Online degree programs provide the perfect fit for the busy health care professional who works full time and wants to continue his or her education, and Wheeling Jesuit has a number of online degrees for today’s adult learner.

Whether you’re a working nurse or health care professional who wants to advance your chosen career, Wheeling Jesuit’s Center for Graduate and Professional Studies has a program.

“Our programs are specifically geared toward working professionals who want to obtain an advanced degree, but can’t afford to stop working. Online courses provide students with the ability to continue working full time, and at the same time, have the ability to work toward a degree,” said Becky Forney, associate dean for the Center for Graduate and Professional Studies.

Last year, more than 200 students enrolled in one of Wheeling Jesuit’s online degree programs — programs which generate $1 million in tuition dollars annually, Forney explained. And since 2002, the Center has seen online enrollment increase by 60 percent, which according to Forney, shows how appealing Wheeling Jesuit’s nursing and health care programs are to adult learners.

“Our online courses offer nurses and health care professionals who live outside the Wheeling area the chance to obtain a degree from Wheeling Jesuit University,” she added.

The online nursing programs began in the spring of 2000, and since that time, several hundred registered nurses have obtained advanced degrees.

Online Health Care Degrees Offer Options to Adult Learners

Vera Barton-Caro
Class of 1982 and 2002
Bachelor of Science in Nursing and Master of Science in Nursing
Nurse Practitioner for Wheeling Cardiologist Dr. Richard Terry
A doctoral student in nursing at West Virginia University

The daughter of a doctor, Barton-Caro grew up around people in the medical profession. She opted to enter WJU in the late 70’s to pursue a bachelor’s degree in the upstart nursing program. Upon graduation, she went onto a nursing career at the Georgetown University Hospital before returning to Wheeling to raise a family. When WJU launched it’s online master’s of science in nursing program, Barton-Caro decided it was time to return to college and earned her MSN as a nurse practitioner.

Today, Barton-Caro has special interest in heart failure and is a national speaker on the subject. Additionally, she is president-elect of the American Association of Heart Failure Nurses and has received a state award from the American Academy of Nurse Practitioners in 2006 for her work in the area of heart failure.

“A WJU education in a health care profession offers the uniqueness of a sound scientific clinical base with a rich liberal arts core,” Barton-Caro said. “This combination promotes critical thinking with a holistic view of health care delivery. The unique experience of a health care professional education within the Jesuit framework fosters well-rounded, interesting globally minded, caring people who are highly competent practitioners poised for leadership roles in our increasingly complex health care system.”
Wheeling Jesuit offers the following online degrees: RN to BSN; RN to MSN; and BSN to MSN. The MSN program has tracks in nursing administration, nursing education and family nurse practitioner.

“We provide several degree choices for nurses seeking an advanced degree, but most of all, students in our online nursing programs have the choice of when to complete coursework. They don’t have to be locked in to attending class at a specific time or place,” Forney explained.

“The RN-BSN program provides experienced registered nurses with tools that can broaden their understanding of professional nursing and make a difference in the profession. The master’s level programs develop nurses as family nurse practitioners, nurse educators or nurse administrators. Learning means practicing new ways of thinking about health issues and assisting people as they journey through health, illness and wellness,” said Rose Kutlenios, Ph.D., director of the department of nursing.

The RN to BSN program is designed for working registered nurses who want to complete most of his or her course work through online delivery. The online RN to BSN program prepares graduates for career advancement and a foundation for graduate education in nursing. Candidates are given credit for clinical experience in their communities.

The online MSN programs integrate the concepts of critical thinking, advanced practice and change throughout the curricula. Registered nurses or BSN graduates can take advantage of this program. Each of the MSN tracks prepare nurses to make the best possible decisions for the betterment of the patient, organization and overall environmental system.

The nursing administration track is designed to prepare nurses for leadership and management positions in a variety of health care settings. Through an integration of concepts from nursing, business and management, graduates are prepared to assume leadership positions in health care settings, to contribute to the development of nursing knowledge, to demonstrate responsibility for the management of the nursing organization, and to function as a member of the executive management team.

The nursing education track is designed to prepare nurses for positions in a variety of educational settings. This program integrates concepts from nursing, science and education, to prepare graduates to assume educational positions in schools of nursing, various health care settings and community health departments.

The family nurse practitioner track prepares nurses for the advanced practice family nurse practitioner role and national certification. The track integrates concepts from nursing, science and family practice to give the experienced nurse the advanced in-depth body of knowledge necessary in the managed care environment. The program prepares nurses for employment in rural and under-served communities.

Wheeling Jesuit also offers a bachelor of science in health care leadership program. Started in 2003, this distance-learning program is designed to advance the careers of working allied health professionals with associate degrees who want to position themselves for leadership roles in the medical and health services fields.

“Our online programs allow working professionals to obtain a degree from anywhere. It provides them the freedom to do course work from home, while not tying an individual down to be in a dedicated class at a dedicated time,” Forney added.

Rose Schuler
Class of 2008
Bachelor of Science in Health Care Leadership
Nuclear medicine technologist
- Duke University Health Systems in Durham, N.C.

When Schuler returned to the working world in 1999 after raising a family, she soon learned that in order to be more competitive, she needed to advance her education. Having not been in a classroom since the mid-70s Schuler admits finding the right program was key to her success. Schuler learned of the online degree program at Wheeling Jesuit while surfing the Internet. Today, after spending several years linking from North Carolina to Wheeling for “class,” Schuler performs diagnostic tests primarily on cancer patients in the positron emission tomography facility.

“I was so impressed with the curriculum and Becky (Forney) was a wonderful advocate for the program. At my age I was concerned that I could not keep up with the younger students and I was not computer savvy. Everyone was so encouraging and helpful,” she said.

“I feel more confident and knowledgeable in my work, and I am delighted with my computer skills. Attending WJU has made me realize that I can do most things, especially anything I put my mind to. I am not afraid to try new things, and I now have skills that I did not have before. Courses like pathophysiology, communication enhancement through technology, dynamics of group and organizational behavior and management have helped me to grow and expand my knowledge in dealing with other people,” Schuler added.
Wheeling Jesuit graduate Dr. John Maris ’83 is leading the way in research that is hunting for the cause of neuroblastoma.

A biology graduate, Maris is the director of Hematology/Oncology at Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia where he has been studying thousands of DNA samples to find what triggers this baffling form of cancer in children.

Maris and his colleagues were able to isolate variations in the DNA associated with neuroblastomas. He hopes this will lead to understanding how the disease arises and how it might be averted. This form of cancer almost always strikes in infancy or early childhood. It is not a brain cancer, but it does attack the nervous system and usually starts with a tumor in a child’s abdomen or chest.

The goal in searching for genes associated with neuroblastoma is to better understand the root cause, not necessarily to single out those at high risk, Maris explained. “The whole point is if we can understand the genetic basis of the disease, we can design therapies that are less toxic.”

He has worked for more than a decade on collecting DNA from neuroblastoma patients. Since the disease is rare, the process of collection is slow. For his recent study, Maris attempted something that would have been impossible a few years ago — comparing the entire genetic codes of 1,200 children with the disease and 2,000 cancer-free controls.

The research has not yet isolated a gene, but simply a region on the DNA where alternative spellings show up more often in neuroblastoma patients than in the controls. He continues to search for a gene, which could lead him to a pathway, or series of biochemical steps that cause this cancer to start and spread.

“My research team strives to maintain a truly translational research program by taking clinical observations to the laboratory, and returning our laboratory discoveries to the clinic. My goal is to establish a comprehensive approach to neuroblastoma, which has resulted in a diverse laboratory environment with multiple projects focusing on the common endpoint of improved cure rates for this frequently lethal childhood malignancy.”
A health technology program at Wheeling Jesuit’s National Technology Transfer Center (NTTC) is playing a key role in helping West Virginia achieve President Bush’s goal of building a national health information infrastructure by 2014. At the same time, it is poised to help close the health disparity gap between rural West Virginians and city dwellers.

Introduced in 2006, HEALTHeWV is a Web-based disease management system that puts technology into the hands of rural health-care providers, by enabling providers to create and maintain electronic medical records (EMR), receive rapid access to the latest in evidence-based medicine for treatment of chronic diseases, improve patient-provider communication and access educational materials for patients.

HEALTHeWV was adapted from the United States Army’s successful HEALTHeFORCES program. Sponsored by NASA, with the support of Sen. Robert C. Byrd (D-W.Va.), HEALTHeWV is available free of charge to rural health care facilities in West Virginia. It has been implemented in 18 facilities, which receive software, hardware, training and helpdesk support from the NTTC’s staff.

HEALTHeWV launched as a pilot project in August 2006 at Wheeling Health Right. The clinic’s executive director, Kathie Brown, found it to be a valuable.

“HEALTHeWV put us on the cutting edge of health care for the uninsured,” she said. “Without it, we never could have afforded electronic medical records. It has allowed us to improve our patients’ health outcomes, and to collect the statistics needed to back up that claim. Free clinics across the country are quite envious of our EMR.”

Peggy Ferguson of Wheeling Health Right said, “Continuity of care has improved. We now have faster access to charts and notes from prior patient visits, which makes it easier to prepare for telephone calls with patients, to communicate with other members of the health care team, and to see and compare changes in test results.”

Since HEALTHeWV’s launch, the NTTC has trained 200 health-care providers in using it, and is helping six clinics prepare to launch the system by September.

NASA provided $1 million in 2005 to begin HEALTHeWV and a second grant in 2006 for the program’s expansion. A third NASA grant, expected in September, will fund a yearlong research component that will identify improvement in health outcomes among diabetic patients at participating clinics.

“Our hope and expectation is that through the implementation of technology, HEALTHeWV will improve the health of West Virginia’s rural population in a way that can be measured definitively by this study,” says Dr. Mazharullah Shaik, HEALTHeWV executive director.

A longtime champion of efforts to combat the grim health statistics among the state’s rural residents, Sen. Byrd said, “Because our state is predominantly rural, many of our citizens who suffer from chronic disease conditions lack access to the best available health care. I fully support the HEALTHeWV program because it specifically targets improving health care for rural patients, and gives rural physicians access to the same medical information as their urban counterparts.”

Shaik added, “We anticipate that future program support will come from a combination of public and private grants and modest user fees,” he said. “The efficiencies and value that the program will bring to the health centers, and the fact that there will be no ongoing licensing fees, likely will permit users to pay for the basic technical support that is not otherwise covered.”

In addition to HEALTHeWV, the NTTC has added West Virginia Rx (WVRx). This program allows physicians all over the state to prescribe free medications online for their uninsured patients. Prescriptions are sent electronically to a central repository from where they are mailed within a day or two.

HEALTHeWV is partnering with West Virginia University and the West Virginia Primary Care Association on a new state-based health performance improvement initiative that will allow the sharing of best practices for the benefit of all three entities.
Educating tomorrow’s health care professionals to serve others with critical minds and compassionate hearts is the hallmark of a Wheeling Jesuit education.

Since the first health care program — nursing — began in 1976, Wheeling Jesuit has been preparing students to be leaders in their field and empowering them to live out the University mission to be men and women to serve others.

The bachelor's of science in nursing program doesn't just prepare graduates to gain licensure as registered nurses, it paves the way to employment and for nursing graduates to earn an advanced degree. The BSN degree gives graduates flexibility and marketability in the competitive health care delivery system, with many opportunities for upward mobility, including management positions or graduate school.

One reason that makes WJU’s nursing graduates so attractive to employers is that many elect to become certified in Advanced Cardiac Life Support (ACLS) as students. Another reason is that the program has achieved high pass rates on national licensing exams — it’s not unusual for 100 percent of a graduating class to pass on the first attempt.

“The department of nursing offers programs to develop nurses at various stages of their professional lives. The BSN program prepares the student to enter nursing with a strong background in pathophysiology necessary to make critical patient decisions and the interpersonal skills necessary to connect and make a difference in people’s lives,” said Dr. Rose Kutlenios, director of the department of nursing.

WJU is one of only 60 schools in the country to offer a bachelor of science in respiratory therapy. Fully accredited, Wheeling Jesuit students complete all core courses, plus master the requirements in clinical science before they practice their knowledge in the clinical setting. Because WJU students are trained
in a setting that closely simulates a hospital, their transition from the University to a clinical setting is easy. Many graduates have gone on to become supervisors, educators and managers in medical facilities throughout the country.

According to Marybeth Emmerth ’85, director of respiratory therapy, the program has graduated students who are now leaders in the profession. Four graduates are now pulmonary physicians and many grads have become perfusionists, supervisors, home care specialists, sleep lab technologists, staff therapist, educators and sales agents. For the past 10 years, the program has a nearly 100 percent passage rate on national board certification exams.

“For the last 10 years, our graduates have been sought after and recruited in the fall of their senior year receiving scholarships for their last semester’s tuition in exchange for a two-year work commitment from places like The Ohio State University Medical Center, University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, WVU hospitals and the University of Virginia,” Emmerth said.

To allow students in West Virginia Northern Community College (WVNCC) respiratory therapy program to earn a bachelor’s degree, Wheeling Jesuit and WVNCC have implemented a 2 + 2 program—allowing students to go the first two years at the community college and the final two years at WJU.

“Our most recent addition to the program has been the initiation of a service learning health care immersion trip to southern West Virginia that began in the fall of 2007 and continued during the spring of 2008,” Emmerth said.

Wheeling Jesuit offers the only bachelor’s of science degree in nuclear medicine in the region. Fully accredited by the Joint Review Committee on Educational Programs, nuclear medicine graduates have a 100 percent employment rate, and are in demand at hospitals such as The Cleveland Clinic, University of Maryland Medical System and the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center.

Nuclear medicine graduates are also able to further pursue other careers in health care by attending medical or dental school, pharmacy school, and physical therapy or physician assistant programs. Our graduates have maintained a 100 percent board certification passing rate since 1989.

“The nuclear medicine program was restructured to provide students with the cutting-edge didactic and clinical nuclear medicine coursework that they will need to meet the technical demands of the profession,” said Dr. Robert George, director of the nuclear medicine department.

“Combining this curriculum with the University’s core coursework provides students a holistic education, which in turn allows them to become both exceptional nuclear medicine technologists and productive members of their respective communities,” he added.

The doctorate of physical therapy program emphasizes a holistic approach to the investigation of clinical issues using a problem-
based format. Diversity and variety of life experiences are most valuable in this program. Due to small class sizes, the students receive individual attention and meet with faculty advisors on a regular basis.

Throughout the two years of the program, students have opportunities to engage in clinical experiences. Frequently, students from the program are offered employment by their clinical sites while still in the program. In some cases, the students have been sponsored by a certain hospital or clinic for their tuition costs and will return to that site to work for the contracted period. Wheeling Jesuit graduates are prepared to take the physical therapy licensure examination and have attained a higher pass rate than the national average.

Dr. Letha Zook, vice president for academic affairs, said, “The health care programs at Wheeling Jesuit are helping to fulfill the employee needs of not only our local hospitals, but also those of the region.”

“However with the national shortage of nurses and other allied health personnel, it is incumbent on WJU to enlarge its nursing program as well as its physical therapy and nuclear medicine programs,” stated Dr. Donald H. Hofreuter, a member of the Board of Directors and past chairman. “I am pleased that health care career programs are growing at WJU. The Jesuit tradition of placing service to others above self prepares our students for leadership roles in our health care delivery system.”

Lisa Merryman
Class of 2008
Respiratory Therapy graduate
Allegheny General Hospital

Merryman credits her instructors for her smooth transition from Wheeling Jesuit to Allegheny General.

“I’m catching on to things very well here and I think its because my teachers at Jesuit did a wonderful job of preparing me and my classmates to be on our own.”

Merryman took and passed her CRT exam just two weeks after commencement. “I passed with no problem so I have my teachers to thank for all the time they spent helping me prepare for the test,” she added.

“My experience at WJU was great and I wouldn’t trade it for anything. I met some great people and made friends and memories that will surely last a lifetime.”