

Evaluation to Strengthen Distance Learning Programs

*Kay S. Taube, Barbara Burrell
Sharon R. Nellis, and Patricia A. Lasky*

Abstract

The authors describe how a comprehensive evaluation of a distance education program was used to strengthen and revise the program. The University of Wisconsin Collaborative Nursing Program, a collaborative effort of the five University of Wisconsin institutions that offer nursing education, allows Registered Nurses to complete a baccalaureate degree while remaining in their home communities. The program has been offered since 1996 and has used a variety of distance learning technologies. The comprehensive evaluation focused on:

- Issues of cost and access
- Technologies and learning modalities
- Availability and quality of support services
- Impact of the program on nurses' careers.

The paper describes the program, approach to evaluation, findings, and areas for change resulting from the study.

Introduction

The Collaborative Nursing Program (CNP) is a joint effort of the nursing programs at five University of Wisconsin campuses: Eau Claire, Green Bay, Madison, Milwaukee, and Oshkosh. It was developed in response to a 1993 needs assessment study conducted by the Wisconsin Survey Research Laboratory, a unit within the Continuing Education Extension Division of UW–Extension. This study, which employed weighted sampling techniques, found an estimated 9,000 Registered Nurses in Wisconsin who were interested in using distance learning technologies to complete a baccalaureate nursing degree.

The CNP is offered through distance education technologies and the combined resources of the five UW nursing programs, with additional support and facilitation provided by UW–Extension. One of the University of Wisconsin System's first collaborative distance education programs, the CNP has been available to Registered Nurses since spring semester 1996. Courses are offered by several technologies—audiographics, compressed video, public television,

WisLine¹ telephone discussion sections, and, since spring semester 1998, Internet courses—that make it possible for nurses to remain in their communities and on the job while completing a baccalaureate degree.

CNP students affiliate with one of the five participating UW institutions (Eau Claire, Green Bay, Madison, Milwaukee, or Oshkosh), which becomes their *home institution*—the place where they are admitted, register for classes, apply for financial aid, receive advising and other student services, and ultimately are awarded their degree. As of May 2001, 184 nurses had graduated from this program, although at the time of this study, about 60 nurses had graduated. Around two hundred students are enrolled in one or more nursing courses in any given semester. Nurses who are taking only general education courses do not appear in CNP enrollment totals for that semester. Students are predominantly white and predominantly female, highly motivated, and geographically bound. Most (48%) CNP students are in the forties age grouping and work in acute care settings (55%).

During the fall semester 1998, the Office of Learning and Information Technology (OLIT), UW System Administration agreed to fund an evaluation study of the CNP to learn more about these students' experiences with learning technologies. The study explored four broad features of the program:

- Issues of cost and access
- Technologies and learning modalities
- Availability and quality of support services
- Impact of the program on nurses' careers

Approach

The Wisconsin Survey Research Laboratory (WSRL) was hired to conduct a two-phase evaluation study. Phase 1 (March 1999) consisted of focus groups, one held at Madison with Eau Claire participants linked to this group by compressed video; the other met in Appleton. Participants were eleven randomly selected recent graduates (Eau Claire/Madison group) and five randomly selected current students (Appleton group). Information obtained from focus group interviews shaped and informed the development of the written survey instrument, ensuring that issues students considered important were included in the survey questions.

¹WisLine is a telephone conference service available to Wisconsin educational, governmental, and non-profit groups.

For the second phase of the study, written survey instruments were mailed to all (387) CNP² students and graduates in order to assess the quality and impact of the program. One initial and two follow-up mailings were completed between July and November 1999. Of the entire sample, 231 returned questionnaires for a response rate of 60 percent.

Members of the CNP Steering Committee³ and the director of OLIT reviewed preliminary focus group scripts and draft written surveys with staff of WSRL, recommending some changes in both to more appropriately reflect the program or their evaluative interests in it.

Findings

Across all four areas of the study, current and past CNP students rate the program highly while identifying some areas for strengthening and improving the program.

Issues of Cost and Access: Reasons that nurses gave for choosing the CNP include the program's flexibility (97%), its availability at a convenient distance from home or work (94%), ease of transferring credits (88%), the reputation of the University of Wisconsin (82%), because of program costs (79%), due to information obtained from an adviser (70%), a lack of other options (51%), or a colleague's recommendation (44%).

Respondents were asked about the usual and the farthest distances they traveled, one way, to attend CNP classes. The average *usual* distance traveled was 23 miles, while the average *farthest* distance was 37 miles. On average, respondents lived 61 miles from their home institution, with responses ranging from 1 mile to 346 miles. About 20 percent of CNP students lived 100 or more miles from their home institution.

When asked to compare the value of the education to its costs, nearly three-quarters of CNP students reported the value was equal to or greater than the cost of the program. While 83 percent of CNP students used personal funds to finance their education, 57 percent of respondents reported they received either full or partial

²Eligible subjects were those who had taken one course or more in the CNP prior to the spring 1999 semester.

³The CNP Steering Committee consists of administrators/faculty representatives from each of the five UW institutions with nursing programs. A UW-Extension representative serves as the group's convener/facilitator.

reimbursement from their employer. Thirteen percent of CNP students received scholarships or grants and 8 percent took out loans.⁴

Technologies and Learning Modalities: Almost 85 percent of respondents reported they had access to a computer at home or at work. As age increased, access to computers at home or work increased, with 91 percent of those fifty or older having access to a computer. Most of those with computer access (80%) had PCs; the remaining 20 percent had Macintosh computers. Seventy percent of respondents had Internet access,⁵ 81 percent had CD-ROM drives, and 32 percent had computers with video-audio play capacity.

Most of the CNP courses were offered via audiographics, with the first of the Internet courses, an elective, introduced during the spring semester 1997. An Internet version of a core (required) course was first available spring semester 1998. Ninety percent of survey respondents had taken audiographics courses, 60 percent had taken compressed video and/or television courses, and half had used WisLine or the Internet. Television was ranked as the *easiest* technology to use (90%), followed by WisLine (78%), audiographics (76%), compressed video (74%), and the Internet (71%). However, when asked to rate each of the technologies according to *effectiveness* as a way to learn, an inverse relationship appears; the Internet was rated good or excellent by 85 percent, followed by compressed video (72%), television (71%), audiographics (66%), and WisLine (63%). The Internet was also identified by most respondents as their preferred (first choice) of learning technologies.

Learners were most pleased with the technical support provided for the Internet (84%) and least satisfied with the technical support available for compressed video (68%). They were most pleased with the orientation given for the public television course (78%) and least satisfied with the orientation to compressed video (57%).

Availability and Quality of Support Services: Advising (for information on courses, program planning, financial aid, and other information) was the most highly used support service (75%). About 25 percent of respondents reported using either the Independent Learning Bookstore or HELP⁶ advisers for information about

⁴About 40% of CNP students reported more than one source of funding for their education, e.g., a combination of employer reimbursement of tuition and personal funds for texts and travel.

⁵In a 1997 survey, only 43% of CNP students had Internet access.

⁶Higher Education Location Program, a toll-free, systemize telephone advising service, providing information for all campuses in the University of Wisconsin System.

courses, financial aid, or other information. Respondents use of other support services was low; those reported include computer labs at their home campus (17%), orientation tours of the home institution library (15%), computer labs at distance learning sites (12%), orientation tours of their home institution (10%), and contacting Learning Innovations or campus staff for help with on-line courses (9%). Only 7 percent of respondents report using the Distance Education Clearinghouse Web site for maps and directions to classes, and 4 percent say they used the Clearinghouse Web site to download book order forms.

Respondents were asked about use of on-line library services made available to them through Wisconsin Interlibrary Services (WILS). Services used included on-line database searches (62%), reading on-line journal articles (52%), requesting books or articles through interlibrary loan (28%), and requesting an orientation to electronic library services (16%).

“As age increased, access to computers at home or work increased, with 91 percent of those fifty or older having access to a computer.”

From a list of potential problems/issues, respondents were asked to identify which they thought were problems for CNP students. Those cited include parking (32%) travel to course sites (26%), transferring credits (18%), child care (9%), and safety concerns (7%).

Respondents were asked to identify positive aspects of the program. Replies to this open-ended question included convenience and flexibility (38%), helpful advisers (23%), reduced travel time (17%), earning a degree (14%), use of technology (13%), and meeting nurses from other parts of the state (13%). Ninety percent of respondents identified at least one positive aspect of the CNP.

Another open-ended question asked respondents to identify least helpful aspects of the CNP. These included technical difficulties (17%), course scheduling (12%), cost (11%), transfer of credits (11%), and cited lack of personal contact with instructors (9%). Eighty-one percent of respondents identified an unhelpful aspect of the program.

Impact of the Program on Nurses' Careers: Nearly eight out of ten respondents reported feeling more satisfied with their nursing careers, and about 75 percent felt more confident in nursing skills as a result of participation in the CNP. Less than one-fifth of

respondents reported that they could attribute any of the following to participation in the CNP⁷: increased job responsibilities, promotions, salary increases, changing employers, or changing their area of practice.

When responses are examined by age of respondents, nurses in their fifties or older were more likely to report increased confidence; 90 percent of respondents over age fifty reported increased confidence in nursing skills, compared to 71 percent of people in their twenties.

CNP students were asked about future plans. Over half of respondents (52%) said that as a result of obtaining a baccalaureate degree in nursing they intended to pursue a master's degree. Other plans included changing areas of nursing (31%), changing jobs (27%), and moving into administration (10%).

“[C]urrent and past students give the CNP high ratings. . . . [and] Learners consider the program a good value.”

Summary

The study revealed a very high level of satisfaction with the program. Across all indicators, current and past students give the CNP high ratings. While most students are contributing to the cost of their educational experience, 57 percent are receiving partial or full reimbursement from employers. Learners consider the program a good value. Nurses find the technologies easy to use; they consider them effective ways to learn, with Internet courses emerging as a clear favorite. Orientation and technical support for the technologies received high ratings and most respondents reported they would recommend the CNP to a colleague. Advisers perform an important role with CNP students and are the most utilized of a variety of support services. A large number (52%) of respondents said they intended to pursue a master's degree. Few students have yet noticed a major impact (promotion, job change, increased salary) they can attribute to participation in this program.

⁷Since the survey instrument did not ask respondents whether they were still enrolled in the program or had graduated, we were not able to cross-tabulate responses to this question for graduates and those currently enrolled. We would expect to see stronger impacts on the nurse's career after completion of the baccalaureate degree.

Several areas that warrant change emerged. The clear preference for Internet courses, combined with increasing numbers of students having Internet access, supports further Internet course development. Students noted concerns about technical difficulties and orientation to some of the technologies. Travel and campus parking also emerged as areas of concern. Based on this study, the CNP Steering Committee has committed to offering an all-Internet program.

References

- Burrell, Barbara. Summer 1993. Registered nurses educational needs survey. Report prepared by the Wisconsin Survey Research Laboratory, University of Wisconsin–Extension, Madison.
- Sloan, Matthew. June 1999. Collaborative Nursing Program evaluation. Report prepared by the Wisconsin Survey Research Laboratory, University of Wisconsin–Extension, Madison.
- Sloan, Matthew, and Eunsang Yun. March 2000. Collaborative Nursing Program evaluation. Report prepared by the Wisconsin Survey Research Laboratory, University of Wisconsin–Extension, Madison.
- Wisconsin Survey Research Laboratory. October 1999. Collaborative Nursing Program evaluation, preliminary data.

About the Authors

- Kay S. Taube is assistant dean for collaborative programs with the Continuing Education Extension Division, University of Wisconsin–Extension. She has worked with the Collaborative Nursing Program during its formulation and implementation, and continues to serve as a facilitator for this program. She is involved with several other collaborative ventures within the UW System.
- Barbara Burrell is an associate professor of political science and associate director of the Public Opinion Laboratory at Northern Illinois University. She was formerly head of the Design Section of the Wisconsin Survey Research Laboratory, University of Wisconsin–Extension. She is the author of several books on women and politics.
- Sharon R. Nellis, assistant dean and coordinator of the UW Collaborative Nursing Program, holds a masters in public administration from Pennsylvania State University and a B.A. in personnel administration. She is the student services coordinator with the UW–Madison School of Nursing, serves as associate coordinator of the WisTREC program, and is a member of the UW–Madison School of Nursing Informational Technology Committee and the ISIS (PeopleSoft) Implementation Committee. She has presented both regionally and nationally at distance education and advising conferences.

- Patricia A. Lasky, associate dean and professor in the University of Wisconsin–Madison School of Nursing; holds degrees from Marquette University (B.S.) and the University of Wisconsin–Madison (M.S. and Ph.D.). She has been instrumental in developing the Collaborative Nursing Program and has written several articles and presented to many groups about the CNP.