



By Jenna Sanders

Distance Education: Can It Go the Distance?

It is no secret to those entering the nursing profession that the nation is in the throes of a nursing shortage, set to leave us short between 400,000 and 1 million RNs by 2020. Coast to coast, prospective nursing students are responding enthusiastically to the call to fill this shortage. But rather than the expected open arms, many are finding long waiting lists and rejection letters. In the 2004-2005 academic year, 72,329 qualified applications were rejected by prelicensure RN programs (NLN, 2007).

Desperate times call for creative solutions, and distance education programs stepped in to fill a need. Allowing students prompt entry into their nursing programs and degrees equivalent to those from brick and mortar institutions, it seems like an ideal solution for many. But does the education measure up to that of traditional schooling? The 2006-2007 NSNA Board of Directors took on that research, and were surprised by the results.

The Board of Directors noted that most distance education programs are of the highest quality, and produce outstanding graduates. Through their research, however, the Board found that there were no clear standards put forth by accrediting bodies to require supervised clinical components concurrent with theory in distance education. While most were found to have healthy clinical components, the board found some that had no requirements and/or gave clinical credit for registration, certifi-



cation, or licensure in other allied health fields such as practical nursing or paramedic training. The National Council of State Boards of Nursing (NCSBN) says, “nursing is a practice discipline in which safety is involved, and students cannot learn critical thinking without practicing with actual patients.” (NCSBN, 2007). The NSNA Board was concerned about the impact that the lack of a supervised clinical experience component could have on patient safety, and felt the need to take action in the form of a resolution at the House of Delegates in Anaheim, CA.

Jennifer Davis and Roberta Loufek were authors of the Board of Director’s resolution entitled, “In Support of Clinical Education Standards for Distance Learners,”

which passed overwhelmingly in the House. Jennifer Davis, current NSNA President, noted, “Passing this resolution put the NSNA on the forefront of this issue. The Board felt it was a powerful statement having nursing students stand up and say that these are the standards we want for ourselves, challenging the professional nursing organizations to reconsider their positions and policies.”

Also of concern to the resolution’s authors was the fact that many who entered these online programs without clinical requirements, some of whom were NSNA members, were doing so unaware that it could hinder their ability to be licensed as a Registered Nurse in some

states or go on for graduate education. Their research showed that some states, including California, would not license graduates of distance programs that lack the minimum clinical hours required for RN licensure.

Additionally, a number of graduate schools are not recognizing nursing education without the clinical component.

The moral of the story is research, research, research. Part of the beauty of the career of nursing is the flexibility provided by the range of degree and education options as well as career specialties available. Before entering any program of nursing, be sure to check with your State Board of Nursing to confirm that your degree will be accepted to sit for the NCLEX. Are you considering graduate school? Verify beforehand that the credits you work so hard to complete in school are going to give you access to earning higher degrees in nursing. Advance career planning can save you heartache in the end. ☹

references

National Council of State Boards of Nursing. (2005). Clinical instruction in prelicensure nursing programs. Retrieved July 14, 2007, from https://www.ncsbn.org/pdfs/Final_Clinical_Instr_Pre_Nsg_programs.pdf

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