

An article from The Herald-Sun, May 17, 2007

Healthy prospects for new nurses

By Andrew Dunn

It must be nice to graduate from college and go directly into a job.

Welcome to the world of the 51 Durham Tech and Watts School of Nursing students receiving associate degrees in nursing this month.

Although they still must pass a federal certification exam, the students are entering the job market in a region -- and nation -- hungry for registered nurses, and they're graduating from schools with histories of success with the test.

Helen Ayres, director of the associate degree nursing program at Durham Technical Community College, said students who graduate from her program and pass the exam automatically have a job at a local hospital -- usually at Duke, UNC, Durham Regional or WakeMed.

The Durham Tech program graduates about 30 students a year from its five-semester program, said Mark Hand, clinical coordinator of the program. Roughly 30 students who previously had worked as licensed practical nurses -- a more limited nurse who must work under a registered nurse's supervision -- also earn the associate degree every other year.

Watts School of Nursing, a partnership between Mount Olive College and Durham Regional Hospital, graduates an average of about 50 students per year. Graduates earn an associate degree in health education from Mount Olive and a nursing diploma, making them eligible to sit for the certification exam.

And most of the students pass the test. Both Durham Tech and Watts had a 96 percent first-time pass rate in 2006, higher than the national average of 88 percent.

That puts the schools in the middle as far as size of graduating class, and sends these dozens of nurses - - usually in their mid-30s -- into local hospitals.

"Here at community college, they're usually from the area," Hand said. "They usually stay here and work here."

But despite the number of graduates, the region and state still need nurses.

The N.C. Center for Nursing puts the current need for registered nurses in the state at about 7,000. And North Carolina is one of the most fortunate, Ayers said.

"It's not as bad in North Carolina because of people coming in," Hand said. "But the influx is starting to level off."

An American Hospital Association study in April 2006 found that hospitals in the U.S. have about 118,000 open registered nurse positions, according to a report by the American Association of Colleges of Nursing. The need is projected to grow to a shortage of 340,000 by the year 2020.

"We are finding that recruitment to open positions is taking longer," said Brenda Nevidjon, a registered nurse and a clinical assistant professor at Duke University, about local hospitals. "I think all of them would say, yes, they have experienced a critical shortage."

Specialty nurses, such as those in burn units and operating rooms, are especially needed. Nurses must have several years of experience and additional training to hold those jobs.

Several factors are leading to the shortages, Nevidjon said.

One is the aging workforce. The average nurse is in his or her mid-40s, and the physical and emotional stress of the job often leads to early retirement.

"Nurses are not necessarily going to stay until they're 70," Nevidjon said.

The repercussions of a smaller generation after the baby boom era also are being felt, including career options for women expanding beyond the traditional options of teaching or nursing.

To fill short-term needs, hospitals are turning to hiring "travelers," or nurses who work under 13-week contracts organized through a national agency.

But using the contractors and replacing retirees with recent graduates leads to a different kind of shortage.

"A shortage is also a shortage of expertise," Nevidjon said. "If you can fill a position, you're often filling it with a more novice nurse."

Both nursing schools and hospitals are looking to address the long-term problem.

It is not a lack of interest, Ayers said. The two main problems are a lack of facilities for clinical training and a shortage of nursing faculty.

"We don't have a problem recruiting students," she said. "We have more applying than we can let in."

The N.C. Board of Nursing determines how many students a nursing program can support at one time, based on the number of faculty and available clinical space.

Durham Tech is permitted 150 students. The college received an increase of 24 students for the spring 2004 first-year class.

Watts was just approved an increase from 130 to 200 students. To accommodate this enrollment boost, the school is moving from the campus of Durham Regional to 2828 Croasdaile Drive, doubling its physical space.

But the process of acquiring more allowed enrollments is difficult.

In addition to hiring new faculty members, the college must obtain the signatures of high-ranking officials at local hospitals stating the new enrollments would not affect the number of students nearby schools could train.

Schools are creating partnerships with hospitals to increase the number of students they can enroll, Nevidjon said.

They also are creating new ways of training using technology. Durham Tech has several sophisticated mannequins that can simulate various medical situations, Ayres said.

Students can build proficiency in simulations, requiring less time working with human patients.

To address the lack of faculty, Duke, UNC Chapel Hill and UNC Wilmington recently have created online master's programs in nursing education, Nevidjon said. Duke graduated 24 students from that program this year.

Hospitals are focusing on creating incentives to attract nurses. In addition to the traditional signing bonuses, hospitals are creating loan forgiveness programs, wherein the hospital will pay back a certain amount of nurses' student loans per year worked.

Graduates of Watts have the cost of their tuitions fully repaid if they work for one of Duke Hospital's three locations for three years.

Hospitals also compete for designation as a "magnet" hospital. This is based on 14 criteria regarding workplace atmosphere and employee treatment. North Carolina has 17 of the country's 242 magnet hospitals, including Duke's facility and Rex Hospital.

"It's really a measure of how nursing is regarded," Nevidjon said.