

Faculty Profile: Suzanne Leveille, Professor of Nursing

She seeks to understand how chronic musculoskeletal pain contributes to falls in older people.

Whether teaching at UMass Boston or conducting research, Suzanne G. Leveille, professor of nursing here at UMass Boston, prefers a hands-on approach.

My work tends not to be so theoretical,” Leveille says, who worked as a geriatric clinical nurse specialist before returning to graduate school for her PhD in Epidemiology at the University of Washington in Seattle. “I work on interventions that potentially improve daily functioning and reduce the burden of pain.”

As an epidemiologist, Leveille’s main purpose for teaching epidemiology is so that nursing students “can understand the principles and methods of epidemiology and be able to critically interpret methods and findings in the literature,” she says.

“When I teach epidemiology, I really teach it in depth,” she says. “I believe it’s important that nurses are able to look at this scientific evidence with a critical eye and put it into context for clinical applications as well as for research and scholarship.”

The nursing field, Leveille says, is transitioning to the point where nurses have more and more opportunities to engage in research and actively participate in academic and research discussions.

“I think learning to do population health research is critical for nurses,” she says. “We have so much more access to data, and because of that, nurses have opportunities to intervene at the population level. Using epidemiologic methods will give nurses a tool for doing this type of research and building the evidence in this area.”

When Leveille isn’t teaching courses at UMass Boston, she’s devoting her attention to her research projects, like the MOBILIZE Boston Study. (see www.umb.edu/mobilize/) Funded by the National Institute on Aging, MOBILIZE Boston is a longitudinal cohort of older adults living in the Boston area.

- **Publications (highlights):**
 - 104 peer-reviewed journal articles, 6 book chapters
- **Editorial Board Memberships**
 - XX vs. YY, *The International Journal of Sex Differences in the Study of Health, Disease, and Aging*
 - *Journal of Pain Management (UK-based journal)*
- **\$3.1 million RO1 grant from the National Institute on Aging for the five-year project Attentional Demands of Chronic Pain and Risk for Falls in Older Adults**

Building on results from an earlier phase of the study, Leveille and her research team want to better understand how chronic musculoskeletal pain contributes to falls in older people.

The cohort, which began in 2005-2008, enrolled about 800 adults aged 70 and older who are now being assessed for a number of factors related to pain, mobility, and cognitive function.



Suzanne G. Leveille

“I want to understand the pathway between pain and falls. Pain in some sense may serve as a distracter when people are trying to move from one place to another,” Leveille says.

These distracters, she says, may be to blame for falls among adults who are unable to respond fast enough to prevent a fall.

In addition to analyzing her results from the MOBILIZE Boston cohort, Leveille also researches with a team at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center. There, they study the impact of giving patients access to their notes from office visits through patient Internet portals.

“Rarely if ever have providers given patients full access, especially providers’ notes,” Leveille says, “so we involved patients from three healthcare systems, and surveyed doctors and patients before and after a year to see what the impact was.”

Providers, Leveille says, are concerned about a potential increase in phone calls from patients who have concerns about what they read in the notes, which would make an already-busy office even busier. But despite the initial concerns, Leveille says she and her colleagues have not seen much of a shake up during the study.

“This is an important step for patient empowerment,” she says of the study. “It’s also an important step for giving patients information for what has until now been challenging to access.”

In light of her multiple grants, research projects, publications, and teaching responsibilities, it’s no surprise that Leveille received the Spirit of Nursing Award at UMass Boston when she recently gave the nursing keynote speech for College’s Annual Research Day.

But Leveille says that all of her accomplishments are possible because epidemiology involves many collaborations with others in the field.

“Once you have a team of scientists to work with, it’s really helpful,” she says. “To do a good job you want to make sure to cover all the disciplines in your work. It’s important to be multi-disciplinary to work with people across scientific fields.”