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CULTIVATING COMMUNITY IN AN ONLINE ENVIRONMENT

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Background/Support: Graduate learners receiving their DNP degree within an online learning program not only require information from their studies, but also critical interpersonal strategies for interacting with colleagues, peers, and patients/clients. It is integral to create an environment using a critically reflective stance in online teaching in order to better engage and evaluate these learners on both of these important aspects of their education.

Prospective learners in advanced practice nursing are evaluated for admission using specific criteria examining readiness for graduate school involving a combination of academic and personal characteristics. These include things such as the prospective learner's background and training in the specific content area, their interpersonal skills relative to the area of specialization in which they seek to earn a degree, and other key behaviors or indicators central to training in their specialization. In addition, they are evaluated for their specific readiness to do an online degree program because such programs require familiarity with Internet-based technologies.

Methods/Application: The culture of an educational community is a must to enhance these experiences. This can be accomplished through engaging dialogues and discussions within the course room, multi person topics for partnership and collaboration, and a student lounge where learners can have a more casual experience. Video chats using Skype, Go to Meeting or another form of visual collaboration allows the learners to connect on a more personal level with the instructor and fellow learners. Having town hall meetings in "real time" can provide a form of connection in addition to disseminating information. Providing mandatory meetings (at least one per term) with the instructor supports learner and teacher interaction, and this also removes the question by the learner of, "Does my instructor really want me to connect with her?". In addition, enveloping a peer mentoring program normalizes the experiences for learners by hearing from and having the support of someone who just went through what the learner may be experiencing. It is more important than ever that students receive feedback as quickly as possible in the course room. Weekly engagement with the faculty through a response to discussions, asking a question, etc. will allow the learner to see the faculty care and have a commitment to their education. Otherwise it is easy for a learner to get lost in the virtual world of education.

Both the content and process of a learner's work must be assessed. This entails assessing work products, as well as in-course behavior and relevant extra-class behavior. Work products might include evaluation of tests, take-home exams, written papers or reports, or other projects to be graded, much as in a traditional face-to-face teaching environment. With in-course behavior, this includes written contributions to interactions with peers and the instructor. Technology in the course room:

Wiki: A web page that can be viewed and modified by those accessing it. It is open ended and collaborative. It offers asynchronous communication and group collaboration. It serves as a discussion, repository, mail system, and tool for collaboration.

Conclusion: Online education holds great promise for community college students, but there remains work to be done before it offers an optimal alternative to the face-to-face experience. Through comprehensive improvement efforts, administrators can create an environment in which online faculty and students have the supports that will help them succeed.

Biography

Judith Carrion is an Assistant Professor in the School of Nursing at Touro University Nevada. Dr. Pinkston-Carrion received her BSN degree from Ursuline College, her MSN from Grand Canyon University, her MSHS from Cleveland State University, and her Doctorate in Education from Walden University. She also holds a national certification in gerontological nursing. Prepared as a committed nurse leader, practitioner and educator within the nursing profession Dr. Carrion has over 29 years of experience in nursing practice. Her education has prepared her in the field of gerontology, research, education, academia, and teacher leadership. Her clinical interests include care of the older adult and surgical services. Dr. Carrion has held multiple clinical leadership positions which include Director of Rehabilitation Services and Surgical Services; all within the major health care corporations. She has also served as the coordinator of a DNP nursing program and led the redesign and development of the program. Dr. Carrion teaches in the DNP program at Touro University Nevada and has taught a number of DNP classes which include: leadership, health policy, research, population health, and project course. Research is a strong area of expertise and focus and her interests includes compassion fatigue. In addition, Dr. Carrion has led multiple DNP project committees.

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