



Nursing Hires Designer for Online, Blended Courses

Information technology and the competencies associated with its use are essential to nursing practice, according to University of St. Thomas School of Nursing Dean, Dr. Poldi Tschirch.



“We must prepare our students with the skills they will need to seek out and apply information in clinical practice and engage in continual learning to keep pace with the rapid growth of knowledge in healthcare,” Tschirch said.

The School of Nursing has a goal to make a majority of courses blended courses—face-to-face with online content—or online-only courses. To assist with meeting this goal, the School of Nursing Title V grant provided funding to support the adaptation of courses into blended and online formats.

The School of Nursing hired Mary Donna Piazza as the new instructional designer under the Title V grant, to help design blended and online courses. She helps faculty members design curricula for distance education or online learning so that students learn more using technology. “Part of my responsibility is helping faculty make the paradigm shift from face-to-face to online,” Piazza said. “I find ways to help them implement interactivity, and improve the communication and collaboration in an online course.”

As nursing students participate in clinical rotations during their junior and senior years, they still need to continue their nursing curriculum and learn new content. Students who are off-campus for extended periods during clinical rotations can benefit from an online component that allows faculty to stay in communication with students and help them to measure and apply the skills they’re learning.

Piazza brings curriculum knowledge, creativity

Tschirch said Piazza brings cutting edge knowledge to her work with faculty, as well as great creativity.

“She is extremely effective in helping faculty translate their content knowledge into engaging and effective online learning experiences for students,” Tschirch said.

Piazza has 28 years of experience in curriculum design, most recently at the Academic Technology Center for University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston, where she worked for 16 years. The center served the whole campus. She consulted on how to design, develop and implement new distance educational programs and courses. She provided training and consultation on how to use various Web 2.0 collaboration and communication tools. She also worked for the School of Allied Health Sciences and School of Nursing at the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston as an instructional designer and graphics specialist, teaching how to effectively use multimedia in the curriculum.

Curriculum can come alive online

Piazza is a medical illustrator and animator specializing in designing multimedia pieces that can help contribute to student learning in a blended or online class.

“My work has included designing digital case studies,” she said. “By using a technique called digital storytelling, we can make the cases come alive using animation, photo, audio or video.”

Piazza hopes she’ll have the opportunity to do that at UST as well, though her first projects are to work with IT to evaluate new software and new processes to support the faculty and delivery of the curriculum.

In addition to helping develop the curriculum, Piazza is able to evaluate the online courses for problems, like a high drop-out rate or low test scores, which usually stem from communication or collaboration issues.

“I look for ways to improve the courses by using the technology to enhance and support the learning experience,” she said.