Nursing With Heart

Anyone who needs healthcare appreciates the skill and kindness of nurses, who undergo years of intense education to work in a job that can require long hours under often stressful conditions. But for their patients, a comforting word or touch is priceless.

Moreover, the profession is evolving as nurses take on greater responsibilities that require even more knowledge, which is why the Cal State Long Beach School of Nursing is growing into one of the state's top nursing education institutions.

The nursing profession continues to face staffing challenges, not only shortages within medical facilities but especially among nursing faculty with doctoral degrees, said Loucine Huckabay, director of CSULB's School of Nursing.

It's not for lack of interest. On the contrary, there's a huge demand among applicants across the nation. Even though 19 of the California State University's 23 campuses offer nursing degrees, "For fall 2010 admissions, we turned away over 450 qualified applicants for 90 seats in our baccalaureate program, primarily due to the lack of faculty," she said, in addition to receiving more than 400 applicants for its accelerated program for people seeking a second degree in nursing.

Although many nurses returned to full-time work or delayed their retirement during the current economic downturn, Huckabay expects many of them will leave the profession when the economy improves, leaving an estimated shortage of about 116,000 nurses in California alone. Furthermore, there are more opportunities within specialty medical fields and in new forms of healthcare such as mini-clinics located in drug stores and supermarkets.

Running a nursing school with 908 undergraduate and graduate students can be daunting, but Huckabay is up to the task. "I'm passionate about our program," she said, pointing to major accomplishments.

Changing its name from Department to School of Nursing is something the program sought long before she became chair in 2001. "Ever since, I've been trying to make a case for becoming a school, which helps you become competitive with other schools and colleges of nursing in terms of external grants," as well as in recruiting top faculty. Nursing faculty finally got their wish in 2009 when the name change was approved.

Furthermore, by 2015, nursing programs including CSULB that prepare advanced practice registered nurses including nurse practitioners, clinical nurse specialists, certified nurse midwives, and certified nurse anesthetists will be required to offer the Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) degree in order to be accredited by the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education of the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) and the California State Board of Registered Nursing.
Cal State Long Beach has one of the state's largest nurse practitioner programs and the DNP degree also qualifies people to teach nursing, Huckabay said. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger recently signed Assembly Bill 867 to allow the California State University to offer the degree, so the CSU Chancellor’s Office is considering which campuses should initially be selected.

Nursing is a collaborative profession, and Huckabay is proud of the school's many partnerships with area hospitals, particularly Long Beach Memorial Medical Center, Hoag Hospital in Newport Beach, and with CSULB's neighbor, the Veterans Administration Healthcare System.

There was an acute nursing shortage in the early 2000s, so Huckabay said that in 2004, "Long Beach Memorial approached us saying, 'If money was not an issue, could you double your enrollment?' The hospital was spending millions of dollars bringing in nurses paid by the day (per diem). It took nine months to develop an accelerated program funded for an initial five years that would enable students to take classes in fall, spring and summer to complete their bachelor of nursing science degree in just two years.

Memorial provided $10 million toward the program; built a six-bed, state-of-the-art nursing simulation lab at the hospital; and provide nurses who teach part-time at CSULB, while the university contributed $5 million of in-kind services. In turn, CSULB students who take full-time nursing jobs at Memorial receive full reimbursement for fees and books. The program was renewed for another five years in 2008.

A similar training partnership exists with Hoag, which pays for training 12 students and for one faculty position. "We also do a lot of volunteer work at Hoag," said Huckabay, who serves as its nurse researcher and also mentors nurses there along with other CSULB faculty.

"Also, the Veterans Administration Hospital funded our first accelerated program for second-degree students. They did that four times and each time it was about $1.1 million or 1.2 million per cohort. We have one more cohort to admit in 2012. Although the funding ends after that, I hope we can continue this program," she said, adding, "We have wonderful relationships with our partners."

Once the school began thriving again, finding space for all those students became a significant issue. Huckabay and her colleagues again stepped up, raising $3.3 million in private funding and $2.2 in public funds to construct a new 10,600-square-foot School of Nursing building that opens this coming spring. It contains three classrooms, a computer lab where students are tested on their skills, and administrative offices. Still, space remains tight, since some former classrooms in the existing Nursing Building have been converted to simulation labs, so the school will continue to explore growth opportunities.

With its reputation for quality and a high demand for its graduates, CSULB’s School of Nursing has a bright future.

— Anne Ambrose