A Year Like No Other: Nursing students persevere despite COVID-19 challenges

Following executive orders by the Governor, classes have been delivered in a variety of methods this year to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, keeping students safe and healthy at Bemidji State.

While most courses have been online or via hybrid models, BSU has been allowed to safely offer in-person courses when other methods are impossible. Nursing practicum courses have continued to be offered in-person, along with socially distanced skills labs. Clinical hospital placements with Sanford Health and St. Joseph’s Health in Park Rapids have also safely remained in place.

As academia pivoted with the onset of COVID-19, student support services provided by our program adapted as well. When restrictions began last Spring, Niganawenimaanaanig staff and students connected daily to create a virtual version of the program’s lounge. These calls provided a consistent space to vent, share fears and successes, prepare for exams, and receive encouragement.

To continue to meet student needs during the pandemic, support services now take place online. Group Zoom gatherings take place each Friday and virtual student check-ins with Michelle, the Student Mentor, continue weekly. Students may access the student lounge with their campus IDs while practicing social distancing measures.

Technology has been a barrier to many who are remote learning for the first time, but Niganawenimaanaanig students have not struggled as much in this regard. Fortunately, the program’s grant funds purchase a laptop for each admitted nursing student to support their continued success.

As the Spring 2021 semester has progressed, additional classes have been allowed to meet in person which has been a welcome return for many students. The Fall 2021 course schedule is slated to have even more in person options, allowing nursing students the hands on engagement and learning they need to successfully practice their skills.

While the daily challenges of COVID-19 are too numerous to mention, we are awestruck by the perseverance of our students during this difficult time. The dedication to studies, family, tribal communities, and the healthcare field is proving them to be strong leaders!

The Niganawenimaanaanig Indigenous Nursing Program has five graduating seniors this spring, joining our 12 previous graduates already serving in the workforce. This year’s class is the most in program history!
Our first virtual Nursing Graduate Recognition and Pinning Ceremony was held on May 7th via Zoom platform. The ceremony honored 140 graduates, five from Niganawenimaanaanig.

The pinning is a powerful time for graduates, as faculty symbolically welcome them into the professional field. This connection to the history of the profession was especially profound during the 2020 “Year of the Nurse”, as healthcare professionals battled the global health pandemic.

Niganawenimaanaanig student, Terry Defoe, was the RN-BS speaker at the event. Terry is a member of the Bois Forte Band, works as a community health nurse, and at 48, has reached her goal of earning her bachelor’s degree! Despite losing her mother at 14, Defoe persevered to become valedictorian of her high school class. While a pre-med student, Terry lost her grandfather, which left her defeated. Leaving school after her freshman year, Terry began full-time work. While she was an EMT, Terry was inspired to earn her AA in Nursing ('08). Before joining our program, Terry twice attempted her Bachelors. At BSU, Terry said that she grew emotionally, spiritually, professionally, and intellectually.

2020 graduates inspired us, persevering through the many changes faced in their final semester. Across the country, 4-year Nursing students were not able to complete capstone placements in hospital settings. At BSU, clinical hours were logged by using HD virtual simulations.

The NCLEX test is used by every state board to determine readiness for nursing practice. Due to COVID-19, exam testing was limited and one Niganawenimaanaanig graduate had the added stress of having to travel out of state to complete their examination.

Bemidji State is proud to share that the 2020 nursing class had a 94% first-time pass rate! This outstanding performance speaks to the students’ determination as well as the excellence of the Nursing faculty. 100% of Niganawenimaanaanig program graduates have passed the NCLEX, with all but one passing on their first attempt!

The Spring 2021 Graduate Recognition and Pinning Ceremony planning is underway and we look forward to celebrating our largest class of Niganawenimaanaanig graduates, while continuing to protect the health and safety of our students, families, and loved ones.

Niganawenimaanaanig Alumna Spotlight:

The Niganawenimaanaanig program provided support and services that guided and encouraged me to continue when events came along that would have been difficult to overcome alone.

The coordinated effort within the Nursing department, support from BSU faculty, and from staff throughout other BSU services enabled me to overcome all obstacles to succeed.

Niganawenimaanaanig was essential to my success. The cultural, spiritual, and emotional support provided by the program has had a great impact on my life in all aspects. I have learned to be more self-aware and of the importance of advocacy for self and for others. The compassion, leadership and respect shown to me really has shown me how to be successful.

I left BSU a better person and this will undoubtedly impact my life in all aspects until I travel on.

- Terry Defoe, Class of 2020 -

“'No matter how quietly you accomplish your tasks and goals, there is always someone watching, you are inspiring others, and you will be inspired by others.'”

-Terry Defoe, RN-BS graduate
Niganawenimaanaanig on the Road

Niganawenimaanaanig promotes student leadership and professional development through student presentations at conferences and with cultural engagement at events. Unfortunately, COVID-19 restrictions haven’t allowed for travel in the past year, but in 2019, the program was able to travel to New Mexico for the Gathering of Nations powwow, the largest Indigenous event of its kind in all of North America!

With cultural presentations and dancers from throughout the continent, the intertribal gathering was truly a once in a lifetime opportunity to take in. While in New Mexico, students were also able to learn about the southwest tribal cultures, sample traditional and regional foods, make jewelry, go horseback riding, and hike the Sandia Mountains.

The trip was an amazing experience and provided everyone with reminders of the importance of their own traditions and practices!

How did you prepare for your final year at BSU, especially with the changes due to COVID-19?

Honestly, I didn’t really prepare. It was hard because everything was still up in the air. Even a few weeks before classes started. They changed from some in-person to completely online. Just had to be flexible and go with the flow.

How has the Niganawenimaanaanig Program impacted your experience as a student at BSU?

When you go to school you can feel all alone and it was so nice to have someone who has your back and to support you in ways you didn’t even think were possible. You didn’t have to go searching for the help, it was just there. That’s what the name means (“we take care of them”) and the program lives up to it.

What have you discovered about yourself during your time as a nursing student?

Nursing is a continued passion, it grows stronger the more that I learn and the more that I’m in the community. As I’ve grown, I can see the impact this profession can have on humanity as a whole. The field is always changing and my passion has gotten larger the more that I learn. Even just learning from Misty about grants that are available and doing research, I’ve realized what I can do and what’s available. People have a singular idea about what nurses are and what we do, but nurses have changed the way that we learn, study, and how the world has improved. It is more than just taking care of people in the hospital. As a nurse we can change legislature, change how drugs are developed, and impact policy on every level. For new nursing students, it is really powerful for them to realize there is so much that you can do with this career and all of the opportunities that are available to you.

Save the Date:
May 11, 2021

Niganawenimaanaanig will host their second Indigenous Nursing Conference as a virtual event on May 11th at no cost - everyone is welcome to attend!

Agenda and speakers for the conference coming soon!

For more info please email niganawenimaanaanig@bemidjistate.edu

Senior Spotlights

Candace Clark
RN-BS Program

How has the Niganawenimaanaanig Program impacted your experience as a student at BSU?

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Raven Peltier
4-year pre-licensure

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How has the Niganawenimaanaanig Program impacted your experience as a student at BSU?

It’s nice to connect with like-minded students reaching for the same goals.

What have you discovered about yourself during your time as a nursing student?

I’m very flexible but it’s hard to make myself stay on task at home. Time management is a major key in being a nursing student and a mom all at once.
Interested in becoming a part of the Niganawenimaanaanig community?

Check out our website at the address below and see if the program is a good fit for you!

www.bemidjistate.edu/academics/departments/nursing/programs/niganawenimaanaanig

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