

# Walden's Online Degree Fills Gaps in Nursing Ed

by Michelle Adam

**The** United States is in the midst of a nursing shortage that is expected only to worsen within the next decades. Thirty states were estimated with registered nurse shortages in 2000, according to a July 2002 report by the Health Resources and Services Administration. By 2020, 44 states and the District of Columbia are likely to face this

growing dilemma.

Given this shortage, it seems likely that increasingly people will pursue careers in nursing. About 41,683 qualified applicants did exactly that when they sought to obtain a nursing degree in 2004. Unfortunately, they were denied entrance into nursing schools due to an insufficient number of faculty, clinical sites, and class-

room space, according to an article in the Jan. 5 edition of the *Executive Intelligence Review*.

It's precisely this shortage of faculty that inspired Walden University, an accredited online school, to create a master's program in nursing in 2006. Today the program has approximately 1,700 participants, and its first class of 20 M.S. nursing students graduated in January.



Walden University, an accredited online institution, held its winter commencement Friday, Jan. 26, at the Adams Mark Hotel in Dallas. The university graduated its first class of students to receive Master Science degrees in Nursing. Gathered to celebrate are (from l. to r.): Dr. Paula Peinovich, president of Walden University; RADM Carol Romano, assistant surgeon general (commencement speaker); Paula Singer, president and CEO of Laureate Online Education; and Dr. Marion Anema, faculty chair at Walden's Master of Science in Nursing program.



Front row (l. to r.): Paula Singer, Laureate Education CEO; Beverly Ward; Zenesia Barkley; Charlotte DeLoach; Julie McRae; Rear Admiral Carol Romano; Jan Herren; Kathy Dew; and Dr. Paula Peinovich, Walden president. Back row (l. to r.): Joan Goudounis, Dr. Barbara Brown, Karen Murphy, Shelly Lehmann, Dr. Marion Anema, Vera Ligia Grover, and Dr. Cheryl Levitt.

“If we need an increase in numbers of nurses, then we need more educators to help educate them. We have to start with leaders,” said Barbara Brown, Walden professor and interim dean.

“Walden tries to meet the needs of what goes on in society, and we have had a crisis in nursing. In addition, by 2014, we need 1.2 million replacements in nursing. We have never had this problem before.”

According to Brown, Walden is building future faculty for aspiring nurses. “Many of our students want to go on to a Ph.D. and teach at the baccalaureate level,” she said.

Unlike more traditional programs, Walden has provided online graduate programs from its inception in 1970. In doing so, the school has been able to offer student-centered programs to fit the needs of adult learners.

“The majority of our students work full time, have full-time families, and then take courses part time at Walden,” said Brown. “Because we

are student-centered, there is much more give and take, and we can focus on the needs of our students. Because teaching is online, we can accommodate that need.”

According to Brown, Walden is able to address individual needs of students, such as being able to extend deadlines if there are family emergencies. Teachers and students are also able to communicate regularly, and students receive personalized attention.

“We have rubrics for everything we grade. The students love the feedback they get. When I grade a paper, I let them know their strengths and weaknesses,” she said. “We work with about 20 to 23 students at one time. It is a give and take. At the end of the week, students will give a review and will say how much they learned from the examples their colleagues gave.”

The online university initially offered Ph.D.s and Ed.D.s in Minnesota in 1970. By 1995, Walden provided its first master’s degree, an

M.S. in educational change and technology innovation – the first completely online master’s degree in education in the United States.

In 2000, Walden became the first distance-learning university to be categorized “research intensive” by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. By 2004, enrollment had reached 13,000 students in 17 master’s and Ph.D. degree programs, including education, psychology, public health, human services, business, engineering, and public administration.

During more than three decades, Walden has built a reputation for providing graduate degrees to a diverse group of students. The school has ranked as one of the top of a list of institutions providing graduate degrees to multicultural student populations.

“The rankings are a reflection of Walden University’s mission of expanding access to graduate education that ensures diversity among our student body and faculty,” said Paula E.

Peinovich, president and provost of Walden.

Despite Walden's success, Hispanic enrollees lag behind other minority groups. Hispanics make up 6 percent of the Walden universitywide population, compared to 10 percent for African-Americans. This is likely to hold true in the school's new nursing program, although it's too early to tell.

What is clear, however, is that Hispanics are sorely needed in the nursing field, and any effort to draw them into university programs will help serve the larger nursing community.

According to the Department of Labor Statistics, Hispanics currently make up almost 2 percent of the registered nurse population, compared to 14.2 percent of the total U.S. population. It is reported that 19 percent of Hispanics prefer to speak Spanish when consulting a physician or health-care professional ("The Hispanic Market and Pharmaceutical Drugs," Cultural Access Group, February 2004). In addition, most Hispanics would prefer to visit a doctor or hospital with a diverse bilingual staff, and feel they are better treated by Latino staff (Rodríguez, Otto J., "How Latinos Approach Healthcare Issues," March 2002).

Walden has formed a Hispanic Advisory Committee to analyze whatever barriers prevent Latinos from entering into nursing and to determine how online education could help bridge this gap.

"We believe that online education should be one of the enablers. We are looking at outreach strategies and ways to address the high college abandonment rate that exists with Latinos," said Ana Sánchez, director of Walden's university relations.

Online programs such as Walden's are likely to attract Latinos who are working and raising families and are in need of flexibility in obtaining graduate degrees. Through the nursing program, students can select the B.S.N. track in education, leadership management, or nursing informatics for registered nurses entering the program with a Bachelor of Science in Nursing. Through this program, students gain knowledge and confidence needed to become a leader in the field of nursing. In addition, those focusing on the education track receive essential information on staff development, patients/families, schools, and occupational and community settings.

Required courses offered within the leadership, management, and education fields of nursing include Understanding Health Care Systems, the Nurse Leader, Linking Theory to Nursing Practice, Ethical and Legal Views of a Changing Health Care System, and Promoting and

Preserving Health in a Diverse Society.

More specifically within the education track, students learn how to create student-centered learning in nursing education and develop strategies for teaching. In addition, future teachers are required to integrate technology into nursing education; to develop curriculum, assessment, and evaluation methods; and to discover the roles, responsibilities, and relationships of nursing educators.

Through the B.S.N. in nursing informatics, students learn how to effectively utilize information technology to enhance the quality of patient care. This specialization blends nursing science with computer and information science. Coursework focuses on such key areas as information systems, database concepts, and effective project management. Students are required to engage in fieldwork as well.

The other tracks – the R.N. tracks in education, leadership, and management or nursing informatics – are offered to registered nurses with a hospital diploma, associate's degree in nursing, or bachelor's degree.

Through all programs, students are able to collaborate with nurses from around the country in a flexible, interactive, online environment, and learn from expert faculty and contributing scholars via DVDs.

Although online courses might seem a "hands-off" approach to learning, Walden courses require that students apply their knowledge directly and engage in practicums.

"All of our work is applied. Students have to apply the theories they are learning," said Brown. "They also dialogue back and forth with their colleagues online. The dialogue is very enriching. We have questions they need to answer, and faculty then respond to that. At the end of the week, students will give a review and will comment on how much they learned. They will also write papers that we grade with rubrics and clear indications of their strengths and weaknesses."

The cost of the Walden program is competitive with that of other university courses nationwide. Some students receive tuition reimbursement supported by many Fortune 500 companies and large hospital networks that rely on graduates to keep their work force alive.

In exit interviews with nursing program graduates, students expressed that they wanted to better themselves and open doors professionally. That has been the case with Lidia López, a Latina born in Puerto Rico and raised in the projects of the Lower East Side of New York City. As an RN, she's

been working as a faculty member at St. Vincent's Catholic Medical Center, an associate's degree-granting institution in New York. Due to a shortage of nursing faculty, López was hired there with the understanding that she would obtain a master's.

"I started Walden in May 2005, and I have nothing but accolades. It has offered me a very dynamic and rewarding experience. It has surpassed any typical classroom environment I have been in," said López, who is pursuing the education track that is based on standards and core competencies of nurse educators. "The way the program is set up is very well structured. The term runs every eight weeks. I would say it is challenging. It takes a lot of dedication, and you have to be well organized."

López was hesitant at first to try an online course, especially given the lack of face-to-face contact with faculty and students. "This was something I ultimately decided to try, and I found that the faculty were more than willing to help a student out. With anything the student is unsure of, you can call them. They are always there," she said. "The knowledge I've received in the past two years is phenomenal. And I've maintained a 4.0. I want to do a Ph.D. through Walden."

López has achieved academic success while maintaining a full-time job and raising her daughter. She has done so by becoming, as she put it, "best friends" with her laptop – even if that has meant taking it to the beach during vacations.

Recognizing the great shortage of Latinos in nursing, López also obtained training as a medical interpreter during this past summer. "Latinos need to be out there for our communities. There is a great demand for registered nurses who are fluent in Spanish. There is no one to interpret for patients in the hospital," she said.

With full enthusiasm for the Walden program and an understanding of the need for many more leaders in nursing, López has recruited three of her colleagues to the online program. "One of my colleagues will be done soon," she said. "And I have grown a lot in my role as an educator. I have learned that faculty can no longer see themselves on stages. Instead, they need to be more student-centered."

López serves as clear testimony to Walden University and to the potential of the school's student-centered and online approach to nursing education to help reverse the nursing shortage in this country.

It's a first step in an urgent journey to increase the number of nurses – and Hispanic nurses – in our hospitals in the next two decades.



## **Walden University Launches Nursing Specialization in Informatics**

Walden University, an accredited online institution, has established a Nursing Informatics specialization within its Master of Science program in Nursing. As health care organizations seek to improve the management of patient information through technology, the demand for nurses with expertise in informatics will continue to grow. In response to the need, Walden University provides one of the few U.S. nursing programs with a specialization in Nursing Informatics that is offered completely online.

Designed in consultation with experts in the field of nursing informatics, the curriculum blends nursing science, computer science and information science. The specialization offers nurses the knowledge and skills to more effectively utilize information technology to enhance the safety and quality of patient care. Walden's M.S. program in Nursing also has specializations in Education and in Leadership and Management.

The Nursing Informatics specialization is designed so that students have the opportunity to learn from experts in the nursing and health care informatics field and apply that knowledge in their practice. Courses address the latest trends in nursing informatics and their implications for the health care environment. Fieldwork experiences provide the opportunity for nurses to apply new knowledge immediately.

Walden University's Master of Science (M.S.) program in Nursing is accredited by the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education (CCNE), a national accrediting agency recognized by the U.S. Department of Education and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation. CCNE, as the only national accrediting agency to focus exclusively on baccalaureate and graduate education programs in nursing education, ensures the quality and integrity of higher education degree programs preparing effective nursing professionals.

### **About Walden University**

Since 1970, Walden University has offered working professionals the opportunity to earn advanced degrees through distance learning. Today, this comprehensive, accredited online university offers master's and doctoral degrees in education, psychology, management, public policy and administration, and health and human services, as well as master's programs in engineering and IT and a bachelor's completion program in business. Walden University is a member of the Laureate International Universities network, the largest global network of accredited campus-based and online universities. For more information, visit [www.WaldenU.edu](http://www.WaldenU.edu). Walden University is accredited by The Higher Learning Commission and a member of the North Central Association, [www.ncahlc.org](http://www.ncahlc.org); 312-263-0456.

**For more information  
call 866-492-5336 or visit [www.WaldenU.edu](http://www.WaldenU.edu)**

**WALDEN UNIVERSITY**  
*A higher degree. A higher purpose.*