

Taking education to all corners

By Vicky Cerino

Like her fellow nursing students, Tiffany Bring learns about nursing the traditional way — through course curriculum and laboratory and clinical experiences. But how she learns is untraditional. Instead of attending class, she learns curriculum through the Internet.

"The number one benefit of online courses is flexibility," said Bring. "The assignments and readings are given to you, but you have the option of when you want to complete them—morning or night. You also are not required to drive to campus every day. Students can listen to lectures and complete assignments without having to leave their home."

The UNMC College of Nursing, based in Omaha, with divisions in Scottsbluff, Kearney and Lincoln, has been leading the way at UNMC in using innovative technology to deliver its programs to students across UNMC's 500-mile campus. From using interactive television instruction to holding live classes over the Internet, the college has made earning a nursing degree more flexible for students for more than 25 years.

Bring, who lives in Lincoln and is enrolled at the UNMC College of Nursing Lincoln Division, is participating in yet another innovation.

The demand for flexibility in earning a nursing degree is so great that the college now is testing the delivery of its traditional Bachelor's of Science in Nursing (BSN) degree. The college's online courses for its BSN degree have traditionally been offered only to registered nurses. This is the first time a distance program has been developed for traditional nursing students who normally would attend class on campus.

The college received a \$481,000 grant from the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) to develop, deliver and test the program.

"The idea came from thinking about students from very distant locations who don't have access to basic nursing education, for example, to offer the program internationally," said Catherine Todero, Ph.D., associate dean for undergraduate programs and the principal investigator of the grant. "This is a pilot test of a model that uses distance education strategies to deliver curriculum of the college's traditional bachelor's degree in nursing to increase access and enrollment."

Nine "distance undergraduate students" began classes last fall with 44 other students in the UNMC

College of Nursing Lincoln Division. The class occasionally meets face-to-face as a group, and they complete their clinical training together. Otherwise, the distance students take their classes at home at their own pace. The syllabus and course deadlines are the same.

The college's distance education programs were born from the need to make earning a nursing degree not only flexible, but possible in the case of many rural residents as well as potential nurses elsewhere in the United States and the world.

As one of the College of Nursing's priorities, Virginia Tilden, D.N.Sc., said distance education enables the college to serve Nebraskans in all corners of the state.

"It means there is a window to nursing education so those who pursue nursing can stay in the communities in which they live. It's extremely important for a school to provide access to everyone," said Dr. Tilden, who became dean of the College of Nursing last fall.

"Distance education provides better access to programs for students who live in rural and urban areas throughout the state, regionally, nationally and internationally," said Carol Pullen, Ed.D., UNMC College of Nursing assistant dean for rural nursing education and coordinator of distance education for the

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college.

Dr. Pullen said the college has obtained six multi-year grants, and in the past nine years, has yielded more than \$8.5 million in federal training grants to fund the college's efforts to extend programs to students not able to attend class at one of its four divisions, which offer classroom instruction in more traditional settings. At the same time, the college is expanding access to its degrees, is improving the quality of its distance courses, is updating its technical infrastructure to gain more interactivity, and is seeking more federal funding to expand the faculty workforce.

Currently, about 340 students are enrolled in distance education programs, including undergraduate, graduate, doctoral students and post-master's degree students. Most graduate and doctoral courses are offered online. The college offers all or part of 66 courses online.

Without commuting to campus, students can participate in class discussions, take tests, and do presentations through the Internet, desktop videoconferencing, satellite and live, two-way video and audio communication via a television monitor.

Classes are in session when the student chooses. Students can leave town in the middle of a semester if they need to, come back and get caught up. Students must leave

ers of the state – and beyond

their home computers, though, to fulfill their laboratory and clinical requirements.

About half of the college's 700 students are enrolled in distance education programs across Nebraska, in several states and in one foreign country – Armenia. Faculty are working to expand degree programs to China, India, Jordan and Afghanistan.

"I believe that the distance education courses for the RN to BSN program are valuable for nurses who, for many personal reasons, cannot leave their hometowns or their current employment," said Marie Kreman, Ed.D., assistant professor of nursing, UNMC College of Nursing West Nebraska Division. "In the community health course, students express their appreciation for being able to do the clinical portion of the course in their hometown, as it gives them an opportunity to work with and explore the resources of their community."

Associate Professor of Nursing Kathleen Duncan, Ph.D., said distance courses allow students to get individual faculty direction and assistance as they work through the course assignments using computer technology.

"Students become more active in the learning process because they must initiate interaction with faculty, each other and with course content," Dr. Duncan said. "For faculty, the value includes the chance to get to know students individually in a different manner. Interaction occurs through discussion board posting and personal e-mail. While teaching by distance can be very time-consuming, it is also very rewarding."

Students enrolled in distance programs for the most part don't feel they're at a disadvantage, Dr. Pullen said. "Most say they couldn't have enrolled if the college didn't offer distance programs."



Virginia Tilden, D.N.Sc., dean of the College of Nursing, says providing education to all corners of the state is one of the college's highest priorities.