

Keiser University's nursing, health-care programs help drive the campuswide enrollment — up 3,000 students over last fall's numbers; nursing graduates fare well as demand outstrips supply

By Ken Datzman

Increasing numbers of people who have seen their jobs eliminated over the past 18 months because of a weak U.S. economy are returning to college classrooms in hopes of equipping themselves with new, marketable skills.

Their research is pointing them to the gigantic health-care sector, among other industries that tend to fare well in the face of recession. Health care comprises 16 percent of the nation's gross domestic product, and is growing, according to the Congressional Budget Office. Job opportunities abound for qualified care professionals.

For example, employment of registered nurses is expected to grow 23 percent through 2016, much faster than the average for all occupations, says a report by the U.S. Department of Labor. Across the nation, registered nurses make up the largest health-care occupation.

"People who have lost their jobs are definitely retraining to better position themselves for employment. Nursing and health-care occupations in general are attracting a lot of attention," said Lori Callahan, nursing program director for Keiser University in Melbourne, where more than 1,000 students are enrolled in a host of programs, including degrees that cater to the fast-growing health-care services market.

Keiser University, based in Fort Lauderdale, operates 13 campuses in Florida. The school's systemwide fall enrollment for the new year is nearly 17,000 students, said Kelli Lane, director of media and public relations for the private institution. "Our enrollment is up more than 3,000 students over last fall's numbers. I think we are looking at a 15 to 18 percent increase. Health care is helping to drive the numbers. It's one of our largest programs systemwide," she said.

According to a "Community College Week" magazine analysis of U.S. Department of Education data released June 16, 2008, Keiser University was named the "nationwide leader" in the production of associate of science degree graduates in "health professionals and related sciences" for the third-straight year (2006-2008).

This year, Keiser University finished third in the survey, Lane said. "There are a lot of things we have been learning about ourselves in the past couple of years, and it's all been positive feedback from reports and surveys."

A recent report by the Washington Economics Group, a national consulting firm, says Keiser University has a \$542 million annual impact on Florida's economy, and helps meet the state's

higher education and work-force needs. Keiser University's operations in the state support more than 19,000 jobs, the report says. The school's operating budget is more than \$138 million.

"A lot of jobs are touched because of Keiser University being in the state. But the report's \$542 million economic impact surprised us," said Lane.

Founded in 1977, Keiser University plays an important role in educating nurses in the communities it serves around the state with bricks-and-mortar campuses, and also through online instruction.

In Melbourne, for instance, Keiser University has three class starts a year for its associate degree in nursing. "I think we are the only Keiser University campus to have three nursing starts a year," said Callahan, who earned her bachelor's degree in nursing from the Medical College of Georgia and has a master's in women's health from Georgia State University. "The school graduates nurses in the spring, fall and winter. We can enroll up to 24 students each term. That is our capacity in nursing education."

With only 24 slots each term, the application process is very competitive for nursing, as it is at most colleges and universities. Keiser University offers a bachelor's degree in nursing fully online.

Callahan says at least "90 percent" of Keiser University nursing students in Melbourne have job offers in their field "as they walk out the door with their degrees. Nursing is a wonderful profession. It presents a lot of opportunity for graduates."

She adds, "Some of our nursing graduates are taking positions with small community hospitals, which I think is encouraging to see. They are accepting jobs in private office settings, too. In general, our graduates are reaching out and looking at different avenues for employment opportunities. Right now, they can pretty much 'write their ticket' as a nurse because of the supply-and-demand imbalance."

Locally, Health First Inc. is building a new 100-bed hospital in Viera, and Kindred Healthcare Inc. is nearing completion on its 60-bed long-term acute-care hospital near Melbourne International Airport. Palm Bay Community Hospital, part of Health First, recently expanded its bed capacity.

"This is creating even more opportunity in the local market for our graduates," said Callahan, whose students train in a nursing-simulation laboratory as part of their overall learning experience. In standardized scenarios, the students are given the opportunity to care for



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Registered nurse Lori Callahan, a graduate of the Medical College of Georgia, is nursing program director for Keiser University in Melbourne. The private institution has 24 slots for A.A. nursing students each spring, fall and winter. Keiser University offers a bachelor's degree in nursing fully online.

"real-life" patients. These labs can be converted to portray a surgery room, an emergency room, and other health-care settings.

The Florida Center for Nursing projected in 2008 that the shortage of registered nurses will grow to more than 18,000 full-time equivalent positions by 2010 and 52,000 FTEs by 2020 if no new actions are taken to resolve the shortage.

The nursing shortage is driven by an aging baby-boom cohort requiring more health care. At the same time, the existing nurse work force is nearing retirement age, creating a powerful dynamic in the marketplace that hospitals and other health-care organizations are trying to resolve.

"I think the average age of an RN today in Florida is 47 years," said Callahan, a registered nurse who grew up in Florida and started her nursing career in 1983. "And the typical nurse educator is in her or his late 50s. So we are experiencing a shortage on both fronts. That's why we are asking our students and encouraging them to continue their education at the BSN or master's degree level in nursing."

Based on current age statistics and retirement projections, the nurse supply will be insufficient to meet the "soaring demand" of aging Floridians, says the Florida Center for Nursing report.