

“More find new careers await at end of online”

By Jenny Munro

Sherri Hart has made the move from manufacturing to health care -- and she used online courses offered by Greenville Technical College to do it.

Hart, 34, had worked in the textiles and fiber optic manufacturing fields, but she decided she needed a career change when her second child was born.

"I was working 12-hour rotating shifts," she said. "That's what led me to going back to school."

Despite initial fears on the part of many students, the number of people taking online classes through Greenville Tech is exploding, officials said.

Hart, 34, was one of those who was scared. She had a computer but seldom used it, she said, but her bosses said she would have to take vacation or leave without pay to attend classes at Greenville Tech.

She said she was willing to try online because "I knew what I wanted. I wanted to better myself."

And she actually liked the courses.

"Once I got in, I realized how simple it was," she said.

Dean Jones, Greenville County's administrator for workforce development, said, "I have seen very little difference between online credentials and onsite credentials. Online academics are very credible."

Instructor Angie Brown said, "I've seen an increase in scores for the national certification board when students take online classes."

That could be the result of the student setting the pace, the learning being dependent on the individual and immediate feedback from tests.

"We certainly see good quality" from online programs that train nurses, said Suzanne White, vice president of patient care services and chief nursing officer for Greenville Hospital System. "The online programs do a great job of meeting the need of people who like that style of learning. As far as the quality of care in our clinical settings, I cannot tell you we see any difference."

She said many nurses going after their master's degrees often use online learning, partially because few nearby schools offer the program.

The increasing number of health-care courses available online and the fast-growing number of students taking them is helping Greenville Tech prepare workers to meet the growing demand for health-care employees, said Leslie Trant, dean of continuing education programs.

Greenville Tech health program officials initially expected to be left out of the online movement, she said.

"We thought health care -- we can't do that online. We're hands-on," she said.

But the college created an online refresher course for registered nurses in 2001. The class was successful. In fact, between 300 and 400 nurses have gone through the course since then, she said. As officials saw the opportunities that existed, the march was on.

Since July 2005, the Buck Mickel Center has enrolled 924 students for online classes, said Wendy Walden, continuing education spokeswoman. She said 3,800 students are taking academic classes online.

Online education has spread Greenville Tech's geographic reach. Brown said she has students in Florida, Maine, Texas and other states. Greenville Tech also partners with the smaller technical colleges, allowing their students to take online courses through Tech.

The school has created online courses for the state Board of Nursing and for the state Department of Health and Environmental Control, Trant said.

Brown said she also had initial doubts. But she created online classes in medical coding and medical terminology.

And they work, she said.

Trant said that what really sold her on the idea of online learning was that she began taking classes online for her master's degree. She liked the experience.

"I had a lot of flexibility. It was a good experience," she said. "If I could do it, anybody could."

Hart agreed. The classes are convenient because a student can do the work at any time. Sometimes, she worked after she returned home from her job and had slept a couple of hours. Other times, she did the work on her days off.

Jones, who has himself taken classes online, said the flexibility to learn that way promotes lifelong learning because of the convenience for the student. That's why he enjoyed his experience, he said.

Hart said that after a frustrating period looking for a job -- everyone wanted health-care experience -- she found a job with Reimbursement Services of Greer.

"I love it," she said. And if she decides to take more courses, she "most definitely" will take them online, she said.

Kay Mattox, co-owner of Reimbursement Services, a billing service for durable medical equipment, said she's pleased with the quality of employees she's hired who have been trained online.

"It's best to hire people with a good base of knowledge and build on that," she said. "I've been very happy" with the employees she's hired and their online training.

Online instruction demands a lot from the instructor, Brown said. She and Angie Hall answer their e-mail from students twice a day. They take phone calls and e-mails when they're not officially working.

"I tell them to feel free to call or e-mail," Brown said. "You have to cater to your students."

For most of those taking online classes, it is their first experience. They need extra help, but Trant said she expects the technical questions to lessen as the technology becomes more common.

"The younger people are so comfortable online," she said.

Many health-care classes are blended classes because of the need for laboratory work or experience in clinical settings, she said.

Also, educators and hospitals are beginning to use simulation labs to allow students and employees to practice on mannequins, White said.

Greenville Tech already uses a few of the simulators and Greenville Hospital System hopes to have a "virtual hospital" in place by July, she said. Residents, nurses and students will be able to practice giving a person medications or responding to an emergency situation with the simulator, partially funded with a \$1 million grant from Duke Endowment.

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