

Distance nursing education in Micronesia

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Abstract

Distance education courses have been offered by the University of Guam for the past ten years, however there were no programs developed for the students of the region. In 1994, the College of Nursing and Health Sciences began teaching courses over PEACESAT (Pan Pacific Education and Communications Experiment by Satellite) every semester. The first course was written to serve Palau, the Commonwealth of the Marianas, Pohnpei, and the Marshall Islands. These jurisdictions have large community colleges. An overview of this program is given. In 1997 the courses were extended to include Palau, Yap, Chuuk, Pohnpei, Kosrae and the Marshall islands. The organisational structure and training of the site operators and training coordinators is described. Two courses were taught in the first year. The first was 'Nutrition for Health professionals and the second Leadership/Management for nurses. These are described, evaluated and discussed.

Introduction

In 1994, the College of Nursing and Health Sciences began teaching courses over PEACESAT (Pan Pacific Education and Communication Experiments by Satellite) every semester. The first nursing course offerings were funded by a Title III grant from the U.S. Department of Education.

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Initially, the grant was written to serve Palau, the commonwealth of the Marianas, Pohnpei, and the Marshall Islands. These jurisdictions have community colleges. The grant funded only one jurisdiction. Palau was selected to be the pilot site. This project was described in an article published in the *Pacific Health Dialog* Vol. 4, No 1, 1997 entitled "Distance Education for Health Workers in Micronesia."

The courses were two semesters long and offered two credits each semester. Students were able to handle the academic work in addition to working full time. Several Palauan nurses in the program wanted to complete a baccalaureate degree and requested that a course be offered each semester.

Course development

In 1997, the Sasakawa Pacific Islands Nations Fund (SPINF) sponsored the University of Guam College of Nursing for a three year renewable grant to provide distance education to the Micronesian region. The regional jurisdictions that were to be served included Palau, Yap, Chuuk, Pohnpei, Kosrae, and the Marshall Islands. In each jurisdiction, all of the key individuals in the health and education agencies were notified of the project and there appeared to be a great deal of enthusiasm.

The PEACESAT site operators and course coordinators from Palau, Yap, Chuuk, Pohnpei, Kosrae and the Marshall Islands were selected and oriented to their role. A week-long workshop was held on Guam in early October 1997. That week consisted of technical training for the site operators and course training for the coordinators. Two of the coordinators were faculty members at their respective community colleges. The other coordinators were nurses in practice or the continuing education coordinator for the community college. Only a few of the course coordinators had formal teaching experience.

One of the main goals of the October 1997 Grant Workshop was to develop a team in the Pacific to support the nursing distance education program. That goal was achieved. The site operators and course coordinators were housed at

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the same location. They shared many personal and professional experiences, and a wonderful spirit of camaraderie developed.

Two questionnaires were sent to the participants, prior to the course coordinators and site operators arrival on Guam. One questionnaire was designed to determine computer skills. Most of the workshop participants had limited skills. Computer skills were part of the workshop schedule for that week. The other survey posed the questions, "What problem or difficulties would a nurse expect to encounter in your jurisdiction?"

Two courses were taught in the first year of the SPINF grant: (1) Nutrition for Health Professionals and (2) Leadership/Management for Nurses. The "train the trainer" model was used to prepare the course coordinators for more active roles in facilitating learning. The first semester when "Nutrition for Health Professionals" was taught, the course coordinators facilitated the teaching/learning process. During the second semester course "Leadership/Management for Nurses," the coordinators were paired with faculty members to co-teach part of the content and consult on other lessons. We wanted the leadership course to be culturally relevant. As an example, when "Conflict Resolution" was taught, international models that were more appropriate to the Pacific were used and the site coordinator from Palau co-taught the content.

The College of Agriculture and Life Sciences taught a session on "Tips for Designing Effective Presentation Using PowerPoint." The projects that the coordinators and site operators produced were very creative. The success of this session gave the participants a new found confidence level with respect to technology.

Much of the leadership course development work was completed at the October workshop. The course coordinators were taught Bloom's Taxonomy, how to write objectives, how to develop lesson plans, and instructional modules for leadership. Some of the tools used in the leadership course on campus were completed by the site operator and course coordinator. The Myers-Briggs Inventory identified what preferences the participants have and how to interact with other peoples preferences.

Other important aspects of training were included. Everyone received an email address and a student Internet training manual that had just been written. It included pictures of the individual screens. The Internet class was retaught with specific instructions to delete the "nice" to

know material from the "need" to know material. The revamped training and evening practice sessions allowed most participants to develop the skills necessary to become adept email users.

Course evaluation

To assess how distance education was viewed by the region, meetings were held with health and educational officials, the site operators and course coordinators, prospective and current students. Some of the lessons learned from this assessment provide insight into perspective and feeling of the students:

- It was difficult to concentrate on studies, meet family obligations and work full-time.
- There was lack of funding and general support for health care professionals furthering their education.
- Many of the students requested that we develop an

Independent Degree Program for nurses like there is for teachers and combine distance education with a Summer Institute on campus.

- There are several nurses who are interested in receiving baccalaureate degrees from the University

of Guam and some nurses in management want Master's degrees.

- One of the course coordinators is the chief nurse in her jurisdiction. She said that some days she does not even want to get up in the morning because there is so much to do. She loved being involved in distance education because she is learning so much. The leadership course was much better than the one she took when she was on campus several years ago.
- Some of the nurses do not want to get involved because they have a fear of failing and because of their poor writing skills.
- One of the directors of health services asked that we develop a mentoring program in which a faculty member would spend a month in each jurisdiction working with the nurses. The nurses want to make the necessary changes but they just can't without assistance. With the added support, I know that they could do it.

In the Fall, 1998, we have seen many changes. One of the most enthusiastic supporters of distance education — the course coordinator from Pohnpei — took a position in Florida. The site operator from Chuuk retired. The course coordinator and site operator from Kosrae both had dengue fever. The region's struggle to gain economic stability with the decreasing compact funds from the United States and decreased tourism revenues because of the Asian economic crisis has affected the health care workers. For these

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jurisdictions, the work week has been shortened and their salary reduced. Thus, their motivation to pursue educational goals has been affected. In addition, the PEACESAT satellite has not been operational much of the time this fall, so classes have been taped and sent to the islands, but communications has been difficult.

Conclusion

Some of the lessons learned from the SPINF project experience:

- Courses need to be taught over two semesters.
- Courses, modules, and information must be relevant to their work site during this time of downsizing.
- Multiple ways of providing information should be available in addition to satellite: e.g., paper, video and eventually CD-ROM and Internet.
- Case studies and review discussion need to be available.

- Email discussions and consultations should increase.
- Different ways of evaluating students needs to be developed.
- Lengthy, frequent examinations are overwhelming to the students in the region.

Last but not least, a program infrastructure to support academic and continuing education in the Pacific needs to be solidified. Changing officials in government, health and education as well as the multiple demands — both personal and professional — on the students equal fragile programs in the Pacific. Partnerships and collaboration are the key to the future of educational programs in the Pacific. Can we join hands to make the future a reality?

References

Available from the author on request.

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We should be careful to get out of experience only the wisdom that is in it - and stop there; lest we be like the cat that sits down on the stove-lid. She will never sit down on a hot stove-lid again - and that is well; but also she will never sit down on a cold one anymore.

Mark Twain (1835 - 1910)