

# Nurse educators go into high gear

By Amy Hanek

According to projections from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, employment opportunities for nurses in America should increase 23 percent by 2016, faster than the average for any other occupation. With health care costs rising, hospitals and doctors' offices have relied more and more on nurses. The race is on for many universities around the nation and in Southwest Virginia to make certain that tomorrow's nurses are better trained, better educated and in plentiful supply.

About three years ago, the Virginia Community College System formed the Nursing Task Force. Colleges in the VCCS, such as Virginia Western Community College, worked together with the Virginia Hospital Association and other groups to find solutions to the already apparent nursing shortage.

"A variety of strategies were identified, including expanding class size, recruiting incentives for faculty, common admission standards across the VCCS, and student retention efforts," said Anne Kornegay, interim vice president for academic and student affairs at VWCC.

Two years ago, VWCC expanded class sizes in the RN and Practical Nursing programs from 25 to 45 students. Lewis-Gale Medical Center, Friendship, Anthem, Richfield and Carilion helped support the transition for the college. Anthem even gave grant money for simulation equipment, said Kornegay.

Today, Kornegay is happy to report that VWCC has increased enrollment, added two faculty positions, is supporting more adjunct faculty positions and

has upgraded the equipment in the labs on campus for both programs.

New River Community College began offering an RN program in conjunction with Wytheville Community College in the 1980s. About 20 years later, in 2003, NRCC expanded the nursing program, housing it completely on campus.

The college was motivated by the rising demand for nurses.

"This initiative was undertaken as a proactive and collaborative effort with the four hospitals in the New River Valley in response to growing demands for registered nurses evident even five years ago," said Terri Moore, nursing program director for NRCC.

The hospitals that provided financial support and clinical learning opportunities for the school were Montgomery Regional Hospital, Pulaski Community Hospital, Carilion Giles Memorial Hospital and Carilion New River Valley Medical Center.

"We couldn't do it without them," Moore said.

Having doubled its student admissions for the nursing program in the last 20 years, NRCC has boosted enrollment for these classes from 20 students to 75, necessitating the hiring of three full-time and part-time faculty members.

One of the largest schools that aspiring nurses can attend in the Blue Ridge area is the Jefferson College of Health Sciences. Owned by the Carilion Clinic (formerly the Carilion Health System) and located less than a mile from the hospital, no one feels the shortage of nurses more severely than JCHS.

And with about 70 percent of

the college's enrollment pursuing nursing degrees, the institution is working hard to keep up with the rising demand.

Dr. Carolyn Melby, chair of the Nursing Department and a nursing professor, reported there is a huge shortage and that the college is maxing out their admissions every year.

"We're doing everything we can to move them through the system at a good rate. We're trying to find ways to admit more, as most every school is, but that's definitely a problem," said Melby.

Melby said the nursing shortage gives rise to another shortage: that of qualified nursing faculty. Because salaries are lower and many nurses are women with busy home lives, it can be difficult to find enough qualified professionals willing to trade careers and leave the bedside for the classroom.

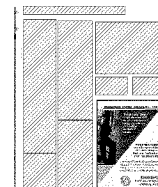
Melby added proudly that despite this challenge, JCHS filled every faculty spot this year, for the first time. She credited the accomplishment to the college's career recruitment and the hospital's tuition aid.

"We have such incredible support in Carilion because they offer such incredible tuition benefits. So that really means

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that most of the students that we educate at any level, go back and serve the Roanoke Valley. So, it's really good for business," Melby said.

In 2005, JCHS began its first master's program for nurses, raising the bar for both the faculty and students. Melby explained that because of the master's programs offered on



campus, many faculty members must have doctorates.

Nursing can be a very expensive major for any school to offer. Because of the clinical learning needs for each student, finding space in already crowded hospitals can be a problem. JCHS has an advantage in this struggle, however.

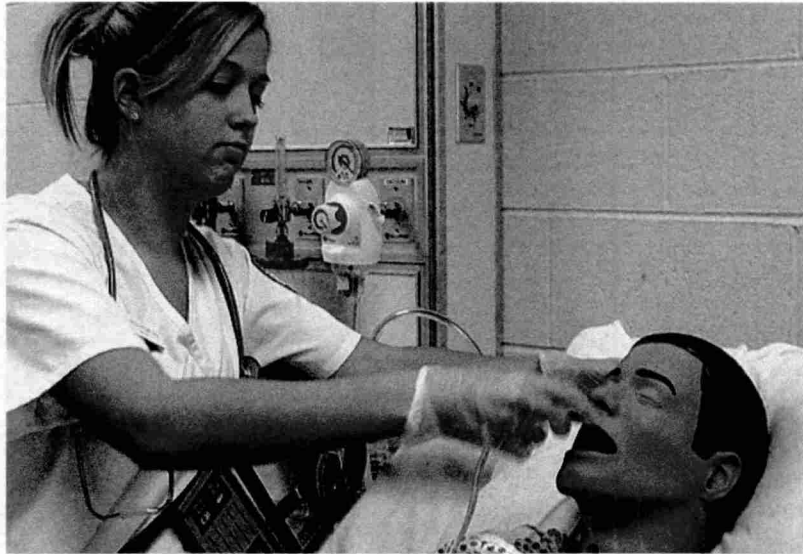
With a large hospital next door, clinical learning is easy and seamless. Many nursing students are well aware of this, further boosting demand for enrollment in JCHS.

Having gone from about 600 students in 2002 up to about 1,000 students this year, the school is in demand.

"In most of our programs, we're backed up to 2010 with admissions already," Melby said. She added that the college does have plans to add more classrooms and, though it is still in the discussion stages, more graduate programs.

"I just see expansion and endless opportunities," Melby said.

*(Amy Hanek is a freelance writer based in Franklin County.)*



**Nursing student Lauren Weeke practices clinical skills**