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## **Online Learning Programs at Chatham and Duquesne Universities Changing the Graduate School Experience for Students Around the World**

By John Fries

If you ever want proof that the Internet is making the world smaller with each passing day, all you need to do is look in the graduate school classrooms at a couple Pittsburgh universities. And to do that, you don't even need to leave your office. Just open your browser and point it at the Bluff or Shadyside.

Online graduate education has only been available at Chatham University and Duquesne University for a relatively short time, but both schools are enjoying tremendous success with it, attracting students from around the world and creating remarkable levels of convenience for participants.

"The online learning program at Chatham was only introduced a few years ago, and it's working very well," says Janet Littrell, Ed.D., Chatham's dean for Continuing and Professional Studies. "This approach enables us to reach a new population of students." Littrell views online learning as a field that will continue to grow; in fact, she moved from Arizona to Pittsburgh just last summer specifically to join the university's staff and serve as dean of the online program.

At Chatham, online learning is offered exclusively in the College for Continuing and Professional Studies, one of three colleges within the university. An RN-to-Bachelor of Science degree in nursing is the sole undergraduate online offering. Advanced degrees that can be earned via online study include Master's degrees in wellness, health science and professional and creative writing; Doctorate programs in occupational therapy and nursing practice; and a Graduate Certificate in infant mental health.

So who's in the program? The students who seek out online learning, says Littrell, tend to be, for the most part, older, non-traditional students. "It's a challenge—in a different way," says Littrell, who adds that such a learning experience requires a "learner-centered, self-motivated approach."

Her comments are echoed by LuAnn Richardson, Ph.D., assistant professor in Duquesne University's School of Nursing, who brings a clinical nursing background to her role and, in fact, continues to work as a nurse practitioner when not teaching or doing research. Richardson also views online learning as an excellent, convenient way to pursue an advanced degree.

"Having been a faculty member at Duquesne University, teaching graduate students both in the class room setting and online, I have had the opportunity to teach and evaluate both methods," says Richardson. "Most students prefer the online setting."

She notes that there's not really a difference in results when comparing one approach to the other. "Evaluation of both methods has revealed similar testing results and

certification passing rate," she says. "In addition, students evaluate online learning as being conducive to learning while fitting this into their busy lives. Each year, we add new modalities to our online classes. Honestly, I cannot imagine teaching in a classroom setting again, without using online learning in some adjunct or blended way."

She goes on to say that technology advances allow faculty members to present lectures online. It also allows expert guest speakers to participate needing only online access. "This allows students to not only view the lecture online, but to go back and review it a second time if they want to," she says. "It also allows students to think about intellectual concepts and then discuss them in a predetermined place in our online course."

At Duquesne, as at Chatham, the online programs are made possible through the use of a technology system called Blackboard. "This allows us to have 'classrooms' online," says Richardson. "Blackboard provides tabs for assignments, quizzes, discussion and reflections, communication that includes e-mail and announcements, and video presentations—all at the click of a mouse. Students can also 'present' their work to other classmates, either in written or oral form. Feedback by the instructor is quick and also is there for later review."

Richardson and Littrell both say that online programs attract students to their universities from all over the world to interact in a virtual classroom. "For example," says Richardson, "in Duquesne's Family Nurse Practitioner program, we have had students participating from as far away as Brazil, Alaska and California to as close as the local area. We use evidence-based principles throughout the program. Students have called it a rigorous program, which is something they appreciate, since they know their new profession as an FNP will be full of challenges. We use case studies, quizzes with the option of providing immediate feedback options for students to review their responses."

She adds that a discussion board allows students to present their point of view and interact with each other during each week and throughout the semester. "New technology options allow students to present verbal presentations to the class as they would in the traditional classroom setting. It does require a lot of time to review each student's remarks, but I learn something new every week by reading my students' comments. They realize that they know more than they thought they did, and that learning builds throughout each semester. They think about challenges and cases being discussed that week or seen at their clinical settings, research the issue and report to the class."

Richardson says that some students are initially intimidated by online learning, but once they see how easy and flexible it is to maneuver, they thrive on the opportunity to go to graduate school at home.

"It does take some self discipline on the part of the students and faculty members to be able to adhere to a weekly schedule and get the readings, lectures and assignments complete in a timely fashion," she says. "As with any program, you get what you put into it, both from a student and faculty standpoint. Teaching my courses is a priority and I continually try to improve teaching modalities. "

Both Littrell and Richardson greatly enjoy both the opportunities and challenges in online learning. In contrast to Richardson's combined background as a nurse and educator, Littrell's is mainly academic, having previously held positions at San Diego State University and the University of Arizona.

Programs at both universities receive technical and staff support. At Chatham, Student Services staff members provide assistance when needed. At Duquesne, the Center for Teaching helps with incorporating new teaching methods. "In healthcare," says Richardson, "one is always learning, with advancements continually changing what we teach. So I, too, learn along with my students."

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