

Interview

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Introduction

Jennifer Whitley is one of my colleagues and is the Perioperative Programs Director at Huntsville Hospital. She established and implemented a 6-month Surgical Technology Program and a Perioperative Nursing Program. She successfully gained the *Accreditation Review Council on Education in Surgical Technology and Surgical Assisting (ARC/ST)* accreditation for the Surgical Technology Program and is working on creating an accredited associate degree for her Perioperative Programs School. I was aware that she was teaching online courses and this assignment gave me the opportunity to find out more about her educational path.

Background

Jennifer received an Associate Degree in Nursing in 1976 and really enjoys the field. After having children, she decided to go back to school. She managed to raise a family, work, and study to obtain a Bachelor of Science in Nursing in 1992. Back then, she was attending school one-12 hour day per week. Two years later, she graduated with a Masters of Science in Nursing and a minor in Education. In 2008, she graduated from an online university with a Masters in Business Administration.

Jennifer told me that she became a teacher because she had did not have a positive school experience and she really wanted make a difference for students. She has been teaching for 22 years. In parallel, she started to teach online 8 years ago. She taught at Kaplan University for 3 years. She revealed that she was very nervous to teach her first course online. However, Kaplan offered an orientation to teach online. Also, for her first class, someone monitored her and she also had to monitor a different teacher. Jennifer stated that communication is key in distance learning. She learned to give the maximum amount of information to her students. She said in a live classroom, students ask

questions but online, learners don't always reach out so she has to be very specific and detailed about her assignments, agenda, etc... One of her biggest frustrations is when she believes someone doesn't understand her lesson. She will reach out to the student but the student doesn't always respond and that leaves Jennifer without any options.

Today, Jennifer is a faculty member of American Public University System (APU).

American Public University (APU)

In 1991, APU was originally created as an affordable university for US armed forces and was then called the "American Military University" (AMU). AMU offered mobile military learners a great way to expand their education while still being in service. In 2002, AMU became APU, opening its cyber-doors to a bigger audience. According to APU, APU is the nation's largest provider of higher education to the U.S. Armed Forces* and has been nationally recognized for excellence in online education by the Online Learning Consortium (*formerly Sloan Consortium*).

The School:

APU offers 190 degrees and certificates for undergraduates, graduates. Topics include:

- Security and Global Studies 30%
- Business: 26%
- Arts & Humanities: 18%
- Science, Technology, Engineering and Math : 13%
- Education: 4%

Jennifer informed me that programs and curricula are structured by department heads and reviewed by faculty to meet requirements. The distance learning platform used by APU is Sakai.

Jennifer shared that she was not impressed with this platform, specifically the discussion board that is

not user friendly. However, she explained that she used ecollege at Kaplan University and she really appreciated the flexibility of this distance learning platform.

The Students:

APU has a student population of over 100,000 with 58% civilians and 42% with a military background (active, retired, National Guard, Reserves). The average age is 33 years old. 89% are working adults and 52% are on military active duty. The average student per class is 19.

Teaching:

Jennifer teaches nursing, pathophysiology and clinical pharmacology, and community health. The courses are set for her by the school. She's able to have some flexibility with the readings but the books are selected for the course by the department faculty. She can teach up to 3 courses in one semester. She spends between 14-20 hours teaching. Jennifer is not required to have any other responsibilities with the school, however she has monthly staff meetings generally hosted on Adobe Connect or Skype. Teachers are evaluated using student evaluation surveys

Jennifer assesses her students' knowledge with discussion board, exams, projects, and written assignments in APA format. She confirms that teaching at a distance is a challenge for both students and teachers. She's a very understanding teacher. Her student group often includes learners that are deployed overseas or work full-time so she's flexible with her requests. Also, she knows how hard it is to juggle work, family and education as she experienced it herself. However, she lets her students know that if they were attending a 'brick and mortar' university, they would set-up dedicated time to attend classes so she expects the same. She encourages students to set a schedule and stick to it. She recognizes that an online instructor has to be patient, flexible and understanding. She believes distance learners should have a computer skills course set as a prerequisite. Jennifer explains that she faced a

few situations where the student had issues just connecting and finding the syllabus, discussion board, or email. In order to make her courses interactive and attractive, she tries to use online tools (youtube, skype, simcity, etc...) to engage and expand the learning experience and also to make sure that she's able to reach the different types of learners. She strongly believes that the workload for a distance student is much more challenging than the ones studying in a 'brick and mortar' school (i.e more readings, discussions, etc.). I concluded the interview by asking her how she would describe her teaching philosophy and she stated that she worked with a physician that would tell her "learning is a painful experience". She turned his quote around to: "I want learning to be interesting and enjoyable."

Reflections

My time with Jennifer Whitley was very insightful. I enjoyed learning more about her background. It helped me understand her career path and her identity as an educator today. I appreciated that she fully realizes the environment that her students are facing. During our conversation, she explained that she is lenient on homework/assignments that are turned in late, however other colleagues are much stricter. Jennifer believes that especially with adult learners, it is important to be supportive.

Jennifer juggles her 'day' job (Perioperative Programs Director) with her 'night' job (distance learning teacher), not by necessity but simply because she's a great educator and truly enjoys being with students and teaching. I admire her stamina in her quest to continually find the latest technologies to add to her classes. I was surprised with her comments regarding a computer prerequisite for distance learners. I had not considered that that could be an issue. I noted a quote on Jennifer's desk: "*Be kinder than necessary because everyone you meet is fighting some kind of battle*" by J. M. Barrie. She told me that she had a student in her live classes that was a single mother. She lost her car as she was unable to pay for the gas and insurance. She said she would come to school every day, by bus, always on time,

with her homework done, lessons learned and ready for a new day. However, Jennifer knew that her family and financial environment was chaotic. Jennifer noted that there is no need to judge someone or be harsh on someone because something is not done on time or turned in late. As she says "life happens". As I was walking out of her office, I noticed another quote on Jennifer's door: "*The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams*" by Eleanor Roosevelt. She explained that she wants to help people realize their dreams whatever they may be. She went on to say "Our role as educators is to lead and support others on their new journeys". I hope to be as perceptive as Jennifer is in my educational journey.

References

American Public University (n.d). Retrieved from <http://www.apus.edu>

Powerful quotes for Teachers(n.d). Retrieved from <http://teaching.monster.com/benefits/articles/8742-powerful-quotes-for-teachers-printer-friendly-version>

(J. Whitley, personal communication, July 6, 2015).