Nathaniel L. Bishop, president, Jefferson College of Health Sciences

Nathaniel Bishop has focused on the need for collaboration between his school and other institutions.
Leading Jefferson College

A career that began in law enforcement leads to his name on the president’s door

by Jenny Kincaid Boone

Nathaniel Bishop never expected to become a college president.

He began his career in law enforcement, first as a police officer and later as criminal investigator for the Christiansburg Police Department.

Now he’s in his fourth year at the helm of the Jefferson College of Health Sciences, a downtown Roanoke institution that offers associate, bachelor’s and master’s degrees in at least 21 health-care fields.

An unlikely string of events led Bishop to where he is today. After 13 years in law enforcement, the Christiansburg native decided to try a new career in long-term health-care administration.

He became an administrator of Virginia United Methodist Homes, which led him to work in Northern Virginia for a time. Eventually, he relocated back to Southwest Virginia for a job with Carilion Clinic as executive director of the Burrell Nursing Center in Roanoke.

He moved on to other positions with Carilion, including vice president and hospital director of Carilion Roanoke Community Hospital. Bishop had a significant role in the transition of Community Hospital into its new identity as home of Jefferson College. When former Jefferson College President Carol Seavor retired in 2010, Bishop replaced her, first as an interim and a few months later as the school’s new president.

This also was the year that the Virginia Tech Carilion School of Medicine opened in Roanoke. Bishop said Jefferson College was tasked with determining how the two schools could work together. He had been a member of Jefferson College’s board, so he was familiar with its mission. He also is a member of the Radford University Foundation board and a member emeritus of the board of visitors for Duke Divinity School.

Bishop, who holds a bachelor’s degree from Radford University, a master’s degree in education from Virginia Tech and a doctor of ministry from Wesley Theological Seminary, says he’s in the right place and in a position that allows him to meld his past and his present.

So far, the theme of much of his presidency at Jefferson College is the need for collaboration between the school and other institutions. One example is Radford University’s use of Jefferson College’s facilities to house its doctor of physical therapy program.

Sixty-five percent of Jefferson College students are enrolled in bachelor’s degree programs, and 20 percent are in a master’s program. Most of the students are enrolled in nursing programs, which follows the trend from Jefferson’s early years when it primarily offered associate degrees in nursing and respiratory therapy.

Roanoke Business recently spoke with Bishop about his work, his goals at Jefferson College and his circuitous career route.

Roanoke Business: You bring a varied background to your role as president of Jefferson College. How have your experiences contributed to your position now?

Nathaniel Bishop: All of them have to do with being involved and making a difference. I really like connecting things and collaborations. It has been interesting to look and see back in the days of doing law enforcement. One of the things that investigators do is to take seemingly unconnected and often insignificant pieces of information and put them together. So it’s just kind of doing it on a larger scale, finding opportunities of connecting needs with opportunity and forming collaborations. I never envisioned myself being a college president, but I have very much enjoyed the experience and the close collaborations I have with my colleagues who are presidents of other college and universities in the area.

RB: What are some of your noteworthy accomplishments since you have been president?

Bishop: Building the name recognition and helping the community to understand who the Jefferson College of Health Sciences is as Roanoke’s downtown college. Making collaborations is something that I really enjoy doing. Some of the accomplishments that we have made in that arena is the collaboration that we have made with Radford University, which is doing its doctor of physical therapy program here in this building. In the process of doing that, [there is] a collaboration that I came into with Ed Walker as the Patrick Henry [a former downtown Roanoke hotel that was converted to apartment units] was coming into new life – a collaboration in which our students occupy half of the building and have a wonderful experience of having a dormitory experience in very close proximity with the college.

RB: Along with your role as president of Jefferson College, you also were named chair of the department of interprofessionalism at the Virginia Tech Carilion School of Medicine in 2012. How is the program important to students preparing for health-care careers?

Bishop: It’s a new model of education, which ... has students working with students outside their own area or their own discipline. It is the hope that in taking classes together it will help them to be more effective professionals as they actually go into the clinical settings. Communications is often seen as one of the areas of problems...
inside clinical settings. Previously students got introduced to others outside [their professions] when they got into the clinical setting. In this model, it allows them to be doing things – working in classes on leadership and ethics and teamwork – very important ingredients in being successful health-care professionals and health-care leaders.

RB: Several years ago, Jefferson College started a program that made transferring credits from some local colleges to Jefferson College easier for students earning a bachelor’s degree. How has this program helped Jefferson College develop a stronger presence in the community?
Bishop: The one with Virginia Western [Community College] in particular is for nursing, and so it is a great example of collaboration. We really like collaborating with other partners, and obviously institutions of higher learning are perfect partners, with the result being that the entire community benefits ... This is the second year of our having the accelerated bachelor of science in nursing program. This brings students who already have a baccalaureate degree from another college or university to be able to come here and in a 16-month program be able to get a second baccalaureate degree in nursing. It’s intense work, and the students work hard. At the end of that, they have had the academic and practical training, clinical rotation experiences to prepare them for being able to take the state boards and to get to work as an RN.

RB: Jefferson College has gradually been increasing its number of bachelor’s programs. Why is this an emphasis for the college?
Bishop: That’s what we have been responding to, the trend across the country and the academic advancement of professionals who are working inside clinical settings. One example of that, our respiratory therapy program, has moved from being an associate’s program to a baccalaureate program.

RB: Why do you move programs to the bachelor’s level?
Bishop: When the community and the standards and their different professions are moving towards higher levels, we wanted to be one of the early colleges that responded to this new direction.

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RB: You still offer several associate degree programs. How are associate degree programs relevant for students at Jefferson College?
Bishop: Our focus has been more the bachelor level; however, some of our very strong programs are the physical therapy assistant and occupational therapy assistant programs [associate degree programs]. There is still a very strong demand for persons with those degrees to work in professional settings.

RB: What are your goals for the next five years at Jefferson College?
Bishop: We feel that we are close to having an ideal number of students that corresponds to the number of clinical rotation placements available in this area. So we want to continue to grow in our relationships and working with our clinical partners and institutions of higher education. One of the things that I’ve worked most on is helping to grow in our name recognition and helping people to understand the great academic and clinical training opportunities that are available inside this building in downtown Roanoke.

RB: How are you trying to build the college’s name recognition?
Bishop: Hopefully you’ve seen that in some of the commercials that we’ve had on television and the radio spots. One of the things that we’ve been doing is inviting leaders into the building for tours. We do that on a regular basis, helping folks to understand this new way that Carilion Roanoke Community Hospital is being used in education as well as the inpatient rehabilitation unit that’s on the seventh floor. It’s an amazing building from having transitioned from being a full-service hospital to a hospital that now is providing both inpatient care and a number of outpatient services, but the college occupies the primary amount of space.

RB: What is Jefferson College’s total enrollment? Are you trying to increase that number?
Bishop: Close to 1,100. This is close to being ideal. There is not an infinite number of clinical placements for students, so you have to balance, because so many of our students have clinical rotations as a component of their education. We’re at a comfortable number at meeting that balance.

RB: What is the average age of most of your students? At one time, Jefferson College was trying to increase the number of traditional aged college students who enroll directly from high school.
Bishop: We’re still working towards that. We haven’t reached that as a majority. The average student age is now 25; graduate student is 30. It’s also been an interesting thing to see students who have pursued baccalaureate degrees in other fields but have just decided that nursing [or another health-care career] was a calling they had at some earlier point in their lives, and they’ve just decided to connect it.

RB: What challenges do you anticipate for Jefferson College in the next five years?
Bishop: Health care is so rapidly changing in the United States. One of the challenges for us is to be able to recognize and anticipate those changes and then to be able to respond so that our programs are staying in line with the need.

RB: How do those changes relate to the new Affordable Care Act?
Bishop: Without the impact of the Affordable Care Act, health care was changing so rapidly. The Affordable Care Act was a response to that changing. We want to make sure that we are designing our programs so that it can respond to the changes that are happening.
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