

Keeping Up with the Demand for Nursing Education through Online Learning

How Spalding University Took Its RN to BSN Program Online

Patricia Spurr, Associate Dean and professor at Spalding University in Louisville, Kentucky, needed to solve a problem. Her RN to BSN program was losing market share despite rising student demand for these degrees. All of Spalding's local competitors had taken their RN to BSN programs online to meet the needs of working RNs. According to Spurr, to stay competitive, "We needed to move online, and we needed to do so fast."

As a small liberal arts college with the oldest baccalaureate program in the state, Spalding has been educating RNs for over 80 years. Its on-campus RN to BSN program, taught in 6-week sessions equivalent to semesters, met on weekends—but many nurses work weekend rotations and were not able or willing to give up their weekends off. Spurr believed they would embrace the online format. "Our students want to be able to access their course on their tablet or phone while they're waiting for their kids at soccer practice," Spurr says. "[They want] to be able to study wherever they have the opportunity and the time."

Enrollments in RN to BSN programs have risen every year for 12 years, driven by new industry guidelines. The Institute of Medicine (IOM) and American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) have called for increasing the number of BSN-educated nurses in the workforce to 80% by 2020. And beginning in 2020, for a health care institution such as a hospital to achieve Magnet status, the American Nurses Credentialing Center (ANCC) requires that 80% of the institution's nurses have a BSN degree. As a result, the BSN is becoming essential for a nurse's job security. Many employers in Kentucky, and more than 79% of employers nationwide,* are now requiring or strongly preferring nurses to have a baccalaureate degree.

Because all of these factors meant more potential students, Spurr wanted to be in position to meet demand. "It wasn't a matter of if we wanted to embrace online education," she says. "It was a matter of when, because it's where the students are and where they are wanting us to go."

To Move Online—But How?

Spurr's next problem: She had never taken an online course, much less designed one; this was something she had in common with most of her faculty. Spalding did offer a few online courses designed with Moodle, an open-source online learning management system (LMS), but those "looked downright ugly and boring," Spurr says, "because we aren't instructional designers. We don't know how to make them pretty." Plus, as Spurr notes, creating an online course is "not a matter of plopping PowerPoint slides onto a Moodle site. Online is a whole different learning and teaching strategy."

Spurr was determined to overcome these obstacles, but she faced a steep learning curve. Her Google search for "online education" yielded 11.2 million sites; her library search gave her 800,000 resources. "That was overwhelming, to say the least."

Then one day, her luck changed. "Miracle of miracles, I got an email from Jones & Bartlett Learning," introducing its RNtoBSN Suite of Online Courses & Curriculum. On the JB Learning course site, she saw that her existing curriculum lined up well with the JB Learning curriculum. "I thought, this sounds like just exactly what I've been looking for."

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* Source: "Employment of New Nurse Graduates and Employer Preferences for Baccalaureate-Prepared Nurses," AACN, October 2014.

A Complete Curriculum Solution

The RNtoBSN Suite of Online Courses & Curriculum from Jones & Bartlett Learning comprises 12 instructionally designed courses aligned with industry standards: the (AACN) Essentials of Baccalaureate Education, the Quality and Safety Education for Nurses (QSEN) Competencies, and the IOM Core Competencies. The courses are available individually or as a suite, and faculty can customize the material as much or as little as they choose. The curriculum is designed to enhance a school's existing program, not replace the knowledge of instructors.

The courses draw content from JB Learning textbooks and were created in collaboration with authors, subject matter experts, and instructional designers. These courses are not just textbooks put online; they feature interactive lectures, practice activities, and case studies. In the discussion forum, students can share information and collaborate on projects. The courses can be accessed from all kinds of devices, from desktop computers to tablets to smartphones.

Spurr was impressed by her initial meeting with JB Learning representatives, but she wanted to investigate other options as well. In her research, however, she “didn’t find that any other publishers had the package that Jones & Bartlett Learning had. Their curriculum is already prepared. Other providers were saying, ‘We can customize a curriculum for you.’ But I wasn’t looking for a long development timeline.” Spurr and her faculty discussed the benefits of adopting the RNtoBSN Online Curriculum and the concerns they had.

In their research, they examined two hosting options available from Jones & Bartlett Learning. The first option allowed customers to host the courses themselves (via a cartridge that plugs right into a University’s current LMS), while the second option offered cloud-based access to courses managed by Jones & Bartlett Learning. Spalding preferred the latter option for various reasons, including that JB Learning would ensure server uptime and handle any tech support questions that might arise.

Another plus for Spalding was that faculty could choose to teach the courses out of the box, or they could customize the syllabus, lessons, and assignments in many ways to suit the course and their teaching style. If faculty chose to use the corresponding JB Learning textbook(s), it would be available to students at 50% off list price. Or they could teach from the textbooks they were accustomed to, and realign the syllabus to that text. Faculty could also design their own customized textbook with PUBLISH from Jones & Bartlett Learning.

As they were debating their concerns, Spurr and her colleagues asked each other, “Is this cheating—if I don’t design the course, does that mean it’s not really mine, or it’s not a Spalding course?” To investigate this question, Spurr looked at the curricula of competitor schools and found that every RN to BSN program taught the same basic topics. This affirmed to her that both the Spalding and JB Learning curricula were consistent with national standards, and that teaching a high-quality course aligned to these standards was a higher priority than creating original content. “Jones & Bartlett Learning is very on target with what’s going on in the country regarding nursing,” Spurr remarks.

A Critical Time in the Field

Indeed, it’s a critical time in nursing in the United States. The Affordable Care Act has helped 32 million more Americans gain access to our health care system, and nurses are taking on expanded responsibility in patient care. What’s more, nursing is one of the country’s fastest-growing professions; the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts the number of jobs to increase by 22% within the next 10 years. As the IOM states, “to respond to the demands of an evolving health care system and meet the changing needs of patients, nurses must achieve higher levels of education.”

RN to BSN programs help good nurses become even better. Research has shown that lower mortality rates, fewer medication errors, and quality outcomes are all linked to nurses who are educated at the BSN level and higher.

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The extended education offered in a BSN degree program builds on a nurse's background and experience with coursework to help them develop stronger clinical reasoning and analytical skills, prepare to give advanced treatment, and better understand the cultural, political, economic, and social issues that affect patients and influence care delivery.

The BSN degree is therefore quickly becoming the new standard in nursing education. This shift is benefiting not only patients and hospitals, but also nurses because it gives them more opportunities for advancement and more career options. The degree also offers nurses the opportunity to earn higher salaries.

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Up and Running

With their questions answered, Spalding chose the RNtoBSN Online Curriculum from Jones & Bartlett Learning. Spurr worked with her Account Specialist to get up and running fast. "If you need customer service, Mariel is it," Spurr says. "She could not be more fantastic. She always gets right back to me and sends me what I need."

To date, Spalding has adopted five courses from the RNtoBSN Suite of Online Courses & Curriculum. The first one that Spurr taught was Nursing Informatics. The experience was "wonderful," she says. "The course is very intuitive and easy to use. You just turn on the editing feature and you can add and delete content. I could link to new readings, add new assignments, pull up papers and grade them and send them back—all within the Jones & Bartlett Learning course platform." Each course is mapped for a 15-week semester, and Spurr customized her course by removing 5 of the 15 course modules to create a 6-week course.

"The instructor resource manual could not be any more helpful," Spurr continues. It includes a customizable syllabus, along with objectives, lesson highlights, discussions, assignments, and resources; faculty onboarding instructions are also available. Through reporting features, instructors can see how much time students are spending in the course. Each course also features a test bank, to which faculty can add their own questions if they choose. Spurr likes that the modules all have the same instructional elements in a repeatable pattern, so students know what to expect. They also have audio and captioned videos so they are accessible to students with disabilities.

However, Spurr did find her first online teaching experience to be very different from classroom teaching. "I had to figure out how often to communicate with students. You have to budget in time for responding to students' emails and checking the discussion boards. I'm becoming better versed in giving instructions so I don't have to answer the same question a hundred times."

As for student feedback, "We haven't gotten a single complaint," Spurr says, whether about course content or technical issues. "And these days, if people aren't satisfied, they have no problem voicing their opinion." On evaluation forms for the Health Promotion course, 100% of the students said that the course materials were appropriate.

The Future of Teaching and Learning

One of her colleagues, a learning specialist at Spalding, believes this is the future of teaching: using publisher courseware instead of building their own courses. "Because publishers will stay up to date—that's how they stay in business," Spurr explains.

Online learning is also a strategy to help universities stay in business. As Patty Spurr discovered, offering an online alternative can be a great opportunity to retain students and increase enrollments. "I haven't seen any downside," she says.