I am sincerely honored to be nominated for the MSU Excellence in Online Teaching Award. Twenty-five years ago, I became a nurse and married a military servicemember. My long-term ambition was to pursue a doctoral degree and teach nursing. But, time and again, my educational goals were cut short “just a few courses shy of a degree” due to my husband’s frequent relocation. Although I did ultimately earn my PhD, these experiences really cemented for me the importance of an educational system that is not exclusively place-bound, but instead, is flexible and responsive to the needs of adult learners. This is particularly important in nursing, where we face an alarming dearth of doctorally-prepared faculty to teach the next generation of nurses. And this is also important for the state of Montana, in which every county is classified as “medically underserved” and suffers from a critical shortage of healthcare providers. Rural areas are the most dramatically affected by this shortage. A major thrust of the graduate nursing program at Montana State University is to improve access to education for those who are geographically-isolated. Through online education, the graduate nursing program has helped to counter the nation’s mounting health care provider shortage by providing an opportunity for nurses who wouldn’t otherwise follow that path because they lack access to a campus, or because work, family or economic considerations preclude a full-time, on-site education. I am proud to be part of this initiative.

I have been nominated for this award by students in N550 Advanced Health Assessment and N560 Advanced Pathophysiology, two core courses in the graduate nursing program. These courses are extremely challenging to teach in the online environment for several reasons. First, as the initial courses in the program of study, N550 and N560 are often the first exposure the students have had to online education. It is critical to the success of these students that they do not feel threatened by the technological aspects of the course. Some students are absolutely crippled by the fear that they will “post in the wrong spot” or “submit an assignment incorrectly.” My goal in the early weeks is to create an online classroom that is welcoming, positive, and reassuring. Just as some students are threatened by technology, many of the students are extremely tech-savvy and expect very interactive and advanced online experiences. One of the other major challenges, then, is to balance the needs of these two groups and bridge this gap so that each student has an educational experience that meets their unique needs. To facilitate this, I have established informal discussion forums that promote student-to-student mentoring. This has proven to be successful in forming a cohesive group of students who feel responsible for one another’s success. It is not uncommon to see students offering each other uplifting comments, advice, and concrete suggestions. My role is to model this behavior, and to be “present” in the classroom, available to students through a variety of means: e-mail, chat,
online office hours, and discussion forums. I make a considerable effort to ensure that the learning experience is not overshadowed by technology, but is enhanced by it.

One of the other major challenges in teaching these courses in an online format is the content. A critical learning outcome of the N550 Advanced Health Assessment course is that students will be able to conduct a full head-to-toe physical examination. There are a myriad of skills that the student needs to master in order to achieve this. For instance, students need to know how to correctly use equipment to examine the eyes and ears, they need to be able to distinguish between normal and abnormal heart sounds, and know how to interpret a chest X-ray. Therefore, the podcasted lectures I have created provide audio and video links that enhance their ability to assess the health of the individual. Students are able to hear what whooping cough sounds like, and see what the rash of scarlet fever looks like. These are all critical skills that they will need in their role as advanced practice nurses. Students then have the opportunity to practice their assessment skills on “virtual patients”. These online “virtual patients” are extremely realistic; they respond to student’s questions (eg. “Where does it hurt?”), allow advanced examination (eg. looking at the eardrum) and provide feedback to the student---and best of all, they are non-judgmental! This goes a long way to allaying student fears about examining real patients when they are in the clinical setting in subsequent courses. At the end of the course, when the students have mastered the requisite skills to conduct a full head-to-toe physical examination, they demonstrate this to me over the webcam, so that I have an opportunity to provide feedback and guidance, and the student is able to clarify areas of uncertainty. With the implementation of these various strategies, I was able to modify the course so that it was delivered fully online. Previously, this course required students to come to campus several times during the semester, which was an obvious obstacle for many students. The approach I have developed and implemented has allowed for greater inclusion of those who are our targeted audience (geographically-isolated), yet has maintained the same high-quality outcomes.

My history with Montana State University is fairly brief, only having arrived here in 2008 after my husband retired from the military. However, my history in delivering distance education dates back a decade. Before starting on this journey, however, I obtained certification in distance education from Indiana University, so that I would have the necessary skills and pedagogical approach to ensure success. Because of my husband’s frequent relocation, I have had the opportunity to teach online courses from three different continents, and students have frequently remarked that I was more “available” than many of their on-campus instructors. One of my proudest achievements in distance education was in 2001-2005, when I was the director of a nurse practitioner program in a very small historically black university. We transitioned to a
completely online delivery method, and boasted five years of 100% pass-rate on a national certification exam. The Georgia Board of Regents recognized it as the “Program of the Year” and made this program the exclusive online nurse practitioner program for the state of Georgia--- beating out many other competing resource-rich intuitions such as Emory University and the University of Georgia. In 2007, I was an invited presenter at the National Organization of Nurse Practitioner Faculties conference on the topic of online assessment of nursing student performance.

My interest in the reach and the impact of the online environment has extended to my program of research. My research focus is on postpartum depression in military wives, a vulnerable population who experiences this mental health condition at four times the rate of the general public. With the help of a block grant from the MSU College of Nursing, I am developing an online intervention to both prevent and treat postpartum depression in this at-risk population. Students from both the graduate and undergraduate nursing programs have contributed to this effort. I will be collaborating with nurses from Brooks Army Hospital (Texas), Landstuhl Hospital (Germany) and here in Montana, Malmstrom Air Force Base. This online therapy is an innovative way to deliver treatment to new mothers who traditionally refuse to seek mental health care--- due to stigma, lack of access, and being relatively home-bound with the birth of a new baby. This delivery mechanism allows the same flexibility and access that online education provides for geographically dispersed students--- plus the anonymity that these new mothers may desire. I have also studied the impact of access to online communication (via social networking) for men in combat who are expecting the birth of their first child. This research was published in the premiere nursing journal, and also won the grand prize (for poster presentation) at the Western Institute of Nursing Research in 2009. Currently, I am the thesis chair for two MSN students who are exploring the feasibility of delivering online health education to rural Montanans who suffer from chronic disease. The potential for online interactions in nursing (also called tele-nursing) has such wonderful potential and I am hoping the MSU College of Nursing can be at the forefront of this initiative!

I am committed to helping the graduate nursing program at MSU enjoy its continued success in online delivery, by building upon the foundation of excellence established by my colleagues in the College of Nursing. I am also committed to inspiring students to not only be consumers of technology, but also to be part of the technology explosion that provides the capability for nurses to make a difference in the lives of patients who connect with us through cyberspace.

Kathleen Schachman, RN, PhD