

THE RN-BSN PROFESSIONAL JOURNEY
FROM EDUCATIONAL LIMBO TO MORE THAN THE ELUSIVE DEGREE

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The needs of an increasingly complex and demanding health care system have prompted calls for baccalaureate preparation of nurses. Yet only about one third of the nursing workforce is BSN prepared. Targeting Associate Degree nurses to pursue the professional degree might appear to be the answer yet recent trends show declines in RN-BSN enrollments. RN-BSN students are unique consumers who want flexible, convenient programs that meet their professional and personal needs. Distance programs have provided a user-friendly avenue for RNs to return to school. Professional development has been identified as an important factor in students' decision to join distance education courses. At the same time concerns regarding the negative impact of distance education on professional development have been raised. No studies have explored professional growth among RN-BSN students taking their nursing program by distance delivery.

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of professional growth as experienced by RN-BSN students taking their program by distance delivery.

Method: A qualitative descriptive design guided the study. A convenience sample of senior students enrolled in a RN-BSN program, taking their classes either by live televised broadcast (ETV) or by on-line instruction volunteered to participate in the study. Data was collected through use of on-line student discussions that took place over a two-week period. A semi-structured interview schedule was used to guide the discussion with discussion threads being posted every two to three days. The on-going discussion was facilitated by a member of the research team.

Findings: RN-BSN students described their pursuit of the BSN as a journey of being and becoming a professional. Even though students already felt "professional" the impetus for the journey could be traced to the over-riding theme of "falling short as a professional." RN-BSN students described their beginning journey towards the baccalaureate degree as "educational limbo," out of which they moved with discovery of the RN-BSN distance program. What began as pursuit of an elusive degree that was expected to produce little change became more as RN-BSN student evolved as professional along many dimensions.

Discussion: The implications of these findings for the development and design of curricular and pedagogical approaches to better serve the needs of this unique group of learners will be addressed.