



STUDENT PERSPECTIVES

IS THE FAST TRACK TO A HIGHER DEGREE IN NURSING FOR YOU?

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In July of 1996, I faced a career crisis. I was still enjoying bedside nursing, but part of me was rebelling, telling me to make a career change. While I had friends who had left nursing to become real estate agents, financial planners, or sales reps, I decided to look deeper within nursing... I knew that there was a world beyond bedside nursing, and I was ready to find it!

I had an associate degree in nursing, and a bachelor's in social work. At first, I considered a masters in social work, but my heart belonged to nursing. What kind of an advanced education could I get in nursing that would further my career, but still fit my schedule?

I saw an ad in a nursing journal for an accelerated course of study offered in my city geared toward the adult learner who also had a full-time job. Classes were only one night a week, and I could obtain my degree in a relatively short time. This program offered advanced degrees in nursing for either a BSN or MSN, and bridge programs to enable nurses with bachelor's degrees in related fields to get their MSN.

I met with one of the university's counselors and received an information packet that contained the catalogue for the master's in nursing program, a transcript request sheet, and application for the school. I found myself writing a check for the fifty-dollar application

fee, and got a class schedule. I set up a loan appointment to arrange for tuition payment. I was pleased with my decision, but in retrospect I realize I should have compared more programs so I could be sure that I was making the right decision.

When I left the university that day in 1996, I had joined the ranks of the "new" nontraditional nursing student. I was 43 years old, married with two children, and working as an RN. I was also now a full-time student on a part-time schedule.

The adventure began in the student loan office the next day. The program was expensive, but student loans are available through federal student loan programs. It was a big step to go into so much debt, but I equated the loan that I would need to the cost of a luxury car—only this loan was benefitting me for a lifetime. Payments for federal student loans were to begin six months after graduation. I was "banking" on the fact that I was a worthy risk.

I began my academic career the next week on a Monday night. I had to take three "bridging" courses before beginning the MSN course of study. BSN classes were usually five weeks long, and MSN classes ran for six weeks. Next, I began my MSN courses. They met every Wednesday night, which made scheduling the classes into my life easier.

My university was accredited by the National League for Nursing and had high standards for both curriculum and faculty. Most of the professors had doctorates, and were working in their fields of expertise. My program was aptly described as "accelerated." One often needed the new course syllabus to complete the assignment for the first week of each new class prior to even seeing a professor! This was both frustrating and difficult at times. The frustration was in interpreting what the syllabus outlined,

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and the difficulty came from never receiving a break from the course work. The only breaks that the school recognized were Christmas, Thanksgiving, and Independence Day. If you had a class on a Monday, and it was a holiday, you still had to attend.

Class time was only four hours on the one assigned night weekly, and consisted of presentations, lectures, and discussion of assignments. Completing the assignments was time consuming,

and I found study groups to be a necessity. Support systems were also key. I was lucky to have a supportive network of family and friends, and stress reducers such as meditation, relaxation, exercise, and maintaining a sense of humor. Time management was also key. Juggling school, family, and work became a real challenge, and caused some of my peers to drop out.

There were also some surprises I hadn't planned on. About nine months into the program, my class was

informed that we would be required to take thirty-two hours of clinical time, and that we would have a sixty-hour practicum. This was in addition to a master's research thesis project that would take at least six months to complete. All of this had to fit into already busy schedules! None of these hours had been discussed during the information/registration process, and I didn't know to ask. I had only focused on the four hours of class once a week since this was how the program was promot-

ed. Perhaps it was naive of me to think that I could earn an advanced degree in so few hours.

Writing papers was a necessity for this curriculum – it had been years since I had been in school and written a formal paper. Also, I was a student of the 70's. The only computer skill I had was looking up labs at the hospital. Word processing and internet searches were foreign territory to me. However, I had not been a nurse for all of those years without learning something about problem solving.

In the first few months of classes I hand wrote all my papers, and a friend transcribed them on her computer, which forced me to complete my assignments as early as possible. I took free classes in word processing, computer operation, and the internet at the local community college.

There was another obstacle I had to overcome. About four months into the program, I was diagnosed with a serious illness. My medication made me quite ill, and the course of treatment was a year or more. The doctor urged me to choose between work and school. I decided to fulfill my dream—I quit my job and decided to finish school. The financial burden was great, but I had support from my family and friends.

I wasn't the only one with hardships to overcome. Over a two-year period, my classmates lost family members, suffered serious illnesses, changed jobs, and experienced challenges with their children. And yet we all showed up for class, as testimony to our commitment.

In June of 1998, I received my MSN. I felt such a sense of accomplishment! Not only had I overcome many obstacles along the way, but I made lifelong friends.

I now have a new love and respect for the profession of nursing—going back to school rejuvenated my career. I discovered that there are many opportunities within the field of nursing now available to me. Not only have I grown professionally, but personally. Getting my MSN was one of the best things that I have ever done!

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BEFORE YOU PURSUE A HIGHER DEGREE...

- Check the accreditation of the school you are considering attending.
- Compare programs, tuition costs, and services of several schools.
- Don't be "swept off of your feet" by the school recruiter/marketer. Take some time to make a decision about your course of study. Once you start school, you want to be in the right program so that you can finish.
- Become computer literate prior to starting the program. Many community colleges and high schools offer free or low cost computer classes. Also many schools offer online and distance education via the computer that you may want to explore as a learning option.
- Determine how much time your course of study will demand. Time management will be easier if you have an accurate assessment of the number of clinical, practicum, and independent study hours required.
- Incorporate stress reduction activities into your life, such as exercise, and relaxing hobbies. Let your family, friends, and colleagues know they are your support system when the going gets tough.
- Tuition reimbursement is available from some employers for those obtaining a higher degree. Check out this option with your employer to see if any portion of tuition is reimbursed.
- Advocate for yourself by learning as much about your required courses as you can. Many academic counselors have a large student ratio, so it pays to know your schedule and academic requirements. This helps to avoid any surprise classes that were forgotten when graduation time arrives.
- Student loans to help pay for tuition are available. Most do not require repayment until six months after the date of your last class. However, if you quit, your course payment may be required as soon as you leave school. Make sure that you understand all the rules prior to taking out a loan.
- Keep your sense of humor, persevere, and GRADUATE!