



Higher Learning: SCF takes action against nursing shortage

By Carol Probstfeld

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A nursing shortage is not just an employment issue; it has the potential to be a health care crisis. As the profession expands and retirements loom, our higher education institutions bear the responsibility to educate and train enough highly qualified nurses to meet the demand of our hospitals and health care providers.

There are currently more than 12,500 vacant registered nursing jobs, according to the Florida Center for Nursing. The center also projects 69,000 nursing retirements in the next 15 years. Locally, our hospitals report nursing vacancy rates as high as 15 percent. In a state that is growing in population, including its population of citizens over the age of 75, this is a critical shortage.

Our hospitals want nurses with bachelor's of science degrees in nursing, or BSNs. As health care becomes more complex, our nurses need more education to meet the emerging challenges. Local hospitals require a registered nurse to have a BSN within three to five years of employment. The Suncoast Nursing Action Coalition (SNAC), which monitors the nursing profession in Manatee, Sarasota, Charlotte and DeSoto counties, has set the goal to have 80 percent of nurses with baccalaureate degrees by 2020. SNAC reports that the four-county region is currently just above 31 percent with BSNs.

The BSN is now considered to be the entry-level degree for registered nurses, according to the Florida Chamber of Commerce's new "Florida Jobs 2030" report. As an education leader in our community, I strongly believe that we must adapt to this change in our statewide higher education framework.

We cannot mass produce a solution to this problem. When our community's health is in the balance, we have to maintain professional standards to ensure quality care. I am in favor of pursuing every pathway at the State College of Florida, Manatee-Sarasota that leads to more BSN nursing graduates for our region. I was thrilled to hear the announcement from the University of South Florida, Sarasota-Manatee of plans for another public-sector BSN program for our area. At SCF, we will continue to take every available action and seek new opportunities to educate our nurses in an affordable manner.

SCF's associate in science in nursing, or ASN, two-year program works to fill the immediate need for registered nurses in our community. Our nursing graduates are among the highest scorers in the state on the National Council Licensure Examination for Registered Nurses. Not surprisingly, our job placement rate for our graduates in 2016 was 100 percent.

As these nurses work in our area hospitals and clinics, they can earn their BSN through SCF's Online Campus. More than 650 nurses have completed the ASN to BSN track in the past four years, with another 348 currently in the pipeline.

SCF has created one more pathway to the BSN with its new “BSN in Four” program to begin in the Fall 2018 semester. The BSN in Four is an accelerated package designed for full-time students to meet their general education and registered nursing licensure requirements with the ASN and complete the BSN in four years as full-time students.

It is important to recognize that nursing programs are among the most expensive higher education programs. Nursing programs require low faculty-to-student ratios and also require expensive laboratories and simulators. The nursing program at SCF would not exist without the contributions from an incredible collection of donors in our community.

SCF has provided high quality nurses at low cost to our community for 60 years. We created our BSN program for this region in 2011 when no other program was available, and in 2018 we will add to our capability with the BSN in Four. We will continue to act to help meet our community’s health care needs and will pursue innovative options to add BSN nurses to our region at an affordable cost, in partnership with our area hospitals and generous donor community.

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