

Nurses: Some students apply multiple times to get into LCC program

Continued from Page A1

Wood Products in Eugene to enroll at LCC with the goal of becoming a nurse. He took a lower-paying hospital job to help his chances of getting into a nursing program. He got top grades.

When LCC didn't accept him the first time, he took more classes and applied again. When he narrowly missed the cutoff a second time, he repeated the process. And a third time. And a fourth, each time missing admission by just one or two points despite having a 3.8 grade-point average.

This year, he applied to two community college nursing programs. He's taken the final essay exam at both and is waiting to hear if he's in.

And if he doesn't make it? This married father with a teenage daughter said he's prepared to sell his house so he can finance a seventh try.

"If it comes to that, that's what I'm going to do," said said a few days ago. "Because I'm telling you, there's somebody out there I'm supposed to take care of. I'm supposed to either save their life or make a difference in their life. There's something I'm supposed to do, and if it means selling my house to do it, then so be it."

Colleges short on funds

But financially strapped community colleges just don't have the money to create enough nursing slots.

State funding for Oregon's 17 two-year colleges has barely caught up to where it was before the state made deep cuts to higher education starting in 2002, and remains well behind that level when inflation is figured in. The state ranks 46th in the nation in per-student support of higher education.

To cope, Oregon community colleges have increased tuition an average of 60 percent; at LCC the cost has doubled. But that hasn't raised enough to replace lost state funding.

"We are up against the funding wall," said LCC President Mary Spilde. "We would need a lot of money to close that gap."

And that leaves costly programs such as nurse training in a bind.

It costs LCC \$11,379 a year to train a nursing student. But the college receives only \$6,474 per student in tuition, plus state funding, local taxes and other revenue.

That means it costs the college almost \$5,000 per nursing student per year more than it receives. Money to fill that gap comes from revenue generated by less costly classes.

Given that backdrop, LCC simply can't take in more nursing students, Spilde said.



BRIAN DAVIES/The Register-Guard

Lisa Nelson has struggled to get into Lane Community College's nursing program but has been unsuccessful.

Yet there are hundreds of good students lining up to take nursing who have already spent time and money preparing. Students may spend years and thousands of dollars on an unsuccessful quest to become a nurse, only to find the best they can do is get a lower-paying non-nursing job to help pay off big student loans.

Ann Burdic is one of them. She's wanted to be a nurse since she was a child, and now, at 25, she's spent the last four years earning a 3.85 GPA and preparing for the two-year nursing program at Lane Community College.

But she can't get in.

"I am intelligent, motivated and a hard worker, yet I do not have the opportunity to succeed when there are so few positions open for RN training," said Burdic, who for four years in a row missed the cut for one of the few openings in LCC's nursing program.

"There is a severe shortage of nurses and it is absolutely ludicrous that a person like me is repeatedly turned away from a community college."

Like many other community colleges in Oregon, LCC sometimes has to turn away four out of five qualified applicants for the 80 or so slots available each year. It often receives 400 applications for those spaces.

That's a problem shared by most of the 14 Oregon community colleges that offer a two-year nursing degree.

These schools produce half the state's nursing graduates and are one of Oregon's best hopes of heading off a crisis.

That pipeline from community colleges has been crimped not only by the state's relatively low funding of higher education but also an exodus of nursing faculty who are retiring and crowded training laboratories and clinical space.

It's a problem that's play-

ing not just on the local stage, but on the national one. For months, Democratic presidential candidates Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton have been declaring there's a very real shortage of nurses, and offering their solutions.

Regardless of political rhetoric, hundreds of Oregonians who want to be nurses are baffled and frustrated.

Students face tough competition

Community college nursing programs generally attract a different kind of student than the classic college freshman straight out of high school.

Most are older, many are married or single parents, and nearly all work to support themselves.

Although nursing is considered a two-year program, students generally spend at least one year before that taking the required pre-requisite courses. The delay often stretches into two, three or even four years if they fail to qualify for a nursing program slot on their first try.

Competition for those slots is so fierce that students often take classes more than once to improve from a B to an A. Few students with more than two Bs in their nursing prerequisites (grades in other classes aren't counted towards nursing admission) make it into the program.

"To get your foot in the door, you have to have a very strong GPA," said Jessica Alvorado, an academic counselor who works with LCC nursing candidates. "Anything that's not an A would be a blemish."

Catherine Diederich has been trying for three years to get into the LCC nursing program. She already has a bachelor's degree in sociology, but she realized she wanted something different and five years ago enrolled at LCC.

She's applied to the nurs-

ing program the past three years. Over that time she repeated three courses and has raised her GPA from 3.3 to 4.0 — good enough to make the first cut this year and be invited to take the essay exam.

"I thought it was going to be easier than it has been," she said, noting that application requirements have changed almost every year. "I feel like I've grown up a lot in this process, but it was very, very frustrating."

Alvorado said she's had students with 3.9 GPAs not make it into the program.

"That's tragic," she said.

Many students earn those grades despite big challenges.

Lisa Nelson is a 44-year-old single mother of four working two jobs and carrying 15 credits this term. She's applied to the nursing program three times without success.

Like many repeat nursing applicants, she's almost used up all the federal student aid she can get because she's taken so many classes while trying to get in. She doesn't even know how far in debt she is, and she was devastated when she failed to reach the essay test this year.

"I feel really hopeless because I feel I've wasted my time," she said. "I'll have taken all the classes that it's possible to take as of summer. I will have no more funding from the federal government because I've taken so many credits. And my life will not get any better because I went to school. It's really, really hard. Now I'm just a mess. I'm a wreck. And I'm trying so hard."

Alvorado said many nursing candidates become so focused on trying to get into the program they refuse to consider other programs, such as dental assisting, respiratory care or medical imaging.

But at some point, the cost of remaining in school with no guarantee they'll ever get into nursing leads many to choose an alternative.

But dental assisting and dental hygiene already are almost as competitive as nursing, and medical imaging isn't far behind. And Alvorado said programs such as respiratory care now fill up much faster than they used to.

"Respiratory care barely filled when I started at LCC in 2001," she said. "Then because of the overflow from nursing it was filling faster

and faster."

The program used to enroll 20 new students each year. Now it has so many high-achieving applicants some are put on a waiting list, which leaves fewer open slots and pushes up the GPA needed to get in. This year's class had only 11 openings because nine alternates from last year were guaranteed a spot this year.

In part to accommodate the overflow from nursing, LCC expanded its medical office assisting program from 30 slots a year to 48. It also added the physical therapy assistant program.

State officials allocate money

Alvorado said more students check in with counselors to discuss health careers than any other program. The 24,000 in-person contacts on health careers last year represented 27 percent of the total.

Nelson can't see herself as anything other than a nurse.

"I want to become a nurse. I believe I was called to become a nurse," Nelson said. "I don't want to be a respiratory therapist. I don't want to be a medical office assistant. I want to be a nurse. This is supposed to be the home of the free and we're supposed to have all kinds of opportunities, and instead all my dreams are shattered right now."

Cathleen Coontz, workforce development coordinator for PeaceHealth, the parent organization of Sacred Heart Medical Center in Eugene, said there clearly are students who don't make the cut for space reasons who would be successful in the program and help fill the state's nursing shortage.

"Is there a valuable layer below that (cutoff) level? Without a doubt," she said. "If we could dip a little lower into that academic structure I would have no concerns."

Alvorado said nearly all of the 315 students who applied to LCC's nursing program have the grades and drive to do well.

"In an ideal world, of the 315, probably 300 of them, in my mind, should be able to find a place to go to school," she said. "This isn't the ideal

DEMAND RISING

◆ 2000: State had 22,000 full-time-equivalent RNs; demand existed for an additional 3,500 FTE RNs

◆ 2005: State had 24,800 RNs; demand existed for an additional 1,652 RNs.

◆ 2010: State will have 27,700 RNs; demand will exist for an additional 802 RNs.

◆ 2015: State will have 31,100 RNs; demand will exist for an additional 5,790 RNs.

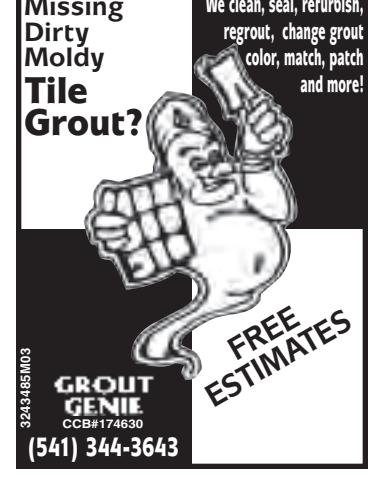
◆ 2020: State will have 35,100 RNs; demand will exist for an additional 7,058 RNs.

world."

State officials recognize the problem. Legislators in the 2005 and 2007 sessions allocated some additional funding to help boost the health-care labor force, but education leaders say there's more that needs to be done.

"There remains a high level of concern about the people who are waiting and what more we can do," said Cam Preus, the director of the state Department of Community Colleges and Work Force Development. "Because there is such fierce competition, students are dismayed that they can't get in (to nursing programs). I wish it weren't so, but right now I don't have a magic bullet to solve it."

Sources: Oregon Center for Nursing, Oregon Employment Department; Reporting for this series was supported by the Hechinger Institute Community College Fellowship



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Education: Faculty shortage also a concern

Continued from Page A1

additional nurses by 2025. But that's about 5,000 more than it's expected to have.

"It is an issue that's going to impact us for some period of time," said Kris Campbell, director of the OCN, which was formed to help lead the state's response to the looming shortage. "We're not letting up at all, because the need is huge. Even if we doubled enrollment in our nursing programs, and we're close to that, it's still not all the nurses that we need."

While hospital care is likely to be affected in many places, particularly rural areas, the shortage will be especially acute at nursing homes, retirement centers and public health agencies.

Hospitals such as PeaceHealth's Sacred Heart and Riverton will be less affected

because the area's quality of life and the higher wages paid by large hospitals make them prime draws for nurses. But that just makes it harder to staff retirement centers and nursing homes.

"Absolutely it's a tough job market," said Jeremy Tolman, director of the Creswell Care Center nursing home. "It's very difficult to compete with the hospitals."

But one place where the shortage may hit hardest is at nursing schools, the very places that are key to meeting the state's nursing needs. Campbell said that a recent OCN survey shows that the average age of nursing faculty in Oregon is 53 and that almost 70 percent of them plan to retire by 2020.

Nurses need at least a master's degree to teach, and getting enough of them into graduate programs to just

replace retirees will be a challenge. And more faculty will be needed if nursing programs are to expand.

"The faculty shortage is huge," Campbell said. "That's the bugaboo to expanding programs."

Oregon is addressing that problem through the Oregon Consortium for Nursing Education, which gives students in community college nursing programs a direct path to a bachelor's degree from Oregon Health and Science University. That makes it easier for nurses to pursue the next step: a master's degree.

But Campbell said community colleges will remain a critical part of the pipeline as the state works to meet the demand for skilled health-care workers.

"They've always been important, because they serve their communities," she said.

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