If you’re looking to obtain a higher degree, virtual learning may be an option.

Is online education right for you?

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A national focus on providing safe and quality care in complex healthcare systems is fueling recommendations for nurses and nurse managers to attain higher levels of education. Numerous factors influence a nurse manager’s decision to continue his or her formal education, but if you’re considering completing a bachelor’s, master’s, or doctoral degree, an online learning program may give you the opportunity to achieve your educational goal.

Classroom 2.0
Although nursing programs use a variety of teaching methods, online courses are generally defined as having 80% or more of the course information delivered online. (See Types of courses.) Online programs may require no visits to the campus, with the entire curriculum being completed via the Internet, or they may require limited visits to a campus location. Some online programs hold annual colloquia in different parts of the country and require students to meet face-to-face for a certain number of days. There are even programs that allow students to participate in their graduation ceremonies from the comfort of their home through live video streaming.

Online courses utilize synchronous or asynchronous learning strategies, but may focus on one more than the other. Synchronous learning requires the teacher and students to meet online at a specific time. Some synchronous online courses meet weekly or as little as one or two times during the course. Examples of synchronous learning...
strategies include an online text or audio chat, an audio- or videoconference, or a live online presentation.

Asynchronous learning doesn’t require the teacher or students to meet at all, but rather an assignment is made with a specific deadline and the student completes the assignment at a time that works best for him or her. The teacher is available for questions, usually during posted office hours, and provides feedback on the assignments. Examples of asynchronous learning methods include readings, prerecorded presentations and videos, discussion boards, and case studies. Asynchronous learning provides the greatest flexibility because students can complete course requirements at a time most convenient for their work and life schedules. Both strategies dramatically decrease the amount of time spent in class and commuting to campus.

Learning in the digital age
With advancements in broadband and wireless Internet connections, online learning has grown tremendously in recent years. Initially, Internet connections were provided in traditional classrooms, then in the home and at work. Now online learning occurs anywhere, anytime through the widespread use of wireless laptops, tablets, and smartphones.

You can complete course work at home, at work, or even at your local coffee shop. Online programs offer a variety of delivery options, which provide greater flexibility for nurse managers.

In the United States during the fall of 2010, over 6.1 million students participated in at least one online course. Nearly one third (31%) of all college students now take at least one course online. As many as 67% of academic administrators rate the quality of online programs as being similar or superior to traditional programs.

A majority of online programs in the United States are accredited, having been available for more than a decade. Regional accreditation through the Council for Higher Education affirms that standards and processes of an online program are consistent with academic quality and improvement expectations. Higher education programs usually accept credit transfers from regionally accredited programs, and accreditation of the educational program is a vital requisite for employers. An online program’s website will generally identify if it has received regional accreditation.

Advantages and disadvantages
Online learning can offer a number of benefits and drawbacks, depending on the perspectives and preferences of the nurse manager. Review of both may help you decide if online learning is right for you.

Flexibility is an important advantage, especially for nurse managers with 24/7 unit coverage duties and family responsibilities. Course requirements can be completed as your schedule allows on days, evenings, nights, weekends, or whatever time works best for you. This type of flexibility may be a means of obtaining an education that might not otherwise be possible due to conflicting obligations.

Convenience is another benefit of online programs. You can complete course assignments from anywhere with a reliable Internet connection. For example, a nurse can access her online quiz with her laptop and wireless Internet connection during a trip to the mountains of Peru. Online learning also requires no commuting and no parking permits.

Online programs increase accessibility, particularly in rural areas. Online education also allows for
greater program choice because you aren’t limited to programs offered within a reasonable commuting distance from your home or work location. You can select a program that best meets your learning needs and career interests. Online courses may include students from across the United States and even different countries, which can broaden your knowledge of other cultures. Interaction with fellow students during online discussions, group chats, and videoconferencing can also provide interdisciplinary team experience. If you decide you’d like to relocate, your national and global network may be helpful.

Online courses may provide some disadvantages for learners. Face-to-face interaction with instructors and fellow students is limited, and classroom discussion isn’t available. One study found that positive and encouraging feedback is important to students. Faculty feedback is usually written rather than verbal, so the online learner needs to be self-directed and organized. Students must also have basic computer, Internet, e-mail, and software technology skills.

Flexibility, considered an advantage by most, can become a disadvantage. Students must be able to manage their learning, interpret written instructions, and communicate effectively. Depending on the online program, communication may be in the form of video or auditory chat, which means that students will need to master the use of additional technologies to be successful. (See Computer skills are a plus.) Online programs tend to have more reading and writing associated with the curriculum due to the self-paced format. In traditional forms of education, a lecture may be given verbally, but typically for online learning, students must either read or listen to a prerecorded lecture. This requires the learner to have increased self-discipline and time management skills.

**Computer skills are a plus**

Although you don’t need to be a computer expert to successfully complete an online course, basic computer knowledge is helpful. Before beginning an online program, brush up on skills such as saving documents to various drives and navigating your computer’s control panel. Software programs such as Microsoft Office (Word, Excel, and PowerPoint) are commonly used for online courses. If you aren’t familiar with these programs, take a class or online tutorial to strengthen your understanding of their usage. More recently, online programs are utilizing web video and auditory chat technology. Programs like Audacity and WebEx are routinely used within the online environment. A good understanding of how to work webcams or other video computer equipment is becoming increasingly important.

**Keys to success**

When beginning an online education program, there are specific steps you can take to ensure success. **Know your learning preferences.** Although there are a variety of different learning styles (auditory, visual, kinesthetic), you should identify which style you prefer. It’s important to understand yourself and know which style works best for you. Are you a self-starter or do you need to be stimulated by a deadline? Online learning is a more suitable learning method for individuals who are self-motivated and self-directed, who read enthusiastically and prefer individualized learning, and who don’t require stimulation from a traditional classroom environment.

**Stay motivated.** Without a physical classroom, it can be common for online learners to lose motivation. Have a clear understanding of what you want to accomplish. Develop short- and long-term goals to ensure success. Celebrate goal accomplishment; as you achieve short-term goals, motivation is bolstered and your challenge won’t seem so daunting.

**Practice self-discipline.** Although online courses may include assignment deadlines, activities required to complete assignments are generally self-paced. This requires self-discipline; the online learner must prioritize among work, family, and education responsibilities, which can be challenging. Successful online learners internalize responsibility and accountability to ensure their educational goals are met.

**Hone your time management skills.** The flexibility offered by online courses can be considerably misleading. Students tend to think...
there’s plenty of time to complete course assignments or activities, which sometimes leads to procrastination. It’s important to set aside time to focus on course work in a place free from distractions. Allot time or specific days for reading, preparing assignments, and participating in course discussions. Creating a detailed schedule plan and, more important, adhering to it, can improve your chances of success.9,10

Sharpen your study skills. When nurse managers are admitted to an educational program, it may have been years since they last completed coursework. Study skills may have been forgotten, so early development of a study routine is important for online success. Develop a schedule and stick to it. When the course syllabus is available, read all the materials to identify course expectations. Copy and/or download all relevant materials. Make the most out of all the information presented within the course. Create a binder to maintain order for the course information. If you don’t understand something, contact your course instructor. Many times in online learning, the faculty may not know you’re having difficulty. Realizing that you need assistance is crucial for success with online learning. Don’t hesitate to reach out to faculty as needed. After all, a responsibility of course instructors is to facilitate your learning.9,10

Be an ace communicator. Online learning occurs through student interaction with classmates and instructors, even if it’s in a virtual environment. Staying connected to your fellow classmates through course resources, such as e-mail and course forums, is critical to maintain open lines of communication during the course. By participating in forum discussions, students are able to gain a more profound and richer understanding of the course material while developing evidence-based responses. When students don’t maintain an active presence within the virtual learning environment, important information may be missed. Take advantage of your instructors, as well as fellow peers’ experiences and knowledge, by asking detailed questions or including comments related to the course.10

Don’t neglect your “netiquette.” When taking online courses, one must understand netiquette. When entering this new online culture, there are some things to remember. You may offend people unintentionally or misunderstand communication and take unwarranted offense. There are two general netiquette rules: don’t waste people’s time and don’t say anything online that you wouldn’t say to someone’s face. You should also avoid using obscene and inappropriate language, don’t “SHOUT” by using all capitals or exclamation marks, avoid grammatical errors by spellchecking content before submitting, keep posted content on topic, and share expert knowledge and resources. Most important, don’t “reply to all” unless you mean to.10

Changing perceptions
During the current economic recession, human resources (HR) professionals note that 72% of individuals applying for jobs have opted to go back to school for an online degree. Forty-nine percent of HR professionals view online degrees as less favorable than a more traditional degree, whereas 43% feel that an online degree is acceptable. Currently, 87% of HR professionals point out that applicants with online degrees are viewed more favorably now than just 5 years ago. This is primarily because traditional universities are moving programs online, and online schools are building campus-based facilities.

In 2010, a survey by the Society for Human Resource Management noted that 79% of participating organizations had hired applicants with an online education. When faced with two applicants of equal experience, 55% of HR professionals state that it doesn’t matter if the individual’s degree is obtained traditionally or online.11

Online: Options, opportunities
The healthcare environment is ever-changing and requires a wide variety of skills and competencies. A highly educated nursing workforce is instrumental in providing safe, effective, and quality care.
to patients across the healthcare spectrum. Online learning enables nurses and nurse managers to remain in their current community and workplace as they complete additional educational programs. Online programs are a viable and growing educational option for developing the knowledge, skills, and competencies needed to meet the demands of increasingly complex healthcare systems. 

REFERENCES

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