Colleges work to meet student needs in health care field

Two schools in Roanoke are forging a relationship that they hope will benefit both in the long run.

By Sarah Bruyn Jones

Area colleges are working to make it easier for students to earn bachelor's degrees and help meet the region's demand for health care workers.

At the forefront of the effort is a relationship that has been developing between the privately owned Jefferson College of Health Sciences and Virginia Western Community College. The two schools are focusing on ways to allow students who graduate with associate degrees from Virginia Western to apply those credits toward bachelor's degrees at Jefferson College.

Virginia Western President Robert Sandel said he and Jefferson College President N.L. Bishop have been talking about strengthening the relationship between the two colleges.

"He and I have developed a very strong working relationship to make Virginia Western a, quote, 'feeder college' to Jefferson College," Sandel said.

Virginia Western students who have earned associate degrees in nursing already can apply those credits toward bachelor of nursing degrees at Jefferson College. On Wednesday, Bishop and Sandel will formalize a similar agreement for students seeking bachelor's degrees in health care management.

"I think the driving force is, people see health care-related programs as being very job ready," Sandel said. "People see there are a lot of jobs in health care and they are good-paying jobs. ... From a community college philosophy, we try and fill the workforce needs of the community, and the Roanoke Valley is a health care-driven community."

For Jefferson College, the partnership with Virginia Western fits with its latest efforts to attract nontraditional students, including working professionals, while expanding its bachelor's degree offerings and reducing the number of two-year associate degree programs.

"We are reaching out to students from all different levels of education and colleges who want to enter fields in health care, and we're trying to work with them to create the smoothest pathway that we can identify," said Lisa Allison-Jones, the college's dean for academic affairs.

Jefferson College, which is owned by the region's largest health care provider, Carilion Clinic, already has solidified agreements with Roanoke College, Ferrum College and Hollins University that allow graduates of those schools to earn bachelor's degrees in nursing in just 16 months.

Similar agreements are common for community colleges throughout the state, with some long-standing transfer agreements in place for a number of educational fields.

What's new for Virginia Western is the focus on how students in health care programs can continue their education after completing course work at the community college level, Sandel said.
Health care management is among several new programs at Virginia Western aimed at meeting health care industry demands, he said. Other new health care programs in the works include those for training ultrasound technicians and phlebotomists, Sandel said.

Additionally, with Jefferson College mostly moving away from two-year associate-level degrees, the college is no longer competing with Virginia Western's programs, Allison-Jones said.

"One driver, I think, is as people look at costs of higher education, the opportunity to do the first two years at the associate degree level and transfer over to a four-year college is very appealing," she said. "We are looking for other kinds of partnerships that help students to become educated in a way that is financially beneficial to them."