Increasing Course Enrollment Through Technology Applications

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Flexibility and accessibility are key characteristics that describe the non-traditional college student seeking advanced degrees. Delta State University School of Nursing placed the RN to BSN and MSN programs online in 2002 to determine if this would increase enrollment in these programs. After two years in this web-based format, the RN to BSN program enrollment has increased by 340 percent. The total MSN student population has grown 525 percent since implementing each track in online format.

This presentation focuses on an online enrollment enhancement project funded by a grant from the Center for Disease Control (CDC) and the Delta Health Alliance. The Delta State University School of Nursing Health Education Project implemented this project to expand the School's enrollment in RN-BSN and MSN nursing programs. Furthermore, the goal of the project includes a dedication to increasing the numbers of professionally prepared BSN and MSN nurse graduates who remain to serve in the growing nurse vacancies across the 16 counties included in the Mississippi delta.

Methods used to enhance current programs and strengthen the two programs enrollment focused on seeking input from RNs in the workforce as to barriers they faced in enrolling in advanced degree programs. Many graduates of ADN and Diploma programs are working parents that are tied to shifts that are not conducive to traditional classroom schedules. Others are single parents unable to sacrifice family obligations for classes during the day and work at night. Other nurses are older or in career tracks that require advanced degrees. These nurses' tell us that nursing programs need to be more flexible in course offerings, be able to meet the needs of a variety of work schedules, and allow students more degree possibilities outside the traditional classroom setting.

In 2001, the School of Nursing utilized grant funding to enhance and upgrade all computers in faculty offices, create a SMART classroom, purchase computer equipment for a computer lab on the School of Nursing grounds, and implement online course tools through WebCT to begin our efforts in meeting this target groups needs. Flyers were then mailed to all registered nurses in the state of Mississippi to inform them of the implementation of the change to a non-traditional online nursing program in the RN-BSN and MSN programs.

During the first year after placing these programs online, there was a seventy percent increase in RN-BSN enrollment and a 240 percent increase in MSN enrollment. Enrollment increases have continued for the past three years. Current enrollment demonstrates an additional increase from the first year of 110 percent, an increase in the third year of online offerings in the RN-BSN program alone as compared to the pre-online program. The MSN program growth has seen a two hundred percent increase in student in the Nurse Educator track, a two hundred percent increase in the Family Nurse Practitioner track, and a nine hundred percent increase in enrollment in the Nurse Administrator track since 2002. Finally, DSU MSN graduates have had a 100 percent first write pass rate on the national certification exam since the online program was started five years ago.

The following table depicts enrollment trends for the RN-BSN and MSN Programs for the DSU School of Nursing since 2000. The table provides information on growth in the programs by actual number of students enrolled in a full time or part time plan of study with the percent change in growth given from the previous year's enrollment.

Academic Year	Total Population RN-BSN Students	Total Enrolled Full-time Graduate (MSN) Students*	Total Enrolled Part time Graduate (MSN) Students*
2000 -2001	6	23	13
2001 – 2002	8* 23% increase in enrollment	20 12% decline in enrollment	6 54% decline
2002 – 2003	10 25% increase in enrollment	7 ** 65% decline in enrollment	9** 50% increase in enrollment
2003 – 2004	17 70% increase in enrollment	24 240% increase in enrollment	20 122% increase in enrollment
2004 – 2005	34 100 % increase in enrollment	32 33% increase in enrollment	23 15% increase in enrollment
2005 – 2006	13 38% decline in enrollment	28 9% decline in enrollment	37 60% increase in enrollment

* Initial "Green Blitz" campaign. Graduates and alumni from ADN programs across the state of Mississippi were mailed a one page flyer with information on the RN-BSN and MSN program options and the online nature of course offerings.

**Enrollment in the MSN program was suspended due to low enrollment and limited numbers of MSN program faculty. Students enrolled in MSN courses were allowed to continue in their curriculums; however, no new students were accepted.

All School of Nursing faculty members have office PCs with internet capabilities, statistical programs, e-mail, & publishing programs to aid in producing quality educational materials to students. The Health Education Project office is equipped with Impatica & Respondus software programs to load content such as Power Point presentations & online tests into courses to ensure seamless operation within the WebCT virtural community. All members of the School of Nursing faculty have received training in WebCT course development and maintain proficiency by attending seminars and programs offered by the Delta State University Office of Information Technology. Many have obtained added training in other web-based educational offerings and courses to enhance their skills in teaching in the virtual community. Several faculty members in the School of Nursing have been invited to be guest presenters at the Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning Creating Futures Through Technology Workshops in based on their expertise in online course development and management.

The School of Nursing website has been updated to include the School of Nursing Student Handbook, student forms, links to faculty and organizational websites, as well as links to the School's honor society & Student Nurses' Association sites to provide students with unlimited access to University and School of Nursing related documents. Additionally, to ensure student's maintain access from a distance to the DSU Library and the University's online resources databases, the W. B. Robert's Library personnel provide instructional sessions with all incoming nursing classes. These orientation sessions include opportunities to have practice sessions to encourage students to use and access services.

The enrollment increase project has been exponentially positive and the students are very pleased with both their educational opportunities, class offerings, and abilities to maintain a functional personal and professional life while earning an advanced degree. With the beginning of a new academic year, the enrollment increases are projected to remain consistent with admission granted for August 2006 to approximately twenty prospective RN-BSN students. In addition the School of Nursing recently accepted thirty new MSN students; 24 FNP students (a cap was placed at this number due to limited faculty), four Nurse Administrator students, and four Nurse Educator students. Provisional admission has been granted to twelve MSN students who were not accepted into the FNP track (due to the enrollment cap). These students will be allowed to enroll in the Nurse Administrator or Nurse Educator track as an option for admission into the program. The Dean of the School of Nursing is diligently seeking additional faculty members for all programs to handle the increasing enrollment and to meet the growing demand for these two programs of study.