

American Association of Colleges of Nursing
Dr. Mary Walker
Chair, AACN Membership Committee
One Dupont Circle, NW
Washington, D.C., 20036-1120

14 April, 2008

Dear Dr. Walker,

I am pleased to nominate the College of Nursing at the University of New Mexico for the Innovations in Professional Nursing Education Awards for the institutional category of Academic Health Center. The programmatic innovation, known as *The Neighborhood*, was developed by the College of Nursing and initially made available for use in January, 2006.

Programmatic Innovation Description. *The Neighborhood* is a Web-based virtual community featuring the stories of characters within households and community agencies. Stories unfold on a weekly basis over three academic semesters and are supplemented with photos, video vignettes, and medical records. The program essentially consists of a series of Web pages (that contain text, photos, and video clips) that are linked for easy navigation. An automated date progression updates stories on a weekly basis; a user authentication system is used for student and faculty access. The household characters represent diverse individuals from multiple cultural groups across the age and socioeconomic spectrum with various health-related issues correlating to the incidence and prevalence in population groups. The stories present a holistic view of nursing because of the focus on individuals and families—in other words, within the context of the lived experience. Through this lens, students learn about health-promoting behaviors, unhealthy lifestyles, and disease processes over time.

Characters featured within the community agencies depict personal and professional issues faced by nurses in a number of roles within various health care agencies. Featured nurse characters include three hospital based nurses, a community senior center nurse, a school nurse, and an advanced practice nurse (midwife) in a women's health practice. Interactions of the nurse characters with other health professionals allow for an understanding of the interdisciplinary relationships that exist among health care providers. A community newspaper features health-related stories that tie together events within the households and community agencies. A community "web page" provides typical facts and figures, population demographics, climate, recreation, and community resources available in *The Neighborhood*.

The primary basis for learning is through the lived experiences of the characters, allowing students to gain an appreciation for personal issues and competing variables associated with health care issues not captured by journal articles and textbooks. *The Neighborhood* has strong links to three well-founded teaching strategies—storytelling, case-based learning, and interpretive pedagogy—representing a multicontextual educational experience. The longitudinal application fosters deep learning among students as a result of the ongoing exposure to concepts and because of the emotional bond to characters that can potentially develop. This process is similar to following the ongoing stories of characters in a television series or novel. Neuroscience research has shown that emotion is a key component associated with learning. Because it is somewhat difficult to thoroughly describe this application in the context of a 3-page nomination letter, the review committee is invited to visit *The Neighborhood* website

<http://hsc.unm.edu/consg/Neighborhood/> where a demo site and short video presentation provide a deeper appreciation of this program.

Perceived Benefits—*Changing How We Teach and How Students Learn*. There are several benefits of *The Neighborhood*. The program provides the foundation for a student-centered learning environment. As a curriculum platform, students and faculty have shared experiences through the stories. Conceptual linking within and between all courses is possible, fostering a greater sense of continuity across the curriculum. The stories and supporting media provide a source for countless student-centered learning activities and assignments for didactic courses, laboratory and clinical courses, simulation learning activities, and online courses. It is important to note that *The Neighborhood* is not a “turn key” application – that is, there are no built in assignments, learning activities, or quizzes. In many ways, programs with such features limit potentially creative uses. The vision for *The Neighborhood* is one where faculty will generate appropriate learning activities based on the class content and level of learner.

Because many concepts and exemplars are depicted in the character stories, faculty can capitalize on students’ virtual experiences, allowing greater flexibility in how class and clinical time is spent. Faculty may not feel as obligated to “cover” the content and instead can focus on extending student understanding and conceptual links. Students draw on their virtual experiences to enhance their understanding of classroom content. Students are often exposed to concepts in the stories before formally studying them in didactic courses or encountering them in the clinical setting. For this reason, students are encouraged to use a variety of references to independently learn as much as they can about the problems experienced by the characters. Faculty can facilitate these efforts by enhancing students’ skills in finding reliable information. This process fosters skills needed for life-long learning—a recognized competency of nursing graduates.

Another benefit to *The Neighborhood* is its appeal to diverse learners. As a multi-contextual application, it has the potential to meet the learning needs of low- and high-context learners. This becomes a very important point because the teaching strategies within higher education have traditionally been low-context (reading, writing, and lecture) which meet the needs of students with low context learning preferences (who tend to be Anglo). Students with high-context learning preferences (who tend to be minority) have been less well served by higher education. The need to support learning preferences of our increasingly diverse students cannot be overstated. Additionally, many of today’s Generation X and Y learners find technologic applications such as this very appealing.

Development and Implementation. The development process for *The Neighborhood* included story writing, photography, development of storyboards to guide filming, editing, Web design, and program functionality – all which was done internally at the College of Nursing – representing a true collaborative effort among nurse educators and support staff. Stories were generated from collective experiences of many nursing faculty, nurses in practice, and other health care professionals. Stories were then sent out for external review among nurses and individuals from other disciplines in other educational institutions for content validity. Although *The Neighborhood* was initially developed with the intent for use in traditional undergraduate nursing programs, it is clear that the application easily extends to multiple programs. Faculty teaching in the RN-BSN program use this program in a number of ways. For example, providing case management experiences for students presents challenges in many communities because of the lack of agency resources. The rich community component of *The Neighborhood* has provided the ability for faculty to develop acceptable alternative assignments to partially address this issue. Graduate faculty are also finding applications. In the MSN education concentration,

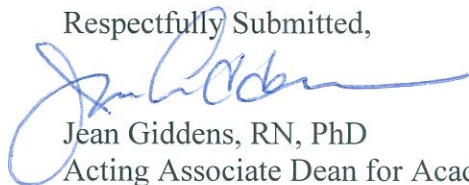
students select a Neighborhood character or family and develop a student-centered learning activity based on the events in the story. This provides students preparing for a career in nursing education exposure to new ways of teaching and learning. The potential for use in advanced practice concentrations is currently being explored.

Evaluation and Dissemination. *The Neighborhood* has been well received by faculty and students at the College of Nursing. Evaluation of the students' perceived effectiveness has thus far been limited to anonymous survey at the end of each level. While not all students report finding the application beneficial, the student responses have been overwhelmingly positive – particularly from minority and younger students. Perhaps the most important forms of student feedback, however, have been the informal conversations, emails, notes, and letters received from students commenting on the benefits of the program. A recent minority graduate of our program communicated that she believes *The Neighborhood* helped her successfully pass the NCLEX-RN because so many of the questions linked to the stories. There has been increasing interest in *The Neighborhood* among nursing faculty from other schools during the past year – this in part due to presentations at nursing education meetings in 2006 and 2007 (including the AACN-BSN meeting, the NLN Summit, and Western Institute of Nursing), recent publications in *Nursing Outlook* (March-April, 2008) and *Nursing Education Perspectives* (September, 2007), and receiving Bayada Award for Technologic Innovation in Nursing Education from Drexel University in June, 2007. This widespread interest has also led to an invitation to present this project at the education keynote address at the Western Institute of Nursing in April, 2008.

Plans are underway make the *The Neighborhood* available to other nursing programs in the upcoming year. The opportunity for outcomes assessment is significantly enhanced with the use of this application at multiple sites. Along with plans for diffusion, the UNM College of Nursing is planning collaborative educational research with other programs and institutions to investigate benefits and experiences of both learners and faculty. There is also interest in exploring this application as a foundation for interdisciplinary learning among health science disciplines (i.e. medicine, pharmacy, physical therapy) at the University of New Mexico. It is expected that future generations of virtual communities will be developed and used in a variety of educational applications based on the findings from this work.

In closing, *The Neighborhood* is an innovative educational program like no other in use for nursing education. It is not only consistent with the AACN mission and goals, but is an exemplary learning application, potentially serving as a benchmark for educational efforts of the future.

Respectfully Submitted,



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