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Rx for nursing programs

Across Southwest Virginia, schools have made conscious choices about the type of nurse they want to educate as they carve out a place for themselves and work with employers to determine exactly what needs are on the horizon.

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Five years ago, as the state faced an impending shortage of nurses, Radford University doubled the size of its nursing program.

Radford wasn't alone: Schools across Virginia responded to a push from the state to expand their nursing programs, and overall admissions to nursing schools have more than doubled since 2003, according to the Virginia Department of Health Professions.

Then the recession hit, leaving new nurses struggling to find jobs as hiring slowed.

Nursing school administrators found themselves in a balancing act between meeting the needs of current students who were trying to get hired and preparing to meet the looming workforce demands.

It's in that context that Radford decided to take the unusual step of reducing the size of its largest nursing program while continuing to emphasize an advanced degree nursing program the school created two years ago.

Radford isn't alone in reshaping the role it intends to play in educating the nursing workforce of the future. Across Southwest Virginia, nursing programs have made conscious choices about the type of nurse they want to educate as they carve out a place for themselves and work with employers to determine exactly what needs are on the horizon.

"I think they are doing a better job at the schools getting them ready to meet our needs," said Pam Hardesty, chief nursing officer at LewisGale Regional Health System. "I find the new nurses coming out, I'm very encouraged by them. They are incredible. I'm very encouraged for the future. I think we are producing some excellent nurses in the nursing schools and that we have excellent schools here."

The learning experience

Radford's decision to lower enrollment in its bachelor of science in nursing program by about 20 slots wasn't a response to the recent hiring slump, said Kim Carter, director of the Radford University School of Nursing.

Instead, the decision was a faculty-driven effort to ensure that Radford uses its resource to best prepare its students for the changing world of nursing.

Specifically, Radford faculty wanted a lower student-teacher ratio for its bachelor degree program, Carter said.

"In nursing, we have to think about patient safety and we have to think about the learning experience for the student," she said. "This is about patient safety. The patients are so much sicker on the hospital unit than in the past and the faculty need more time with the students."

The decision will not affect Radford's Roanoke program, where about 100 students are enrolled. The drop will occur at the main Radford campus, where about 160 slots currently exist.

Even as Radford plans to decrease enrollment, the university has focused on creating a doctorate nursing program. The move is a response to the need for more highly trained nurses who can be leaders in clinical settings, Carter said.

Two years ago, Radford started the region's first doctor of nursing practice program. There are 47 students enrolled, with plans to admit another 25.

Similarly, Jefferson College of Health Sciences has made some decisions about the direction of its nursing program that have resulted in changes to the student population.

In 2010, Jefferson College ended its associates degree program, but it also chose to expand its bachelor of science in nursing program. It added a new program designed to attract students who already have earned a bachelor's degree in another area and now want a nursing career.

Twenty-five students are enrolled in the fast-track, 16-month program, said Ava Porter, chairwoman of the college's nursing department.

"I have big plans down the road for enlarging the program," she said.

Meanwhile, this fall Virginia Western Community College will increase its class size for its associates degree in nursing program from 75 to 100 students.

"We have a tremendous demand from students," said Tresia Samani, vice president for academic and student affairs at Virginia Western.

After Jefferson College stopped offering the associate's degree, the community college became the only place in the Roanoke Valley to earn the two-year degree toward being a licensed registered nurse, Samani said.

The job market

Even as nursing programs have adapted to meet the demands of the health care industry, there have been obstacles in the job market.

"Employment rates are down a little," Carter said. "That won't last. The jobs will be back up soon."

Both Carter and Samani said they have seen the availability of jobs improve recently.

"I don't think we're in a soft job market now — I think we may just be coming out of it," Samani said.

Both Carilion and LewisGale, two of the biggest employers of new nurses in the region, said that the recession did mean fewer jobs.

Recently, however, Carilion has picked up its hiring of new nursing graduates, with a 17 percent increase in new hires from 2010 to 2011. Last year Carilion hired about 100 new nursing graduates and LewisGale hired 35.

At LewisGale, the vacancy rate for nurses is below 5 percent.

"It's very low," said LewisGale's Hardesty. "But I do think there will be jobs. â€I have no doubt the shortage is going to rear its ugly head again."

It has meant greater competition among graduates for jobs and has allowed employers to be selective.

It also has required nursing students to learn, like other job seekers, how to stand out.

"A lot of people screen themselves out because they don't take the time to fill out the application," said Debbie Lovelace, senior director of human resources at Carilion. "You need to compete for a nursing job just like any other position."

Gone are the days when a graduate leaves school with a job in hand before even sitting for the registered nurse licensing exam.

At Radford, it used to be that 98 percent of graduates had a job the day they received their degrees. Today, that has dropped to about 30 percent, Carter said.

At Virginia Western the changing marketplace has led to a focus on teaching students about interviewing and job hunting.

"We have had to remind students that you don't go to an interview in flip flops and a T-shirt. â€We have worked on interviewing," said Sharon Morfesi, the nursing program head at Virginia Western.

For Kelli Loftus of Roanoke County, finding a job was about old-fashioned networking.

Loftus, 41, said being an older graduate may have helped her understand how to approach finding the job she wanted.

"I had to be face to face with the people I wanted to work for," she said. "I think some of the younger generations are so used to sending out emails that they forget to make the connection and say, 'Hey this is me. I really want to work here and this is why you should hire me.' "

Loftus graduated from Virginia Western in May and is working in the neurotrauma intensive care unit at Carilion Roanoke Memorial Hospital. It's a position she fell in love with during a six-week adopt-a-student-nurse program at Carilion.

"I just made sure to keep in touch with them, and when I applied later they knew who I was and hired me," she said. "I attribute a lot of that to getting hired."

Even as graduates are working on how to shine as applicants, hospitals are also planning ways to continue to lure nurses to ensure the pipeline is in place when the expected shortages hit later this decade.

For Carilion that has meant starting a blog geared toward connecting with job-seeking nurses, Lovelace said.

"We want to be able to communicate with people in the best method for them," Lovelace said.

Additionally, employers and educators say that they anticipate new roles for nurses will emerge as the nation continues to search for ways to improve the delivery of health care.

Already nurses have jobs that range from taking care of patients at the bedside, to administrative duties and research positions.

"I'm continually amazed at the different types of careers nurses can have — it's not just one flat job description," Lovelace said.

The array of opportunities is what drew Eun Kim to enroll in Jefferson College's new accelerated program for students who already have a bachelor's degree.

Kim, 23, graduated from Liberty University in 2010 with a degree in health promotion. She struggled to find a job in her field and after working for year in sales at Verizon decided on the nursing program.

"There is always a need for nurses anywhere you go," Kim said. "There are so many options with nursing, it's not just at the bedside."

For now she thinks she wants a job as a nurse anesthetist, which will require more education, but she hasn't ruled out working with the elderly.

"It might change, but that's the best part, it can," she said.

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