

News Briefs

Membership numbers on the rise

Sigma Theta Tau provided service to more than 134,000 members worldwide last year. What's contributed to this increase? "During the past year, we have introduced some exciting new products and services," explains Nancy Dickenson-Hazard, Sigma Theta Tau Executive Officer. "More importantly, we have expanded our online communication options, improved responsiveness to member requests and enhanced record keeping."

Largest gift in Sigma Theta Tau history

Philanthropist Ruth Lilly has given a \$2 million contribution to expand Sigma Theta Tau International's electronic library. Ms. Lilly's gift, the largest single gift in the 78-year history of Sigma Theta Tau, will help nurses worldwide get the information they need to conduct research, serve patients and control health care costs.

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The art of nursing

Encouraging prospective students to pursue a nursing career is more important than ever. To promote the opportunities nursing provides, Sigma Theta Tau International offers the "Art of Nursing" brochure. Call 1.888.634.7575 for copies.

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Sigma Theta Tau International Honor Society of Nursing

EXCELLENCE

in Nursing Education

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On the rise: Are grades where they should be?

By Joyce K. Shoemaker & Mary DeVos

Grade inflation is an evaluation problem that has received a good deal of attention during the past 20 to 30 years. During the post-Sputnik era of the 1970s, it was thought to be a response to public demand for more rigorous academic standards. There is also speculation that during that time, inflated grades were assigned by sympathetic professors as a strategy to delay the drafting of students for military service in Vietnam. In recent years, grade inflation has been perceived as a response to public concerns regarding academic accountability accompanied by demands for improving the quality of education in post-secondary schools.

Although studies of grade inflation have not been reported in nursing, the phenomenon appears to exist in almost every educational setting and should, therefore, be of concern to nurse educators. Numerous studies of college and university transcripts during the 1980s and 1990s have



"Numerous studies of college and university transcripts during the 1980s and 1990s have indicated a substantial increase in the number of A's assigned to students in addition to a reduction in the number of recorded C's."

revealed a substantial increase in the number of A's assigned to students in addition to a reduction in the

number of recorded C's. Most recently, medical schools have begun to raise questions about grade inflation related to concerns about the ability to identify student performances that are below acceptable standards.

Grade inflation is defined as a maldistribution of grades characterized by an excessive number of A's and B's. It may be limited to one or more courses, or it may pervade an entire curriculum. When grade inflation is common practice within a curriculum, it results in an overabundance of students achieving high grade point averages.

Reasons for the rise

Numerous causative factors have been postulated for the existence of grade inflation. In some instances, faculty simply find it difficult to assign low grades to students who appear to be working hard to master course content. Some faculty members capitulate to

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New Harris poll is sobering wake-up call for profession

By Nancy Dickenson-Hazard



A just-released national poll by Harris Interactive presents a sobering wake-up call for nurses everywhere. Despite our profession's far-ranging health care knowledge, the poll shows that most consumers seldom look

to nurses for advice on such important issues as elder care, women's health or childhood diseases. Instead, most of those polled rely on nurses for basic health care advice that's consistent with traditional nursing roles.

The national poll, sponsored by *Nursing Spectrum* and the Honor Society of Nursing, Sigma Theta Tau International, was based on telephone interviews with more than 1,000 adults aged 18 or over.

While the poll results show that nurses have carved out a respectable niche in providing health care advice to the public—principally through the traditional venues of office, school and hospital nursing—we clearly need to do a better job of reaching out to consumers and helping them with a wider range of health care problems and concerns.

The Traditional Nurse

Out of 30 potential areas of nursing involvement cited in the poll, it is stunning to note that nurses' advice was sought only in the four areas consistent with traditional nursing roles. According to the poll, the public is comfortable asking nurses about over-the-counter health care products, how to take care of themselves or loved ones after surgery, how to take prescription medicines

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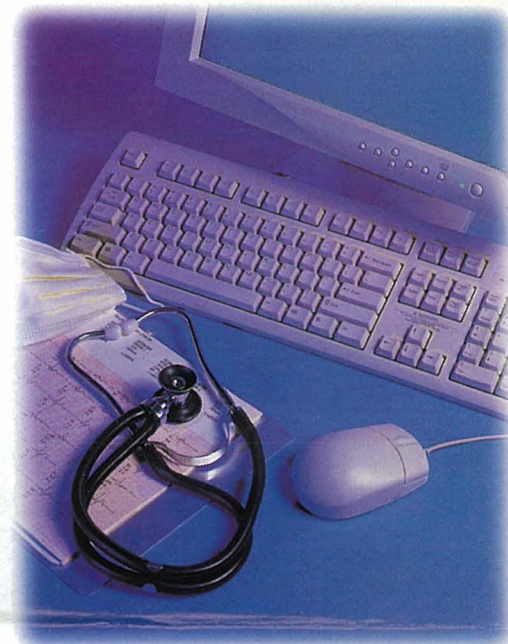
Tapping into technology: The future of electronic theses and dissertations

By Bonnie Holaday

The advancement of nursing science has been paralleled by advancements in the means of expression and sharing of knowledge. Since the expansion of the Internet there have been dramatic changes in the enterprise of nursing research and education. These changes are now helping to drive further change that will affect the key documents of graduate education: theses and dissertations. These documents were handled by libraries and perhaps Bell and Howell Information and Learning (formerly University Microfilms) or a university press. In the not-too-distant future, most theses and dissertations will be prepared and submitted electronically by their authors to their universities via networks.

This change is occurring concurrently with the emergence of digital libraries. Digital libraries ensure access to these electronic theses and dissertations using powerful tools for searching and browsing, while enforcing any restrictions required by the university, author or publisher. Digital libraries are high-end or "super" information systems that integrate a wide variety of specialized technologies. Advanced information systems involve multimedia information and distributed processing and the ability to handle various approaches to information organization whether in collections, databases or graphs (as in hypertexts). Scientific visualization, virtual reality simulations, vector space or probabilistic or conceptual searching, and 2D or 3D graphics interfaces are all a part of a comprehensive digital library. Thus, while the rest of this article focuses on the implications of Electronic Theses and Dissertations (ETDs) for nursing education and research, one must also consider the changes occurring in university libraries.

The history of ETDs is quite short. The idea was first discussed publicly in a workshop hosted



"Electronic theses and dissertations will provide a foundation for worldwide collaboration among schools of nursing that will allow them to address important research problems, as well as enhance the dissemination of nursing knowledge."

by University Microfilms International (UMI) in 1987. Practical solutions became feasible in the early 1990s with the arrival of Adobe's Acrobat software, which supported creation of the Portable Document Format (PDF). UMI, the Council of Graduate Schools, the Coalition for Networked Information and Virginia Tech worked together and sponsored a series of meetings beginning in the early 1990s in the United States and Canada.

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GRADES ON THE RISE

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student demands for higher grades. Faculty may also assign passing grades to avoid the stress of student grievances. Student evaluations of faculty are frequently used for promotion, tenure and merit decisions. As a result, faculty may be conflicted between the need to evaluate student performances honestly and the desire to achieve complimentary student evaluations. Student course evaluations can affect the enrollment in a course or a section of a course, an additional factor that may contribute to grade inflation. A final concern is that some faculty members are not familiar with evaluation principles. Nurse educators with master's degrees preparing for clinical specialization, administration or an area of primary care practice generally have not had education courses in their curriculum. Additional education resulting in doctoral preparation generally does not repair that knowledge gap. Unfortunately, as these individuals are mentored into their teaching roles, the issue of evaluation of students may be overlooked.

The Importance of Grade Accuracy

In general, grades serve two purposes. They inform students about their achievement individually and in relation to their peers. Grades also inform employers, regulatory bodies and educational institutions of student achievements. Both of these purposes are limited by grade inflation. With

regard to students, their views of competence or achievement may be distorted—resulting in beliefs that minimal performance is, in fact, good to excellent. It is also unfair to the high achiever when the majority of students are rated as above average. A major concern is that a high grade point average is no longer a reliable criterion for selection of students to advanced educational programs. In fact, because of grade inflation, many schools have had to employ remediation experts in attempts to salvage students who may have entered an advanced educational program without the requisite knowledge. Of particular concern is the fact that the standards of educational programs are lowered when maldistribution of grades is evident.

In nursing education programs, grade inflation limits our ability to identify student performances that are below the minimum pass level. It compromises the ability to predict success on the licensure examination. It provides an unrealistic assessment of student abilities to succeed in graduate programs, and it is a disservice to students. Of particular concern is the fact that nurse educators have a responsibility to society to prepare the highest level of practitioners. This responsibility is compromised when nursing education programs ignore signs of maldistribution of grades.

Addressing Grade Inflation

There are a number of interventions that may be considered. However, the

first step is to recognize that maldistribution of grades exists. Usually, the administrator of the program will recognize it when grade sheets are turned in with an excessive number of A's and B's. Or it may become apparent when there is an exceptionally large number of students with high grade point averages. Clinical sections in which students consistently achieve excellent ratings should be examined to be sure grade inflation is not a factor. Once maldistribution of grades has been identified, faculty should have an opportunity to discuss the meaning of grades with each other. Is everyone defining and implementing the grading scale in the same way? If not, faculty must be encouraged to come to consensus on these issues.

Occasionally, students achieve uniformly high grades in courses in which there is an excess of previously learned material. In those instances, course objectives and content need to be reviewed. This should be followed by an examination of evaluation criteria to determine whether methods of evaluation assess the achievement of course objectives. Another area to be examined is the practice by some instructors of providing opportunities to students to earn additional credits, particularly when they do not contribute to appropriate assessment of student knowledge. For example, some faculty will allow a failing student to complete an additional project to earn credits, which will bring the final grade to a passing level. Unfortunately, the

student may still not have mastered the required course content.

Efforts should be made to change faculty attitudes when maldistribution of grades is noted. Faculty should become aware of the implications of *laissez-faire* evaluation of students. They have a right to administrative support when a student fails, and they should also receive peer support when it is necessary to assign minimal or failing grades to students. Faculty should establish appropriate standards of performance in all aspects of the curriculum and take pride in maintaining those standards. Faculty with inadequate knowledge of evaluation measures should be required to take an appropriate course at the time of their appointment. Finally, periodic faculty development programs on principles of evaluation, test construction, clinical evaluation and other measures of student performance should be offered so that faculty can maintain their competence in this critical area.

Tell us what you think by completing the survey on page 4.

Joyce K. Schoemaker, RN, EdD, is professor and dean emerita at the Medical College of Ohio School of Nursing.

Mary DeVos, RN, MS, is assistant professor at the Medical College of Ohio School of Nursing.

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and what types of side effects to expect, and how to interpret information provided by a physician.

For example, more than half (55 percent) of the respondents said they had queried a nurse about post-operative care. Also, more than half (53 percent) of the respondents had asked a nurse for advice about over-the-counter health care products that provide relief for pain, fever or allergies.

Respondents were also questioned about how often a nurse has helped them understand something a medical doctor has told them, including information about treatment options or a diagnosis. The majority (52 percent) responded "very often" and "sometimes."

A similar percentage of respondents

said they had asked a nurse about how to take a particular drug (50 percent) and side effects of prescribed drugs (50 percent).

Troublesome Findings

Although nurses are capable of providing a wealth of health care information, most of those surveyed said they did not seek expert nursing advice on care for the elderly, children's health issues, women's health issues, alternative therapies and certain aspects of medications.

The public also does not turn to nurses for advice on other important health-related issues including sexually transmitted diseases, sex education, abortion, and drug and alcohol use.

For instance, 59 percent of the women surveyed had not asked a nurse about

birth control, 77 percent of women had not sought a nurse's advice about menopause and 81 percent of women had not consulted a nurse about osteoporosis.

Implications

This poll clearly shows that nursing must find a way to make the public aware of the extensive health care knowledge nurses possess.

This is one of the issues being addressed by the Honor Society of Nursing and other professional organizations through aggressive media relations designed to get news and entertainment programs to more accurately portray nurses.

It's also a focus of Nurses for a Healthier Tomorrow, a coalition of 19 leading nursing and health care

organizations that is launching a national advertising campaign to raise awareness of – and change the image of – the nursing profession in order to recruit and retain more nurses. (For more information on Nurses for a Healthier Tomorrow, visit www.nursesource.org.)

These findings should be a major concern for nurses everywhere who've worked hard to expand the role of our profession, increase our versatility and enhance our value in an increasingly complex health care system. It's time for nurses to have their voices heard and be counted among health care advisors consulted by the public.

Nancy Dickenson-Hazard, RN, MSN, FAAN, is the executive officer of the Honor Society of Nursing, Sigma Theta Tau International.

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NursingCenter.com

How are we doing?

Excellence was launched in January of this year providing members with an opportunity to choose the nursing information they receive — education, clinical practice or administration. We would love to know what you think about *Excellence*. So that we may continue to provide you with news and information important to you, we are always looking for authors and good story ideas. Please e-mail your thoughts to amy@stti.iupui.edu.

Career profiles in nursing education

Name: Elizabeth Johnston Taylor, RN, PhD

Title: Associate Professor

Employer: Loma Linda University School of Nursing

Years in Nursing: 16



Elizabeth Johnston Taylor

Three favorite aspects of job:

- Influencing future nursing care through teaching and research
- Relations with students
- Writing with an awareness that others will read my work and ideas

Three challenging aspects of job:

- The work is always there!
- The volume of knowledge required to keep abreast of is overwhelming
- Wishing you were even smarter!

Job description:

Conducts research investigating spiritual responses to illness and how nurses can care for the spiritual needs of clients; teaches undergraduate and graduate nursing students; and is currently writing a textbook on spiritual care giving titled *Spiritual Care: Nursing Theory, Research, and Practice*.

Education:

- BN, 1984, Andrews University (Mich.), Nursing
- MN, 1987, University of Pennsylvania, Oncology Nursing
- PhD, 1992, University of Pennsylvania
- Post Doctorate Fellowship, 1995

Sigma Theta Tau Chapter:

- Gamma Alpha Chapter

Best advice:

"Love what you do—or else don't do it! Do what you believe you were called to do. Be sure that your career decisions are congruent with your overall life values and goals."

How Sigma Theta Tau has shaped her career:

"Sigma Theta Tau International has been a tonic for my career. When I was selected to be a member, I felt validated and inspired as a young professional. Continued membership has brought me several opportunities that have enriched me. For example, the opportunity to be a collateral reviewer for research proposals allowed me to develop this professional skill and offered me perspective on what other researchers do. Being a local chapter officer gave me the chance to learn about leadership experientially. Attending local and international Sigma Theta Tau conferences has allowed me to meet and listen to other nurse leaders and thinkers."

Elizabeth Johnston Taylor is one member whose career is profiled on our Web site, Career Profiles in Nursing, at www.nursingsociety.org/career. Visit the site today to ask these nurses questions through e-mail and explore the world of nursing. If you are interested in being featured on this site, please visit www.nursingsociety.org for an application. Submission deadline is October 30.

TAPPING INTO TECHNOLOGY

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Funding from the Southeastern Universities Research Association (SURA) and the U.S. Department of Education (FIPSE) in 1996 led to the National Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations. In 1997, the international interest in this topic led to the establishment of the Networked Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations (NDLTD). This group now includes 85 U.S. universities and 35 international universities along with UNESCO. NDLTD's aim is to enhance graduate education through the application of electronic publishing and digital library technologies.

Electronic theses and dissertations will provide a foundation for worldwide collaboration among schools of nursing that will allow them to address important research problems as well as enhance the dissemination of nursing knowledge. Most nursing faculty and practitioners must wait for months or years for findings to appear in journals or books before they can refer to them in class or use them in practice. Nurses engaged in distance education have an especially difficult time finding out about graduate research results since most lack easy access to university libraries.

Graduate students, faculty and practitioners can easily search for studies related to their personal research or practice area using NDLTD (<http://www.theses.org>). The information in these studies may guide a graduate student to a topic, provide important references and information about methodological issues, or lead directly to other relevant research.

Databases can keep track of citations to the theses reviewed, as well as record the large number of references to other scholarly literature. Faculty and students can also carefully review the details of the studies, methodology, data and analysis within weeks of the study's submission. Some data sets, visualizations, videos and other accompanying materials can be downloaded for further review. The study of full data sets, both qualitative and quantitative, will be extremely useful to students and faculty.

Students will also benefit from learning by doing as they prepare their ETDs for submission. Students may learn more about multimedia technologies if they wish to include pictures, audio or video components to their theses. The students will also learn more about preservation after they create XML versions of their ETDs instead of Word or WordPerfect versions that may be unusable in a few years. Faculty will be able to guide their students to figures, tables, bibliographies, literature reviews, and other parts of ETDs and incorporate ETDs in their lectures, supplemental courseware, and research projects. Faculty and the

university will also be facilitated in their service mission by having material they can easily disseminate to the government, hospitals and other health care agencies.

It is important that graduate nursing education programs keep up with technology and that our graduates do not complete their programs lacking basic "information literacy" skills. Nursing graduate students need to know about networked information systems and their use. Nursing faculty of the future must also learn how to publish electronically and take advantage of digital libraries.

All universities can participate in the NDLTD. It is expected that university, government and other agency access to the NDLTD, including searching for and retrieving ETDs, will continue to be free. A review of the Virginia Tech ETDs Website (<http://etd.vt.edu/>) will provide you with more information about ETDs. The next international NDLTD meeting is March 22-24, 2001, in Pasadena, Calif. (<http://www.ndltd.org/>).

Bonnie Holaday, RN, DNS, FAAN, is dean of the graduate school and associate vice president for research at Clemson University, Clemson, S.C.

Nursing research congress to be held in Denmark

Nursing researchers from around the world will convene in Copenhagen, Denmark, at the 12th Sigma Theta Tau International Nursing Research Congress. The congress will be held June 8 and 9, 2001, in conjunction with the ICN Quadrennial Congress.

The objectives for the Sigma Theta Tau International Nursing Research Congress include:

- Promoting research and clinical scholarship among and within international networks of colleagues;
- Identifying current global trends in nursing research;
- Discussing international health care concerns;
- Exploring the use of technology in the conduct and dissemination of research within a global marketplace; and
- Recognizing the importance of using research findings to support evidence-based nursing practice.

Preparations for the Nursing Research Congress are underway. The organizing committee is planning a congress program that will feature presentations, keynote plenary sessions and poster sessions.

For more information about the Nursing Research Congress program, registration, speakers and venue, visit our Web site, www.nursingsociety.org/education.

Mark your calendars!

Leadership Today—Changing Roles, Rules and Responsibilities

Sigma Theta Tau International presents the **new** 2001 Professional Development Conference and Chapter Leader Academy

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- Volunteer Association Leadership: Rewarding Roles in Service to Community
- Becoming a Funded Researcher
- Chapter Leader Academy (2-day track)

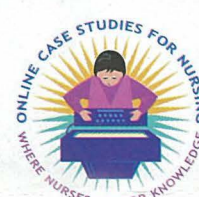
Locations:	Dates:	Keynote Speaker:
Orlando, FL	January 26-27	Patricia E. Thompson, RN, EdD,
San Francisco, CA	February 23-24	Sigma Theta Tau
Philadelphia, PA	March 23-24	International President
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Online courses are funded by the Joan K. Stout, RN, Continuing Education Series on Nursing Practice and the Eli Lilly and Company Foundation for Women's Health.

Sigma Theta Tau International is an accredited provider of CE for nurses by the American Nurses Credentialing Center's Commission on Accreditation.

Nursing coalition expands membership

Nurses for a Healthier Tomorrow (NHT), a coalition of leading nursing and health care organizations including the Honor Society of Nursing, has added its nineteenth member – the National Association of School Nurses (NASN). With more than 10,000 members, the NASN will help strengthen the coalition's commitment to attract people to nursing, as well as promote public understanding of nursing's contributions.

"School nurses can have a significant impact on recruitment to the profession," said Judith Robinson, RN, PhD, executive director of NASN. "We look forward to helping NHT distribute information to middle and high school students and encourage students to consider nursing."

NHT has also received a donation of \$250,000 in research and creative



services from JWT Specialized Communications and a \$100,000 grant, plus an additional \$100,000 contingent pledge for 2001, from the Helene Fuld Health Trust. These contributions will help create and place a national advertising campaign designed to recruit new nurses and convince existing ones to remain in the profession.

With Luci Baines Johnson and Elizabeth Dole serving as honorary chairs, NHT was formed in response to the shortage of nurses in the United States. Rather than wait until the problem is severe and patients are at risk, NHT is working now to increase awareness about the shortage and the excellent opportunities for those who seek a nursing career.

More information about NHT and a list of members can be found at <http://www.nursesource.org>.

Recognizing the best: Regional awards to be presented

Creative and scholarly contributions to nursing benefit nurses and the patients they serve worldwide. To recognize outstanding accomplishments, the society presents the biennial regional awards. The following awards will be presented to recipients from seven geographical regions.

- Media Awards (print, electronic, photography and art)
- Technology Awards (information technology and education technology)
- Research Dissertation Award
- Research Utilization Award
- Research Dissemination Award
- Chapter Research Advancement Award
- Chapter Heritage Award
- Innovative Chapter Award
- Mentor Award

Recipients will be recognized during the 2001 Professional Development Conference and Chapter Leader Academy. Award winners may accept their awards at any one of these Professional Development Conference and Chapter Leader Academy sites: Orlando on January 26-27; San Francisco on February 23-24; Philadelphia on March 23-24; or Chicago on April 27-28.

To be considered for a 2000-2001 award, submissions must be received by October 15, 2000. For information about eligibility, specific criteria and submission requirements, visit www.nursingsociety.org or call Frank Maez at 1.888.634.7575.

Grade inflation: Tell us what you think

1. How many years have you been a nurse educator?
- 1 to 5 years
 - 6 to 10 years
 - 11 to 15 years
 - more than 15 years

2. What is the highest degree in nursing you have earned?
- associate degree in nursing
 - bachelor's degree in nursing
 - master's degree in nursing
 - doctoral degree in nursing

3. Have you earned a doctoral degree in a discipline other than nursing?
- yes (please specify)
 - no

4. In your educational preparation, did you complete courses in: (Circle all that apply.)
- curriculum development?
 - instructional methods?
 - tests and measurements?
 - evaluation of students?
 - none of the above?

5. In what type of program are you currently teaching? (Circle all that apply.)

- associate degree
- bachelor's degree
- bachelor's degree completion program for nurses
- master's degree
- doctoral degree

6. How many students are there in your school of nursing?

- less than 100
- 101 to 250
- 251 to 500
- more than 500

7. How many faculty members are there in your school of nursing?

- less than 20
- 21 to 40
- 41 to 60
- more than 60

8. What is your academic rank?

- instructor
- assistant professor
- associate professor
- professor

9. In addition to teaching, do you hold an administrative position?

- yes (please specify) _____
- no

10. During the past three years, what courses have you taught? (Circle all that apply.)

- adult health
- community health
- ethics
- gerontological nursing
- health assessment
- health care of children
- health care of women
- nursing administration
- nursing education
- nurse practitioner
- pathophysiology
- pharmacology
- psychiatric nursing
- research
- role preparation
- other (please specify) _____

11. Do you believe grade inflation is present in your school of nursing?

- yes
- no

If you responded no to question 11, do not complete the remainder of this survey but do return it. Your contribution is important!

12. What leads you to the belief that grade inflation is present in your school?

13. If there is more than one program in your school, is grade inflation more prevalent in one of them?
- yes (state which one) _____
 - no

14. What factors do you believe contribute to grade inflation?

15. What measures, if any, have been taken to decrease grade inflation in your school?

Thank you for your participation. Please return this survey to Dr. Joyce Shoemaker, 1614 River Road, Maumee, OH 43537 no later than November 15, 2000. Results of the grade inflation survey will be published in a future issue of *Excellence in Nursing Education*.

Excellence available online

Excellence articles are available at nursingsociety.org/publications/excellence.html. Don't miss these articles:

Excellence in Nursing Administration:

- Achieving positive results during change
- Delivering culturally competent care
- Managed care: How it's affecting health care
- Forensic nursing

Excellence in Clinical Practice:

- Rehabilitation nursing: Another increasing shortage
- Nurses and the 'net: The Internet resource for clinicians
- Nursing: An international student's perspective
- Forensic nursing
- Nursing coalition expands membership

Excellence in Nursing Education:

- On the rise: Are grades where they should be?
- Tapping into technology: The future of electronic theses and dissertations
- Nursing research congress to be held in Denmark
- Nursing coalition expands membership

If you did not select one of these three versions, you automatically received *Excellence in Clinical Practice*. You may still select a customized version of the January issue by calling our Member Service Center at 1.888.634.7575 or e-mailing: marketing@stti.iupui.edu. Select only one version to receive in the mail and please include your member number in your response.



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