



The Online Option for Continuing your Nursing Education

By Diane E. Scott, RN, MSN

For many professional nurses, distance learning by the internet has become an increasingly popular means by which to continue their nursing education. During the past decade, the online options for continuing an advanced or graduate nursing degree has led to an unprecedented amount of choices, options and flexibility to nurses at all stages of their nursing careers.

To learn more about the online option for continuing nursing education, the Center for American Nurses recently talked with Ann H. Cary, PhD, MPH, RN, A-CCC, the Director of the School of Nursing, Loyola University New Orleans and a Robert Wood Johnson Executive Nurse Fellow for 2008-2011.

Center: What do you attribute the popularity of online courses as a means for nurses to continue their education?

Dr. Cary: We lead busy lives with work, family and personal commitments. For many people, being in one place for set times each week does not meet their lifestyle and actually may interfere with work and family commitments. Taking courses online allows the student to pace the engagement within the timelines set by the instructor.

In addition, pursuing online options for education gives nurses many more choices of schools as they are not limited to educational opportunities within their own geographic area. At Loyola University in New Orleans, we have students throughout the country that attend our BSN completion and/or graduate degree programs that may never step foot in the state of Louisiana until graduation.

Center: How difficult is it for nurses that are not computer savvy to learn to take courses online?

The Center for American Nurses is a professional association whose mission is to create healthy work environments through advocacy, education, and research.

Dr. Cary: The key to mastering this is your attitude and openness for learning new ways of working and relating in courses. Regardless of your comfort with technology, there is a learning curve to taking an online course. You will need to get used to the “feel” for how information is displayed, located and responded to. It is like looking for different doors in a room. Once a learner gets used to the style of the course, they will find they can more quickly navigate through the course. It is quite common for tutorials to be provided and real time 24/7 help via the phone or email to be provided as well.

While investigating an online course, most providers will describe the minimum technology and connectivity requirements. A learner who is techno-phobic will have a harder time grasping the value of the learning experience because they may be so distracted by the technology learning curve.

Center: How do courses offered online differ than the traditional on-campus method?

Dr. Cary: The instructional design of online courses utilizes technology to provide the learning environment for cognitive, affective and behavioral interactions. Student interaction with their classmates and faculty require the ability to “connect” with the course either synchronously (real time) or asynchronously (on their own time) and thus can provide convenience to “attend” the class anytime: 24/7. Discussions take place among classmates one by one like in an instant messenger format if students and instructor happen to be online

at the same time. Students need to have access to software and hardware that will support the learning management system which supports the course. Exams may have to be proctored if taken offsite. There are no travel and parking issues with online courses.

Center: What factors should students consider when choosing a program?

Dr. Cary: Reputation of the faculty who actually teach in these programs, accreditation of the program and institution, success of their graduates in the job market and for further education, satisfaction of the students/graduates/alumni, and match with your professional goals and the quality of the program area.

Students need to select programs that are of quality and have the accreditation credentials to match the “brick and mortar institution” programs. Faculty should be well credentialed and part of a regular institutional faculty who come under the same hiring, promotion and evaluation policies as on-campus programs. Beware of diploma mills-either in on-campus or online programs.

Center: How is the faculty/student relationship fostered in an online program?

Dr. Cary: We do this by starting out with ice breaking exercises to let the students and faculty get to know each other. Students/faculty is asked to read all about their classmates through their postings and to respond to commonalities and differences as they explore their partners in the

learning experience. Students can also reach out to others in the course offline to explore personal interests. I have seen where students who have been in courses together respond to these with questions about how a person or their family is doing since last semester, sharing journeys/challenges they have encountered in their work lives, and even swapping recipes and instituting cookie exchanges at the holidays as they mailed their best cookies across the country. Important to the faculty and student relationship is faculty responsiveness in a timely manner to the student's questions and projects so that students feel like the faculty is there and interested in them and their learning.

Center: What types of students thrive in an online program?

Dr. Cary: All students can thrive in online programs with an open attitude to learning different ways to learn. Online learning allows the student to be more reflective in responses before they write their responses and thus I have found that often the students appear more thoughtful in their approaches and have had time to integrate their learning materials. Independent students who like to move at their own pace and enjoy being a partner in the learning process do well.

Center: Are there any pitfalls to these types of programs?

Dr. Cary: If a student lives in a geographic area challenged by connectivity issues, they will be frustrated with the lack of ability to dial up, log on or get into cyberspace. If a student is traveling

during the course, they may travel into regions or time periods in a region where connectivity becomes an issue. Having your own laptop and wireless provider can enable a student to rarely miss connections when travelling.

Center: What about the clinical practicum, how is that done in an on-line program?

Dr. Cary: Practicum preceptors are identified in the community where a practicum is held. The faculty member for the course needs to provide the same oversight of the student and preceptor as they would in a local, on-campus course. More frequent communication between the faculty member and preceptor may be warranted due to distance. Clear expectations and orientation of the preceptor and student by the faculty member is important. A learning contract where all agree to the processes and outcomes is a frequently employed instrument to guide the learning experience.

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