

## **From Access to Graduate Programs – An extensive array of learning opportunities for nursing and health science students at Lakehead University**

### **Opportunity**

Lakehead University in Thunder Bay serves both the vast area of northwestern Ontario, an area of 550,000 square kilometres with numerous small and remote communities including many Aboriginal communities, as well as Central Ontario through its campus in Orillia. Technology-assisted distance education offers access to educational opportunities in these regions, expanding opportunities for learning, career choices, and economic and community development. As stated in the Lakehead University Academic Plan 2012-2017, “Our connections to community are explicit and ever expanding as we move to enlarge relationships and student learning opportunities while embracing our role as a vital contributor to economic development.”

The need for training for nurses and other health professionals is acute and using online delivery to enable students to stay in their communities to learn has been an effective strategy in expanding access and encouraging graduates to remain in their communities.

Within the Faculty of Health and Behavioural Sciences, the School of Nursing, the Gerontology Program, and the Department of Health Sciences all offer online programs that serve the learning needs of a variety of health professionals at all levels. Students have access to resources ranging from courses in a program to qualify them to apply to a nursing degree program to an online Master’s degree.

### **Innovation**

Online programs in the School of Nursing, the Gerontology Program, and the Department of Health Sciences are offered to support access to the Bachelor of Science in Nursing, and to provide the Community-Based Collaborative Bachelor of Science in Nursing Program, the Interdisciplinary Palliative Care Certificate Program, the Interdisciplinary Certificate in Dementia Studies, and the Primary Health Care Nurse Practitioner Program. A Masters of Public Health is also offered online. Each of the programs fills a particular need for learning, access, and flexibility for students.

**Native Nurses Entry Program:** This program, funded through Health Canada and the Ontario government’s Aboriginal Post-Secondary Education and Training fund, was

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established to enhance registration in the Bachelor of Science in Nursing Program for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students, with the ultimate goal of increasing the number of Aboriginal nurses. The program requires nine months on-campus, which has presented challenges for some of the students as they were torn between family, community, and academic responsibilities.

In order to lessen the challenges of leaving their community, three of the courses, study skills, English, and mathematics, are now offered through a hybrid learning pilot project, using web streamed videoconferencing. Lakehead works with KO Telemedicine (KOTM) which delivers clinical, educational, and other services via videoconferencing and advanced information technology to First Nations communities in northwestern Ontario. The lectures are enhanced with the use of online chats and archived for later reference. The students come to campus for a shorter period now, to take courses in chemistry and biology that require labs and other on-site facilities. This hybrid delivery model is being evaluated for future offerings.



Community-Based Collaborative Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BScN) Program: This four-year degree program is offered in collaboration with Confederation College in Thunder Bay to students in four communities in the region – Dryden, Sioux Lookout, Fort Frances, and Kenora. The students stay in their communities for all courses, coming to Thunder Bay for three weeks for clinical placements after they have completed their third year. Using live videoconferencing, classes and labs are delivered and archived, with on-site instructors to support the lab sessions.

The program uses the same curriculum as the four-year on-campus BScN at Lakehead and the delivery is done through videoconferencing facilities at Confederation College. The electives can be taken online through Continuing Education and Distributed Learning at

Lakehead. One cohort at a time is enrolled in the program – the second group began the program in 2010.

Primary Health Care Nurse Practitioner (PHCNP) Program: A consortium of nine Ontario universities offers this program: Lakehead, York, McMaster, Ottawa, Laurentian, Western, Windsor, Queen's, and Ryerson. It is for registered nurses who wish to specialize in primary health care in community health centres, Aboriginal centres, family health teams, and other facilities. All of the courses are delivered online, with five of the seven courses requiring attendance at labs and tutorial on campus. At Lakehead, this entails one weekend a month.

Program delivery involves discussion forums, virtual classrooms, books, tutorials, online print resources, library resources, as well as clinical labs and placements. The virtual classroom sessions are archived so that access is available at any time.

The University of Ottawa serves as the hub for the distance education team, with course instructors coming from a number of institutions. As a member of the consortium, Lakehead is able to offer the PHCNP Program to students in northwestern Ontario. There are almost 200 students currently enrolled across the nine universities and the number will increase in September 2012.

Interdisciplinary Certificate in Dementia Studies and Interdisciplinary Certificate in Palliative Care Programs: The two online certificate programs offered in collaboration with the Gerontology Program consist of four, university-level half courses, of which three courses are required and one is an elective. The courses are delivered over a six or twelve week time frame through web-based learning.

Continuing Education and Distributed Learning provides templates for course development and assessment. As students come from many different academic units and health professions, interprofessional education is strongly promoted within the certificate programs through small group discussions, assignments, case-based learning, and online cafés. Main discussion boards are commonly used for communication and asking questions.

Master of Public Health (MPH): This is the most popular graduate degree program on campus and is available both synchronously and asynchronously. It is delivered in a classroom for the Thunder Bay cohort and offered live through videoconferencing over the web. Currently, the web conferencing software WebEx is being tested. The lectures are predominantly scheduled from 7PM to 10PM so that working professionals in the region can attend – in person or online. The lectures are archived as well. Within the MPH program are two specializations; one in nursing and the other in nursing with Nurse Practitioner electives.

## Outcomes and Benefits

Native Nurses Entry Program: The program has been successful in helping students stay in their communities for at least part of the access program and work towards the pre-requisites for entry into the Bachelor of Science in Nursing Program.

Community-Based Collaborative Bachelor of Science in Nursing Program: Students live and learn in their home communities and, based on the choices made by the first cohort, the program has been successful in the recruitment, training, and retention of nurses in these communities.

Primary Health Care Nurse Practitioner (PHCNP) Program: The program has an essential role in improving health care delivery, especially in remote communities, as registered nurses are able to become advanced practice nurses and take more active roles in providing primary health care. As they are working full-time, the distance delivery and the asynchronous access to the courses are greatly appreciated.

Interdisciplinary Certificate in Dementia Studies and Interdisciplinary Palliative Care Certificate Program: The completely online programs were developed so that health professionals, such as nurses and social workers, could earn the certificates at a distance. The courses have proven to be of interest to on-campus students as electives in the degree programs or to earn the certificate.

Master of Public Health (MPH): The MPH started as a campus-based program but, based on demand, has become an online synchronous program with an asynchronous option. This has allowed an expansion and diversification of the community of learners, strengthening their opportunities to learn from each other.

## Challenges and Enhancements

Native Nurses Entry Program: The hybrid delivery pilot project program is quite expensive to operate, with the costs of bringing students on campus for even a portion of their learning and, as it is dependent on external funding, there is always a measure of uncertainty about its future. The KOTM technology is reliable but, as it is also used to deliver clinical and other medical applications to the community, the classes can sometimes be pre-empted by a more urgent need for the system.

Primary Health Care Nurse Practitioner(PHCNP) Program: The technology can be challenging at times, but through experience in serving northwestern Ontario, the School of Nursing has developed Plan B to respond to lost signals and lack of bandwidth. Archiving the materials is essential.

Interdisciplinary Certificate in Dementia Studies and Interdisciplinary Palliative Care Certificate Program: As the class enrolments increased to over 200 students in some courses, Lakehead has worked to meet the student demand while also supporting the appropriate teaching strategies, interaction, assignments, and timely provision of feedback for student learning.

Master of Public Health: Technology can be a challenge in the region as there are issues of broadband access, aging technology, and equipment. As Lori Livingston, Dean of Health and Behavioural Sciences, says “if you are fighting with technology, quality becomes an issue”.

## Potential

The possibility of offering the Native Nursing Entry Program through the Orillia Campus is being explored in preliminary discussions with the Aboriginal communities and partner organizations in the region. The classes would be delivered online from Thunder Bay to the Orillia Campus site.

Gwen Wojda is Director of Continuing Education and Distributed Learning (CEDL), a department working with the Faculty of Health and Behavioural Sciences, as well as all other faculties, to deliver distance education. With a mandate to enhance access to educational opportunities particularly for regional learners, Ms. Wojda sees growth in online learning, with more asynchronous course designs, more courses in compressed formats of three- to six-weeks, and more online opportunities for professional development. As well, CEDL is increasingly providing support for on-campus courses, including the use of the learning management system.

Karen Poole, Director of the School of Nursing, is involved in researching needs in continuing nursing education such as an online certificate programs in leadership for nurses.

Dr. Livingston describes the potential as “tremendous” as broadband access is extended. Currently, the Master of Public Health program has enrolment restrictions as there are not enough sections to respond to international demand. By offering the course completely

online, rather than synchronously with a face-to-face class, enrolment could be expanded. Online learning can serve students throughout northwestern Ontario, adding community economic development and industry diversification. Currently, a proposal for a fully online Master of Health Science degree program is awaiting approval from the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities.

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