Vital Signs Strong

CSU’s Nursing Program is Thriving and Prepped for More

By John Lester

Nursing is hot. Thanks to two new degree programs, a new director, an infusion of financial support from the community and a record-breaking number of interested students, Columbus State University’s School of Nursing is riding a wave of energy and excitement.

No other academic program is drawing more interest from prospective students. When the undergraduate application deadline for fall ended in June, 778 students said they wanted to study nursing. That number is by far the highest on campus by major and higher even than the number of students (588) who weren’t sure of their major, classified as “undeclared.”

Nursing’s popularity has school officials facing a quandary: There’s
only room for about 100 students in upper-division classes each fall. But the school’s leaders in Illges Hall like this kind of problem and are looking at new ways of addressing the boom in interest. In the past year, CSU’s School of Nursing has launched or prepared for two new online programs:

- An RN-to-BSN degree that fast-tracks nurses with a two-year degree toward a bachelor’s degree, boosting both their pay and career options.
- The schools’ first master’s program, created in collaboration with Clayton State University.

Director Sheri Noviello said CSU’s School of Nursing is popular because of the quality of the faculty and the academic experience they deliver, and because students believe they will be able to get a job when they graduate with a nursing degree.

“I think they are coming in because of the nursing shortage in this country. Students think if they are coming to this program, they are likely to get a job,” Noviello said.

They are probably right. Jobs in the health-related fields continue to make the list of the future’s “hot jobs,” especially as baby-boomers retire. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ National Center for Health Workforce Analysis, the United States has experienced shortages in the health professions for at least the last decade. Analysts now are projecting a nationwide shortage of almost 100,000 physicians, as many as 1 million nurses and 250,000 public health professionals by 2020.

Leslie Painter, assistant professor of nursing, explained it simply: “Despite the economy, people are still going to get sick, and they are still going to have babies, and those people will want other people – the nurses – to help take care of them.”

Local health care organizations have demonstrated their belief in the CSU School of Nursing’s ability to
meet demand. St. Francis Hospital and Columbus Regional Healthcare System recently committed $1 million to Columbus State’s nursing program to increase the number of nursing graduates and raise the level of nursing education in Columbus, in part to meet a 22 percent increase in the demand for registered nurses statewide over the next eight years, projected by the Georgia Department of Labor.

Columbus State University is meeting the challenge set out by that $1 million grant. Last year, the School of Nursing earned a seal of approval from the leading accrediting body for baccalaureate and advanced degree nursing programs when the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education affirmed the school meets or exceeds the nation’s highest standards to prepare and advance the training of nursing professionals.

Adam Branch, a 2010 nursing graduate, said his experience has shown the caliber of CSU’s programs. “I believe is it the most challenging in the area and provides the community with the best possible nurses,” he said. “I know they have a high graduation rate, and beyond that, you have to take the NCLEX exam and basically everyone passes it because they have been prepared so well. I don’t know too many other programs in college where you can go from school directly to a job where you will do exactly what you learned in school.”

Nobiliello, who took over as director in December, attributes the school’s success to its faculty. They have an immense array of expertise in just about every health care field. And many of them stay current with their fields, working in hospitals and clinics in their time away from CSU.

“When you take care of your faculty and support them, it can explode their efficiency and productivity,” she said. “If the faculty are happy, then our students are happy and that’s what is most important.”

Amanda Hawkins is certainly one of those happy faculty members. She has been teaching nursing at CSU since 1994. Last year, she switched gears from traditional classroom teaching to lead a new online program designed for registered nurses to quickly and conveniently earn a bachelor’s degree.

Last year, about 15 students were enrolled. This year, the program has about 50 students and Hawkins had to enlist another professor, Lisa Frander, to help out.

“We found time and money were always on nurses’ minds” when they were thinking about returning to school, Hawkins said. “So we developed an online curriculum that will save them some time. If you are working a 12-hour shift three days in a row, you don’t have time to come to campus.”

The program lasts just a year, classes are offered in 10-week sessions, and clinical sessions and projects can be done at the nurses’ work site. “The program is extremely flexible,” Frander said. “We bend over backwards to help students get their degree. We want them to graduate.”

As for cost concerns, many students get tuition help from their hospitals because the Institute of Medicine has recommended that 80 percent of the nursing workforce have a bachelor’s degree by the year 2020.

Unlike other traditional undergraduate nursing programs, the RN-to-BSN program has no cap or waiting list. Hawkins hopes to add more students, more scholarships and more partnerships with institutions that offer a two-year degree program.

For Noviello, who was in Columbus College’s first nursing baccalaureate class that graduated in 1986, such a vision fits nicely with hers. She hopes the new online master’s program will eventually have similar success, preparing nurses for jobs in higher education or senior administration.

She’d love to eventually see the school become a standalone college, get a new building and double the number of nursing students they are capable of enrolling. She said the need is definitely there, and Columbus State’s record of success is also healthy.

“When I go back to work in the ER and look around, about 80 percent of the nurses around me are nurses that I once taught,” she said. “I am so proud to be a little part of the success they have had.”