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I Have the CNL Power...To Teach! – Faculty Category

What does graduate education look like today? Think back to your college and graduate school days. Maybe your mind goes to the traditional classroom setting with a chalkboard or whiteboard. Perhaps you are reminded of Monday - Wednesday - Friday, or Tuesday - Thursday block schedules, running to class with a coffee slopping in hand, trying to slip into your seat before the teacher notices you. Remember the overhead projectors with the clear pages and dry erase markers? Are you thinking about morning or night classes? Are you studying in a dorm room with friends, or at the kitchen table long after your family has gone to bed? Graduate education today can look like all of the above. But more than ever before, graduate education today can look like none of the above. The proliferation of online education options has opened our world to endless possibilities to attain a graduate degree while working and living life to the fullest.

Just as education options have evolved, graduate students are no longer forced to fit a certain mold, follow a certain schedule. I teach in a completely online MSN-CNL program, and my students and their life situations are as diverse as they come. Most students are full-time working nurses (in the middle of a pandemic). Some are married with families; some are single with families. Some of my students care for their parents or other family members; some students lost their parents to COVID-19 during school. I teach day shift nurses and night shift nurses, nurse managers, nurse educators, and newly graduated RNs that are working their first nursing job (again, in the middle of a healthcare crisis) and starting graduate school at the same time. These students, these nurses, are facing their career head on while aiming to achieve a higher level of education that will benefit them personally in their career, and more importantly, benefit the discipline of nursing at a time when we need all the help, all the ideas and talent, that we can get.

Making the change from teaching undergraduate BSN students to teaching CNL students carried with it one major change for me – the schedule. No longer were my students living on campus and carpooling to clinicals. No longer were my students dropping by my office with a question or a funny story. My students changed from individuals with nursing school as their career to individuals with nursing, with life, as their career. Many have practiced longer than I have, they have more nursing and management experience, and some even have more teaching experience. Many of my CNL students have more than one nursing job. Most have families, most have community commitments, and most have other interests other than solely school.

So how do we effectively teach someone that is not exclusively in school, that is a student while being a professional and a family member and a community member? The schedule. We change the schedule to meet the needs of our students. That's it. Graduate nursing students cannot succeed in school without a flexible schedule where they can study and learn and communicate with their peers and teachers on their own time. I have had many emails at 2am from students working night shift, calls from students at 3pm from the school car line, and messages sent in

between back-to-back meetings. My students communicate with me when they can, and I respond to my students when I can. The give and take of online learning is a beautiful thing when each member of the team (student and teacher) understands the basic rules of the schedule. As long as students and teachers meet the set requirements of the schedule (answering emails in a timely manner, not expecting a call back after hours, logging into class the required number of times per week, grading assignments within a few days, etc.), learning can happen for anyone, anywhere, anytime. And to me, this schedule is the most beautiful thing.

Clinical nurse leaders are in high demand. Competent and compassionate nurses are in high demand. Flexible and creative nursing faculty are in high demand. One way to keep up with the nursing shortage and to help combat the healthcare crisis is to meet the needs of today's nurses and today's nursing students. Accommodating the scheduling needs of professional nurses to allow them to pursue graduate education is one of the best and simplest things we can do as nursing educators. I am thrilled to be able to work with some of the strongest and most determined nurses that can earn their MSN-CNL degree because the schedule meets their needs.