

College of Nursing explores virtual education

by Vanessa Virbitsky - Thursday, May 01, 2008

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In nursing education, practicing life-saving techniques and getting an up-close look inside an actual human body can seem unrealistic or even impossible.

But it's not virtually impossible.

The College of Nursing at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh is offering a virtual reality Community Health Nursing course through Second Life (SL). The experimental course will be one of the first classes to offer chats, lectures, discussions and other services in a virtual campus on the SL island Wisconsin Technology of Nursing Education (TECNE).

UW Oshkosh nursing students eventually will have the opportunity to participate in virtual patient simulation, public health inspections and even simulated pregnancies, said Stephanie Stewart, Director of Center for Nursing Innovations at UW Oshkosh.

[SL](#), developed by Linden Research, Inc., is not a game; it's a 3-D virtual world created by its users. Since SL was made available to the public in 2003, it has grown to connect millions of citizens, businesses and organizations around the globe.

The College of Nursing picked up on this virtual trend through a Department of Health and Human Services (HRSA) grant that had a primary objective of helping nursing faculty infuse technology into a collaborative online Bachelor of Science in Nursing Degree Completion Program.

"Nursing informatics, the application of information and computer technologies to the practice of nursing, is fast becoming important in educating the next generation of nurses," Stewart said. "Bringing busy faculty up to speed with technology is challenging, and helping them find ways to introduce these ideas into the already-crowded curriculum requires faculty development approaches that are efficient and easy to access."

"Distance learning strategies afford a way to engage faculty learners in the very tools and skills that they will subsequently transfer to students," she said.

This project capitalizes on the University of Wisconsin School of Nursing Collaborative Nursing Program as a vehicle to deliver nursing informatics to faculty and, subsequently, to students at the University of Wisconsin System nursing schools, which include Eau Claire, Green Bay, Madison, Milwaukee and Oshkosh.

As part of the five-year, \$200,000 grant, UW Oshkosh will host a Wisconsin TECNE Conference on Virtual Reality and Immersive Education for the UW System nursing schools May 20 and 21 at UW Oshkosh.

Designing a virtual campus

With the intent to enhance distance learning with immersion learning experiences in SL, the UW Oshkosh College of Nursing collaborated with UW Oshkosh media specialists and staff at Polk Library to purchase a virtual island in SL in December 2007.

Contracting a “terraformer” for landscaping and a builder to construct a virtual campus, the SL island Wisconsin TECNE houses a replica of the Pollock Alumni House, Polk Library, an amphitheater and a public health nursing department.

“Our vision for the future of the island includes virtual classrooms for all of our accelerated theory and clinical courses,” Stewart said. “The classrooms will be equipped with media PowerPoint and video equipment for synchronous and asynchronous learning experiences. We also intend to use the classroom space for synchronous discussion and chats.”

The virtual campus also will have a virtual clinical learning laboratory with a simulated healthcare system, including a clinic and hospital units. Other campus services to be virtually represented are financial aid, student accounts, faculty offices, student health and counseling, a teaching-learning center and a nursing research center. Virtual faculty offices and a student lounge also will be available for faculty and student avatars — online personifications of users — to meet and discuss campus events.

The College of Nursing piloted the virtual project with 50 accelerated undergraduate nursing students in January 2008.

“The students oriented to SL and created avatars, SL characters, when they were on the UW Oshkosh campus for their two-week clinical nursing skills courses,” Stewart said. “Since this orientation, student avatars have held meetings in the SL Polk Library and Pollock House. As we progress with the project, this pilot group will experience chats, lectures, discussions and other services.”