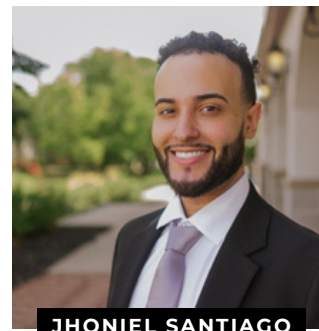


From Night Shifts to Nursing Leadership

How Montclair's Online MSN Supports Working Nurses



JHONIEL SANTIAGO

For Jhoniel Santiago, becoming an intensive care unit (ICU) nurse was always the goal. However, as a full-time night shift nurse in a fast-paced Cardiothoracic Surgical Unit, he knew that continuing his education to advance in the field would be challenging without the right program. Montclair State University's fully online Master of Science in Nursing (MSN) program provided the flexibility and support he needed to achieve his goals.

"If the program didn't have that online option, I might not have even pursued my master's at all," Santiago said. "Being able to continue working full-time, while studying from home and still having time for myself, was what made it all work."

Santiago's nursing journey began when he earned his Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) from Montclair State in 2021. After graduating, he secured a position as a new graduate nurse on a telemetry floor, gaining valuable experience. However, he knew his true passion was in critical care.

"Right from the start of my nursing career, I knew I wanted to be in the ICU," he recalled. "The critical thinking, the intensity of it—it felt like the right fit for me. But I also knew I had to keep learning to get there."

By 2021, Santiago set his sights on Montclair's MSN program. Like many nurses, he faced the challenge of balancing a demanding work schedule with his educational aspirations. Montclair's fully online MSN program provided the flexibility he needed.

"When you're working full-time, especially in the ICU, it's hard to imagine sitting in a classroom after a long shift," he said. "The online aspect of Montclair's program made it possible for me to study on my own time without sacrificing my job or personal life."

Balancing night shifts with graduate studies isn't easy, but Montclair's MSN program gave Santiago the flexibility to thrive. He completed coursework from home and was able to apply what he learned in real-time at work.

"I could take one or two classes per semester and balance that with my work schedule," he said. "I didn't feel rushed—I could go at my own pace, which was really important."

Santiago also benefited from Montclair's flexibility with clinical placements. He completed his clinical hours at St. Joseph's Medical Center, where he worked full-time, eliminating the need to commute or rearrange his schedule.

"Being able to do my clinical hours at the hospital where I worked made all the difference," he said. "I was able to apply what I learned in the classroom directly to my work, which helped me grow both as a nurse and a student."

After three years of balancing work and school, Santiago graduated with his MSN in August 2024. This milestone felt especially rewarding given the challenges he overcame. But for Santiago, the degree wasn't just an accomplishment; it was a stepping stone to a leadership role in the ICU Cardiothoracic Surgical Unit, where he now works full-time.

"The coursework really emphasized critical thinking and patient care on a deeper level, which is exactly what you need in the ICU," he said.

Santiago has also earned certifications in critical care and progressive care nursing. He now aspires to become an educator within his unit, helping train future ICU nurses in advanced technologies like Extracorporeal Membrane Oxygenation (ECMO).

"Montclair gave me the skills and confidence I needed to move into a leadership role," he said. "Now, I'm looking forward to becoming an educator in the ICU, helping new nurses and making an even bigger impact."

When asked what advice he would give to prospective students, Santiago emphasized the importance of pacing oneself.

"You don't have to rush through the program," he said. "It's a lot to balance with work and life, but if you take your time and really focus on learning, you'll get so much more out of it. I finished in three years, but some people finish sooner—it's all about what works best for you."

Santiago's journey demonstrates that pursuing a master's degree while working full-time as a nurse is not only possible but achievable with the right program and support. Montclair State University's online MSN program gave him the flexibility, practical experience, and advanced skills needed to reach his goals.