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Faculty Shortage Leads Schools of Nursing to Turn Away Students

When St. Joseph's College professor Elizabeth Hayden accepts her Nightingale Award for Excellence in Nursing on May 4, many of the people applauding will be her former students. Like the hundreds of nurses who have been honored in the annual statewide event, Hayden is known for her dedication. But she is also a rarity: an experienced nurse who has chosen academia over higher paying opportunities in clinical practice or administration.

"The teacher in me is just so strong," said Hayden. She began teaching in 1995 having earned her master's degree in nursing after many years in clinical practice. The challenge of helping novices become adept at patient care is tremendously satisfying for her. "How do I get my students to see what I see with 30 years experience?" she explained.

While more students are applying for nursing programs, a lack of faculty prevents schools from training new nurses to address an acute shortage in the profession. In Connecticut, 24 percent of qualified applicants were turned away from undergraduate nursing programs in 2004, according to a report by the Connecticut League for Nursing (CLN). In graduate programs, 9 percent of qualified applicants were rejected, according to the same source.

By 2012, nursing will experience more growth than any other occupation, the U.S. Department of Labor projects. Ironically, that demand has made it difficult for schools of nursing to recruit faculty as they are outbid by other employers eager to hire experienced, highly educated nurses. A nursing faculty member with a master's degree made an average of \$60,357 in 2003, reports the American Association of Colleges of Nursing. (AACN pro-rated the academic year salary to reflect a full 12 months pay for comparison's sake.) A nurse with the same qualifications working in a hospital emergency room would have made \$80,697, according to a survey in *ADVANCE for Nurse Practitioners*.

"It's difficult to find qualified people," said Cesarina Thompson, Ph.D., RN, chair of the nursing department at Southern Connecticut State University. Professors must have at least a master's degree to teach in an undergraduate program. For graduate programs, a doctorate is preferred. Only 10 percent of registered nurses nationwide have a master's degree, and about 1 percent have doctorates.

Thompson is attacking the problem in part by urging her undergraduate students to enroll in master's programs. Traditionally, the profession had discouraged young nurses from continuing their education until they had many years of clinical experience. "We can't wait," Thompson said.

Just a few years ago, there would be 26 applicants for each nursing faculty position at Capital Community College, according to program director Cynthia Adams, RN, MSN. Now Adams gets three applicants per position, and some lack the required master's degree in nursing. Adams has had to get permission from the state Board of Nursing to allow faculty still finishing their own graduate degrees to begin teaching undergraduates. Adams has not had to reduce enrollment because of the faculty shortage, but said that it makes thoughts of expansion impossible.

She has relied heavily on adjunct faculty who generally combine a higher paying clinical job with teaching a single course. While these professors can share exciting information with students about innovations in care, they are not available for traditional academic duties, such as curriculum design, said Adams.

Adams said she touts the regular hours and vacations that faculty enjoy as a selling point. But ultimately, the desire to teach is her best draw for "those of us who are very passionate about learning," she said.

The very hospitals that compete with colleges for master's-prepared nurses recognize the need to shore up faculty ranks. Hartford Hospital provides two teaching faculty to Capital Community College while Lawrence & Memorial Hospital funds a faculty position at Three Rivers Community College. The state is also offering grant funding to help schools deal with the faculty shortage. Thompson has applied for support to help adjunct faculty pursue doctorates and a career in academia.

Meanwhile, the major health care employers in the state have joined together to sponsor an event that encourages retention and celebrates many nurses who have pursued advanced degrees. Six years ago, the Visiting Nurse Association of South Central Connecticut launched the Nightingale Awards for Excellence in Nursing, a program that describes its goal as "elevating nursing." Today there is a Nightingale banquet held in four regions of the state, and a total of 300 nurses are honored. For information about the May 4 galas, call 860-444-1111 x304 in Eastern Connecticut; 203-276-3000 in Fairfield County; 877-722-7324 in Hartford; 203-777-5521 x1710 in New Haven.

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