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Family Nurse Practitioner Expansion to USG 3.0: Taking the Best from the Pandemic Bridgitte Gourley, DNP, CRNP

Abstract

The Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) Family Nurse Practitioner (FNP) specialty expansion to the Universities at Shady Grove (USG) created opportunities for exploring new ways to learn between and across two campus settings prior to the pandemic and one year following the move to online instruction as a result of the pandemic, and lessons continue to be learned. As we look forward to returning to our campuses, faculty and students wonder how the learning environment will adapt to become a true hybrid of the before, during, and after the pandemic teaching strategies.

The experience of being fully online temporarily has opened faculty eyes to a new way of teaching and learning as DNP and FNP professionals, and there have been benefits and challenges to evaluate. One challenge has been clinical practicums, which have historically relied on face-to-face interactions with patients to confidently diagnose and treat acute and chronic conditions. As face-to-face clinical opportunities were in scarce supply, faculty developed leveled case studies and role plays with simulated patients and scenarios to target needed skill sets in assessment, management, and communication. The benefit of developing the cases was that faculty could ensure equal exposure to a variety of clinical experiences that may not be guaranteed in face-to-face clinical, regardless of campus, and highlight areas in need of exposure. While the alternative activities do not replace all the clinical hours needed, the extra practice permits students to arrive at clinical best prepared to encounter patients and practice advanced practice registered nurse-level skills, placing less of a burden on our preceptors. These activities will be kept in the program moving forward. Fortunately, clinical sites have begun accepting students again.

Another challenge that turned into a benefit was the synchronous online format. While it was initially a steep learning curve for the FNP faculty to deliver engaging content online, students from both campuses were able to participate together in one setting, thereby increasing the equity as well as inclusion of diverse nursing perspectives and experiences. Guest lecturers were able to deliver content once to both campuses, which simplified scheduling and travel. Students enjoyed knowing that regardless of campus, they were receiving the same content and could interact with other classmates from both campuses in small groups as well as with the presenter in the chat box. While faculty did miss seeing students face-to-face and the ability to connect with a room of

students live, there were logistical benefits to having both campuses in the same room and interacting with each other, and the experience was rated positively in the CEQs and FEQs.

While the pandemic thrust many unpleasant restrictions upon students and faculty, it also gave an opportunity to be innovative and try things outside of our traditions, which has proven beneficial in the short term. Looking ahead, we can keep the best changes from 2020 and leave the less successful ones behind.