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THEORY:**  
PART I

# RN<sub>TO</sub>BS

## BUILDING ON EXPERIENCE

### UMASS BOSTON'S INNOVATIVE ONLINE PATH TO SUCCESS

BY JENNIFER ROSINSKI

**R**uth Gethers is a 49-year-old mother of three who decided to become a nurse after she and her first husband were divorced in the early 1990s. “I wanted to be a nurse and I wanted to be a nurse now,” says Gethers, who works the 8 P.M. to 8 A.M. shift as on-call nurse for VNA Care Network in Needham. So she enrolled in a three-year diploma program at Lawrence Memorial Hospital School of Nursing in Medford. Her plan had always been to complete the requirements for a baccalaureate in nursing, and in 1996, she enrolled in the RN to BS program at UMass Boston. “At the time,” she says, “I was pregnant and married again. After the baby, I found it was too hard to go back.” Unable to fit classes around her hectic work and home schedules, it looked as though a BS in nursing was a dream that wasn’t going to come true. Today, however, through an innovative program at the University of Massachusetts, Gethers is only a few semesters away from earning her degree, and even a diagnosis of breast cancer hasn’t stood in her way.

The College of Nursing and Health Sciences’ online RN to BS program was created by the same UMass Boston nursing faculty that teach traditional classes on the undergraduate level. The program is designed to spare RNs from repeating classes they’ve already taken and aims to break down the barriers that have kept many RNs from furthering their education. Stripping away the need to travel, deal with conflicting class times, or juggle childcare, the virtual classroom allows students to complete weekly assignments in their own home at their own pace.

#### Removing Obstacles Creates Opportunity

“When you work full-time and you have families and you’ve got other obligations, it’s very difficult to get to a place to further your education,” says Greer Glazer, PhD, FAAN, RN, CNP, dean of the College of Nursing and Health Sciences. “People want to go back to get their baccalaureate, and we haven’t always, in edu-

cational institutions, made it easy for them.” So the idea, she says, was to find a way to make it as easy as possible for people to come back and earn a degree while maintaining high academic standards. “The online format seemed to be what people were asking for.”

The virtual program takes less time and money to complete than a traditional classroom-based program, according to Kathleen Polley, RN, MSN, coordinator of the program and instructor for its “Professional Issues” course. Administered by the Division of Corporate, Continuing, and Distance Education at UMass Boston, the online RN to BS program is five semesters running continuously over less than two years at a cost of \$7,700, or \$1490 for each six-credit course, plus fees. A UMass Boston RN to BS student in the traditional program would have to pay more than \$4482 for each semester and take summers off, which would result in a cost of more than \$22,000 over two and a half years. “This is a bargain,” Polley says.

An agreement with seven area associate degree-granting colleges works to further remove obstacles that RNs often face in earning a BS, says Associate Dean Marion E. Winfrey, EdD, RN. The participating schools include Bunker Hill, Cape Cod, Caritas Labouré, Massachusetts Bay, Massasoit, and Roxbury Community Colleges as well as Quincy College. Before the agreement, it wasn’t always clear how classes at the various institutions counted toward the BS at UMass. After reviewing the curriculum at each of the seven institutions, however, faculty at UMass Boston created individual transfer sheets that outline precisely which courses students need to take before entering the RN to BS program. “[Customized advising sheets] lay out what is accepted and what courses you need from each college to get into the program,” Winfrey says. The students, she says, now know how their courses count, and feel their education is being valued, not discounted.

Associate dean Marion Winfrey, EdD, RN, explains that the effort that went into developing UMass’s innovative program was intended to remove obstacles students often face.



**Greer Glazer, dean of the College of Nursing and Health Sciences, is proud of the program's ability to provide access while maintaining the highest standards.**

Luise Speakman, PhD, RN, chair of the health sciences department at Cape Cod Community College, says the agreement creates options for the students there. "We do everything we can to encourage our graduates to continue their education," Speakman says. "It's a huge advantage to our students to be able to go to school on their own schedule without the travel commitment. I think for many of our students it's the easiest way and the best way."

Anne Scalzo-McNeil, PhD, dean of nursing and allied health at Massasoit Community College, has nothing but praise to give UMass Boston for coming up with the online RN to BS program and asking area community colleges to partic-

ipate. "It's hard to really find any negative about having a baccalaureate degree and upgrading your education," says Scalzo-McNeil. "What we want from our nurses are good, critical problem solvers with well-rounded educations."

#### **Using Professional Experience to Facilitate Learning**

"We think it's important that people have opportunities to further their education," Glazer says. "There is a lot of research that shows there are positive outcomes associated with nurses having baccalaureate degrees: decreased deaths in patients, increased survival rates, better communication, better critical thinking.

We know the baccalaureate should be the ultimate goal in terms of being able to address the healthcare needs of people."

According to the American Association of Colleges of Nursing, the presence of nurses with a BS degree has been linked to higher quality patient care and better patient outcomes. Nurses who have BS degrees have also been described as strong leaders, good problem solvers, and happier employees. In Massachusetts, 35.9 percent of registered nurses hold baccalaureate degrees, 13.2 percent have earned a master's degree, and 0.6 percent have PhDs, according to a 2003 report by Lisa Young, director of the Health and Human Services Program at the Massachusetts Community Colleges Executive Office. That leaves 22.2 percent with associate's degrees and 28.3 percent with diplomas according to the report. "Anything that lets people advance their education is helpful," Young says. "The more you can streamline the process, the better it is."

There are currently 159 RNs enrolled in the online RN to BS program for the 2005-2006 school year, which is the first time the College of Nursing has seen more than 90 students in an RN to BS program since 2000. Winfrey says the College of Nursing and Health Sciences, which no longer has a traditional RN to BS program, knew their traditional RN to BS program was not meeting the needs of its students as evidenced by declining enrollments. "We knew the RNs were not happy," Winfrey says. "When you have a classroom of 60 students and 45 of them are undergraduates who are not RNs you're going to teach to the majority." That meant RNs in the traditional program were studying content they had already mastered in school or on the job. "Now we recognize professional experiences and use them to help students understand, for example, the application of theory and research to their own prac-

tice. This is quite different from teaching research to non-RN students who do not have 5 to 10 years of patient care to draw upon for insight.”

While the online RN to BS program makes it easier for students to complete their education, it does so without sacrificing any of the rigor of a nursing education. To enroll, a student must have passed the NCLEX-RN. After that, students must complete an application, submit two letters of recommendation and an essay, and have credit for specific prerequisites, including English I and II, anatomy and physiology I and II, microbiology, growth and development, social and behavioral-science electives, statistics, pharmacology, and nutrition. “The same quality is given in the online program that is given to the face-to-face students,” says Polley, who worked as a pediatric nurse before joining the faculty at UMass Boston. “It’s important that students understand this is really rigorous work. This is at least 18 hours a week of work. Every piece of education we give them improves their practice and improves what they do at the bedside.”

Students in the RN to BS program move through five semesters with the same group of students and must take all five classes in the program in order. The classes are “Professional Issues in Nursing,” “Health Assessment and Promotion,” “Nursing Research and Informatics,” “Evidence-Based Practice,” and “Community Health Nursing for RNs.” A six-hour orientation ensures that all students understand how to use the required software and hardware, which are included in the program costs.

The online program is organized like a class, with each class syllabus organized into weekly assignments, lectures, readings, papers, and final projects. Modes of instruction include video clips, movies, and PowerPoint presentations. Students

enter their class using an online learning management system called Web ct which is then augmented by a real-time chat session called Centra Symposium, which is available 24 hours a day and allows weekly synchronized chats with all students and the professor. Headphones and a microphone allow everyone to speak and be heard.

### **Meeting the Needs of Working Professionals**

While the program requires students to follow a preset curriculum, it offers flexibility so students like Gethers, who needed to interrupt her studies, will have the opportunity to do so without dropping out. A year ago this past January, Gethers enrolled in the online RN to BS program. But after completing one semester, she took leave in the summer to undergo chemotherapy. If she had been enrolled in a traditional BS program, she would have had to drop out. But the program at UMass allowed her to skip a semester and then pick up where she had left off. Gethers, who is still undergoing treatment for cancer, says she’s glad the program allowed her the time she needed. “I didn’t want to lose out. This is something that takes my mind off the bad things that I’m going through.”

John Bethard is an RN at Boston Medical Center who enrolled in his first class, “Professional Issues,” this past fall and received permission to complete it over two semesters. Bethard, who graduated from Bunker Hill Community College last May, switched, at the age of 38, from a career as a hairdresser to nursing. “I always knew I wanted to go on with my education, but being a new graduate I don’t have a lot of free time for classes,” says Bethard, who is immersed in training for his new position in 6 East Medsearch Telemetry. About the program, he says, “I like it, but it’s been stressful. It’s a pretty rigorous program. I’m eating it up, but if

I give 110 percent, there’s not much left.” Then he adds, “I like it because I can go at my own pace.”

Barry Knowles joined the program in January. A self-employed RN who travels the country and globe to care for patients after plastic surgery, he needs the flexibility that comes with the new RN to BS program. “The online seems so much more appealing because it seems so much easier to fit it all in,” Knowles says. “Because what I do changes all the time, I wanted something that could work with me and be more flexible.” Knowles had attempted to earn his BS in the traditional undergraduate program soon after graduating from Bunker Hill Community College in the mid 1990s. His hectic schedule, however, made it impossible and further complicated his dream of becoming a nurse practitioner. “I want to be able to move and work someplace rural in the world where nurses may be the only healthcare,” Knowles says. “It would be very rewarding.”

For Gethers, the reward will come once her degree is in hand. Until then, the RN will charge ahead to both fight her breast cancer and excel in her classes. “I want to get my BS,” Gethers stresses. “It’s very important to me.” ■

### **For more information about UMass Boston’s online RN to BS program contact:**

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