

American Association for the History of Nursing 2018 H-15 Grant Research Summary
Early 20th Century Correspondence Courses in Nursing: Questionable or Quality Education

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The Chautauqua School of Nursing, an early 20th century nursing correspondence course in Jamestown, New York, was incorporated in 1902, and enrolled tens of thousands of students until its dissolution in 1936. Students graduated as a “Chautauqua nurse” after successful completion of two courses that included nearly 50 lectures, studying instructions, case studies, examinations, and guidelines for supplemental, yet not required, practical experience. The course materials were incrementally mailed to students and, if as anticipated, one lesson was completed each week, the length of study was approximately one year. The cost of the program was about \$100.00 dependent upon the chosen payment plan.

Chautauqua was established when there were inconsistencies in the preparation of nurses across hospital training schools. The inconsistencies were found in admission requirements, length of training, patient case variety, theoretical instruction, and supervision of practical training; however, hospital training schools provided the practical training that Chautauqua did not require. This absence of required, nurse-supervised practical training was the issue that rendered the strongest opposition to Chautauqua by organized nursing in New York. Conflict between organized nursing and Chautauqua continued throughout the school’s tenure. A philosophical difference was also at issue; the founders of Chautauqua viewed nursing as a domestic and vocational skill for women, while, at the same time, organized nursing was working to standardize training, protect the title ‘nurse’, and professionalize nursing practice via registration.

Correspondence courses have consequently received negative or no mention in the nursing history narrative. In the 21st century, however, the Chautauqua School of Nursing has been reviewed more positively for its innovative approach to educate nurses; still lacking is an

evaluation of its educational quality. My research examines whether the Chautauqua School of Nursing offered a quality, theoretical foundation for nursing practice in the early 20th century. The course content, pedagogical approach, and assessments are being analyzed, as well as the reasons students enrolled, and their work post-graduation as “Chautauqua Nurses.”

The American Association for the History of Nursing H-15 grant advanced this study through financial support for on-site archival research. Primary sources, including course materials and examinations, correspondence, advertisements, published testimonies, and memorandums were used from the Archives of the Foundation of the New York State Nurses Association, Bellevue Alumnae Center for Nursing History in Guilderland, NY; the New York State Archives in Albany NY; the Fenton Historical Society in Jamestown, NY; and the Barbara Bates Center for the Study of the History of Nursing, University of Pennsylvania School of Nursing in Philadelphia, PA.

Preliminary analysis reveals curricular strengths within the correspondence course. The presentation of relevant medicine and nursing content, illustrations, photographs, and case study enhancements provided students appropriate resources for learning. Robustness of the lessons both in length and content within the anticipated 1-week timeline of completion, coupled with the student’s isolation studying alone at home, required a disciplined, driven student with strong reading and writing skills. Student learning was assessed through non-proctored tests which required written responses. Tests were evaluated by hand and corrected content was returned to students to redirect student learning. Although not required, practical experience, to include hands-on practice with friends and family, as well as physician-supervised care of patients, was strongly recommended. The Chautauqua School of Nursing assisted students in securing work with physicians through letters of support describing the course and student’s progress.

Published testimonies illustrate that students enrolled in Chautauqua to better care for family, to seek employment as a nurse, or supplement their hospital training school preparation. Testimonies further reveal that students lived in many states and several countries with variety in age, gender, marital status, responsibility of dependents, physical health, religious affiliation, and proximity to a hospital training school for nurses. The Chautauqua School of Nursing reached a broad population of students who were unable to enroll in a hospital training school. Graduates reported satisfaction with the course, and the ability to obtain work as a nurse in diverse settings and geographical areas.

The Chautauqua School of Nursing curriculum provided the proactive, motivated student a quality, theoretical foundation for nursing practice in the early 20th century. Requiring supervised care of patients would have enhanced the course by ensuring that each graduate received practical training. The quality elements of Chautauqua's curriculum hold value even in the absence of nurse-supervised practical training. It is expected that continued analysis will yield a descriptive narrative to earn Chautauqua a place in nursing education's history