

## Providing Access and Flexibility – Innovative learning opportunities for nursing students at Nipissing University

### Opportunity

Nipissing University in North Bay has responded to the need for more nurses in Ontario by creating two innovative learning programs. In one program, Registered Practical Nurses (RPN) can study for their Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BScN) online and in clinical settings on a part-time basis. The Scholar Practitioner Program provides a two-year compressed BScN program for those who have a baccalaureate degree.



### Innovation

The two programs use different approaches to pedagogy and technologies for learning – one program is offered online while the other is face-to-face learning, enhanced by technology.

RPN to BScN Blended Learning Program: The program is a five-year part-time program for those with a Registered Practical Nurse diploma registered through the College of Nurses of Ontario who want to earn a Bachelor of Science in Nursing. The Program consists of theory delivered online as well as face-to-face clinical experiences. Partnerships are set up with health care institutions across Ontario so that the students can complete their practicum in settings close to home. The students must have the support of their employers who work with the university to facilitate their clinical experiences. The theory courses are offered through a learning management system (LMS), Blackboard, with syllabi, content, and online assignments supplemented by - at the discretion of the professor - chats, discussion board activities, visuals, audio, and other online teaching and learning tools.

Scholar Practitioner Program: This program, which began in September 2011, is based on the evolving need in health care for nurses who are clinically competent and

theoretically capable scholar practitioners who can participate in knowledge networking within complex health care delivery environments. All students must have a baccalaureate degree in a discipline outside of nursing before enrolling in the two-year, full-time program, in which the majority of time is spent immersed in practice-based settings. The six academic health sciences teaching centres affiliated with the program are based in Toronto and include the following: The University Health Network, The Hospital for Sick Children, Baycrest Geriatric Health Care Centre, Mount Sinai Hospital, Toronto Rehabilitation Institute, and Toronto Public Health. Each health care organization appoints an on-site faculty advisor to support the learning experience through learning technologies and experiential systems. The program's small student cohort accommodates the various needs of the students.

The pedagogy of the Scholar Practitioner Program incorporates narrative inquiry and a learning relationship between faculty and students in interpreting, critically thinking about, and analyzing concepts, ideas, and situations. The overall paradigm is collaborative and discovery based. Students spend the first three weeks of each semester focused on inquiry, with course concepts and learning tools provided online. The students explore the questions posed in each inquiry course through research, learning objects, links to library resources, and collaboration with their fellow students, health care delivery staff, and program faculty. The subsequent nine weeks are dedicated to practice and reflection, as students work in unique clinical settings and integrate the reflective practice process and apply it to their personal learning.

An e-portfolio plays an essential role in the process of narrative inquiry and building evidence-based scholarly practice. Each semester, the student develops an individualized learning plan in collaboration with faculty. The student's plan outlines additional program content and learning processes needed to ensure understanding of core program learning outcomes. Many elements comprise the e-portfolio, such as individual philosophies of nursing, CVs, learning resources, reflection pieces, case studies, multimedia exemplars, and other content related to personal learning journeys. Nipissing uses Mahara, an open source e-portfolio, resume builder, and social networking system. The students choose what they put in their e-portfolios and which parts of it are accessible to others in their cohort.

## Outcomes and Benefits

RPN to BScN Blended Learning Program: The combination of online learning in the theory courses with clinical experiences in settings close to home enables students to keep working and to study on a part-time basis in locations and at times that suits them. This is also a benefit for the employers. The BScN is essential for becoming a Registered Nurse; it is also the means by which the students advance in the scope of their practice and earnings. As the program develops, a cadre of experienced teachers is being established across Ontario, many with experience as online learners.

Scholar Practitioner Program: The goal for the program is to graduate nurses who are the next generation of leaders, self-directed learners who are practice-ready after their intensive experience in the partnering institutions, and open to thinking differently and changing nursing practice. Since they are focused on knowledge creation and sharing as well as evidence-based decision making, they are better equipped to function within the increasingly complex health care environment. Their continued exposure to and experience with technologies for learning, communication, research, and collaboration will equip these nurses with essential skills for modern health care provision.

## Challenges and Enhancements

RPN to BScN Blended Learning Program: Some students have found that online learning is not an appropriate learning approach for them or that working while doing part-time studies is a difficult balance. The majority of students, however, have been successful by using a combination of skills and attitudes including motivation, self-direction, and organization.

Scholar Practitioner Program: The program is built on an innovative approach to nursing education and has taken a number of years and considerable expertise from across Canada to develop. It demands that the students become efficient, motivated, self-directed, and inquisitive learners over the six semesters. They must have the ability to recognize and meet their own learning needs within the context of the learning objectives for the program, the online environment, and the narrative inquiry context of learning.

## Potential

RPN to BScN Blended Learning Program: While the online learning component is currently offered asynchronously, Nipissing is looking at adding virtual office hours, live tutorials, audio conferencing, and other synchronous enhancements. As well, online video streaming that demonstrates all procedures included in the clinical experience may be added through the LMS or links to a video-based site.

Scholar Practitioner Program: The program is presently in its first year and, therefore, performance-and learning-focused findings are limited. There are, however, plans for measuring and assessing students' learning and achievement of outcomes through a comparative study of the three nursing programs Nipissing University offers: the face-to-face model, the RPN to BScN Blended Learning model, and the Scholar Practitioner approach.

Recently, iPads were provided to all faculty members to enhance networking between Nipissing University, program administration, faculty colleagues, and the students themselves. iPads can be used to provide instant access to extensive resources and a

multitude of applications. As technological resources are increasingly integrated within academic and health care systems alike, iPads will be strongly recommended to future students.

## For Further Information

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