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BSN program answering need for better educated nurses

By Sandra Beckwith, contributing writer

The demand for nurses with a Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) degree continues to rise as colleges hire more nurse educators with advanced degrees, hospitals seek "magnet status" and need better-educated nurses to achieve that designation, and treatment for more complex diseases requires superior critical thinking skills.

Oakland University's RN to BSN degree program responds to the demand with an online curriculum that allows students to study at their own pace without the restrictions of scheduled classroom time. The program has at least 150 students enrolled and learning at any given time.

"One of the barriers for associate-degreed nurses who want to go back to school is that hospital schedules are planned so far in advance that it's hard for nurses to get time off to attend classes," says Diane Norris, associate dean for the School of Nursing. "With the online format, they can take classes when it's convenient without worrying about juggling course meeting times with their work schedules."

The program combines general education in the humanities and the social, biological and natural sciences with education in the theory and practice of nursing. It is designed to develop the critical thinking, communication and clinical skills needed for today's complicated health care environment.

The value of those skills is reflected in research revealing that hospitalized patients cared for by nurses with more education have a lower morbidity and mortality rates. The University of Pennsylvania's Center for Health Outcomes and Policy Research reports that a 10 percent increase in the proportion of nurses with BSN degrees decreases the risk of patient death by 5 percent.

"The goal of a BSN degree is to help move practicing RNs to the next level and prepare new nurses to provide the best care possible to patients," explained Suzanne Begeny, director of government affairs for the American Association of Colleges of Nursing.

Kathleen Young hopes to use her recent OU BSN degree to provide that top quality care in the U.S. Army Nurse Corps.

"My OU BSN degree got me active duty in the Army," said Young, 48, who was ready for a new challenge after 23 years as a nurse. "The Army has one of the best graduate programs in nurse anesthesia in the country. I hope to use what I learn to serve my country by caring for soldiers." Nurse anesthetists are often the sole providers of anesthesia in many military circumstances and provide nearly 100 percent of the anesthesia in rural American hospitals in some states.

"It's an awesome thing," Young says.

"Continued education with a BSN or advanced degree is a way to make really good nurses great," says Kathleen Van Wagoner, chief nursing officer at Crittenton Hospital and Medical Center in Rochester. "Baccalaureate prepared nurses have more exposure to general education and more time in nursing science in order to understand why we learn the things we do."

Begeny says the general education exposure, which includes coursework in the humanities, sciences and mathematics, helps prepare nurses for the multi-cultural, social and ethical issues they will face in today's health care environment. Nurses with baccalaureate-level preparation recognize the importance of a broader education and are much more likely to pursue the advanced degrees needed to teach.

"There are faculty positions available in higher education, but without a BSN, you cannot obtain your master's or doctoral degree. Those with associate degrees who want to teach eventually will need to complete the baccalaureate content," she notes.

Teaching is a particularly appealing option for nurses who have been providing hands-on care for many years and are ready for a transition. "When nurses are at the mid-career stage, they often feel that the physical demands of nursing begin to take their toll, and they look for opportunities as a nurse educator or manager. Most of those positions require a minimum of a bachelor's degree," she says.

SUMMARY

The School of Nursing's online curriculum allows students to study at their own pace without the restrictions of scheduled classroom time.

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