderly — and how to intervene with those populations.

**GSU Newsroom: What would you like to focus on next at GSU?**

**Comer:** I would love to see the Nursing program grow more, especially our doctoral program, and would love to add a forensic track to our program.

I would also really love for us to have a nurse-run clinic on campus. It would be great for our students and great for the university. We know from research that most GSU students come from the immediate area, and when they graduate, they go back to the immediate area to practice in. I always feel like we can improve the health of the community through our work.

At GSU, we offer people a unique opportunity to expand their education. In our local area, there aren't many universities that offer advanced education. Without GSU, if you wanted to get a master's or doctoral degree, you would have to go downtown.