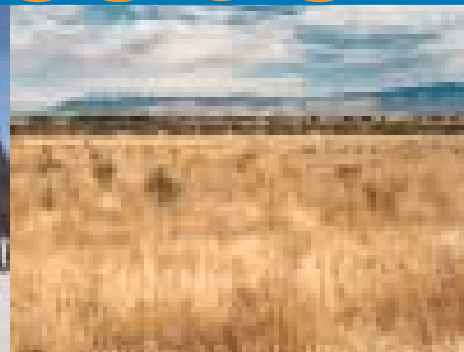
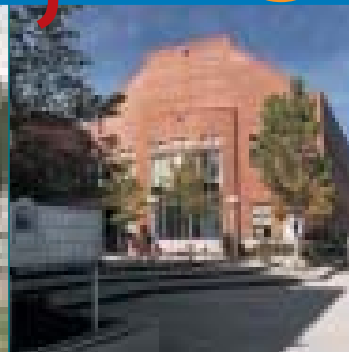
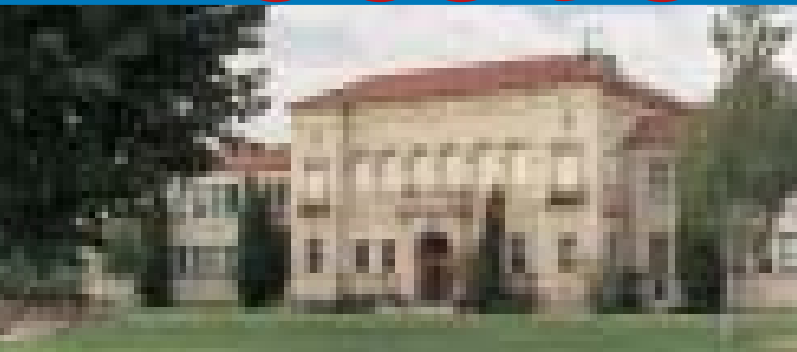


“We want place-bound nurses to have access to doctoral education without giving up jobs or having to move their families.”

— Beverly Hoeffler, RN, DNSc, FAAN

BY LEE LEWIS-HUSK

Location, Location



It's Everything With the Regional Ph.D. Program

The whole journey has been pretty remarkable — at times exhausting, frustrating and difficult. But it's also been very validating, interesting and challenging,” according to Jodi Groot, a Montana nurse in her final year of the PhD program offered by the OHSU School of Nursing.

Groot is among 21 students now enrolled in the School's regional program which allows nurses to earn a doctoral degree by distance learning in their own communities. They comprise half the students (21 of 41) in the School's PhD program. In addition to the Portland campus, the School is educating doctoral students at its campuses in Ashland and La Grande, Ore.; and in Billings, Bozeman, Helena, and Missoula, Mont., in partnership with Montana State University-Bozeman College of Nursing. Students also are enrolled in the program in Tacoma, Wash. (Pacific Lutheran University) and in Provo, Utah (Brigham Young University).



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“We know that when nurses leave rural areas to study in an urban-based PhD program, it’s hard to get them back,” says Beverly Hoeffler, RN, DNSc, FAAN, OHSU School of Nursing, associate dean for academic affairs and co-director of OHSU’s regional PhD program. “We want place-bound nurses to have access to doctoral education without giving up jobs or having to move their families.”

Nancy Findholt, RN, MN, assistant professor at the OHSU School of Nursing La Grande campus, is in the program’s first class. “This is a unique program in that there’s no requirement to go to the main campus. We did attend orientation in Portland, but this is really a pure distance education program.” She adds that there’s no way she could have worked on her doctorate if the School hadn’t made the PhD program available.

Doctorally-prepared nurses will help alleviate a critical shortage of teachers in the nation’s nursing schools. According to Hoeffler, the average age of nursing school professors is 52, which means many schools will lack the teachers they need to educate tomorrow’s professionals. Nurses with doctoral degrees also conduct research on the pressing health needs of our time, and serve as visionaries and policymakers in many institutions and agencies.

“When we started the regional PhD program, only two other nursing schools in the U.S. offered PhD programs by distance delivery,” Hoeffler states. Today, of the 73 schools that have doctoral training as listed by the American

Association of Colleges of Nursing, just nine offer distance learning. OHSU’s is the Northwest’s sole program and one of two in the West. (The other is at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center.)

“We’ve been singled out by the Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges (an accrediting body for colleges and universities) as an example of how to provide a high-quality PhD program through distance learning,” says Hoeffler.

Hoeffler says the School has many requests for the regional program that it can’t accommodate.

This paucity of PhD programs means that many masters-prepared faculty members never have the opportunity to receive a doctoral-level education. In many schools, they have difficulty achieving tenure, competing for research grants and reaching their institution’s highest ranks.

The seeds for extending OHSU’s PhD nursing program were sown in the early 1980s in Montana, which had no PhD program of its own. However, the idea never got off the ground due to the high costs of technology and tight higher education budgets at the time.

In 1995, two Montana State University faculty members, including Groot, resurrected the idea. “In faculty meetings, they were always talking about doctoral preparation. So I nudged my buddy, Molly Harrington, and said, ‘Don’t you think we could do this at a distance with



technology?’ Molly thought I was onto something, so we brainstormed and ended up writing a paper on distance learning and doctoral education. We concluded that doctoral education and distance learning seemed highly compatible.”

The pair looked at several nursing schools in the West and decided that the philosophy and specialty areas at OHSU were the best fit for them. They took their research and ideas to MSU-Bozeman College of Nursing Interim Dean, Kathleen Chafey, RN, PhD. In contrast to the previous decade, the infrastructure for Web-based learning and video/audio conferencing had become more affordable.

“OHSU’s PhD program, which started in 1985, had built a fine reputation,” says Chafey. She approached OHSU with near perfect timing. The Portland-based School was seeking ways to make graduate and doctoral education available to its newly acquired campuses in Ashland, Klamath Falls and La Grande.

In 1996, the newly arrived dean, Kathleen Potempa RN, PhD, FAAN, asked Hoeffler to work with Chafey in hammering out the details. “From the beginning, our model was different from other distance learning programs,” says Hoeffler. “One guiding principle of the program was that all students be immersed in one program. We also wanted the experiences for every student to be of the same high quality regardless of location, includ-

ing having opportunities for research mentorship by faculty.”

OHSU didn’t want to increase its faculty to make two separate programs. Rather, the School chose to rethink the best ways to teach doctoral courses to include students who were off-site. It had to figure out how to mentor students and provide them practical research experience at a distance.

The two colleagues wrote a grant and eventually received funding from the federal government to support a distance PhD program in Montana. The program admitted its first students in 1998.

Courses are delivered by interactive videoconferencing that ties all the different campuses together with Portland. Faculty and students can see and hear one another on television screens in real time, and both can present audiovisual materials that all sites in the system can access. Faculty augment videoconferencing with Web-based online coursework and other telecommunications options, such as e-mail, FAX and telephones.

“This approach was just right for our people,” says Chafey, who co-directs the regional program with Hoeffler. “A large number of faculty who got their doctorates in the 1960s and 1970s are now looking at retirement. We simply don’t have enough faculty.” She says the PhD program will round out MSU’s heavy emphasis on clinical experiences and boost the school’s research expertise.



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The regional PhD program’s first class included three people in Montana and three in Oregon. Hoeffler says four students remain, and all are at the dissertation phase. She says that the regional program is designed for five years. “Most of our students at the Portland campus take four years to complete a PhD program, but the program can be accomplished in as few as three intense years or spread out to seven.”

Like any inaugural program, there were glitches to work out. “I think both systems had to stretch and work to make the program fly,” says Groot. She says that if the telecommunications system, Polycom™, didn’t work, she and fellow student, Jean Ballantyne, RN, MN, had to figure out how to fix it. “Neither of us is a technophile but we can make that machine work.”

Findholt, Groot and Ballantyne agree that doctoral candidates need tenacity to make it through the program. “You essentially must put your life on hold while you work on a PhD,” remarks Findholt. “I had a number of hobbies that I haven’t touched in five years,” she says.

Groot adds, “My friends joke that I have checked out for the last four years. My priorities really have been family, school and work.”

Ballantyne, assistant professor of nursing and campus director at MSU-Bozeman College of Nursing in Billings, says that it’s a rigorous program but also very stimulating. “It’s exciting to learn and be part of a School that has a

high caliber of faculty.” She says the faculty genuinely wants students to succeed. “It has high standards and expects people to keep them.” Ballantyne made a personal choice to spend part of her summers in Portland with her mentors. “When they learned I was coming, they arranged their schedules to give me as much time as I needed.” Groot adds that the “effort and energy put in by the OHSU faculty has been amazing. I never would have gotten this far without them.”

Despite the hardships, none of the students interviewed for this story would do things differently. In fact, Ballantyne’s advice to anyone considering a PhD program is an emphatic, “Just do it — don’t delay! If it’s a long-term goal for you, this is a window of opportunity you shouldn’t let pass.”

Chafey sums it up this way: “When students think of the trade-off with distance learning versus face-to-face contact, they’ll take what they’ve got. They like being in school, taking care of their families and having jobs. They get good interaction with a great faculty.” And they appreciate the fact that OHSU, together with their institutions, has given them this opportunity to ascend into the ranks of doctorally-prepared nurses.^{NP}