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# Program promoting nursing degrees shows gains

By **Matt Rocheleau**

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A joint effort by state officials, health care industry leaders, and colleges is showing early signs of success in boosting the number of nurses with bachelor's degrees to meet heavy demand from hospitals and other employers.

The results are generating optimism as officials embark on similar initiatives to educate more workers in other surging sectors, including technology, life sciences, and manufacturing, which experts believe could face labor shortages, if they do not already.

“Massachusetts is a state that lives by its wit — we need a highly educated workforce,” said Richard M. Freeland, the state’s commissioner of higher education. “But the state is currently underproducing graduates for all of these fields.”

Four years ago, in response to those shortages, state higher

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education officials partnered with universities and businesses to explore ways to improve graduation rates and align degree programs with workforce needs.



The first experiment, launched in the fall of 2012, was to boost the number of nurses with four-year degrees.

Experts say a large percentage of nurses will soon retire, which will create a shortage within the profession, and there is particular demand for nurses who hold a bachelor's degree or higher.

“Nurses educated at the baccalaureate level or higher have been linked to better patient outcomes. The evidence is irrefutable,” said Gino Chisari, former president of the American Nurses Association of Massachusetts, who directs a clinical and professional development center at Massachusetts General Hospital.

As the state's population ages, experts predict, health care needs will grow more complex, Chisari said. And the role of nurses has been evolving as the health care system has shifted from a model where patients travel to get care to one where the care is brought to patients.

The program in Massachusetts has shown early signs of success. The number of bachelor of science in nursing degrees awarded by public and private college nursing programs in Massachusetts rose to 2,580 in 2013, a 34 percent gain from three years earlier, according to newly released data from the state Department of Higher Education.

Included in those figures are licensed nurses already working in the field who returned to school to earn a bachelor's degree. That group saw an 81 percent increase in bachelor's in nursing graduates during the three-year span.

“We're encouraged by what's happened,” Freeland said. “But the state is very far away from having the number of nurses educated on the baccalaureate level that we need.”

Salem State University has teamed up with Winchester Hospital to hold courses for nurses at the hospital and to offer them tuition reimbursement, officials said.

The university also has launched a program with North Shore Community College to help more students who hold associate degrees in nursing to study for a bachelor's degree. The program eases the credit-transfer process and offers to save them about \$1,000 a year in tuition.

“We're trying to find ways that are a little more accessible for nurses,” said Patricia Meservey, president of Salem State, which awarded 175 bachelor's degrees in nursing last year, up 20 percent from 2010. “We're seeing that the preferences of hospitals and the other health care agencies have clearly shifted toward hiring

nurses with bachelor's degrees.”

Curry College awarded 251 bachelor's in nursing last year, up 39 percent from 2010. The Milton college has formed an academic partnership with Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center-Milton to expand education opportunities for nurses who work at the hospital.

Curry's nursing department is exploring the idea of adding more “hybrid classes” for busy students, which involve a mix of in-person lectures and online course work, according to Dr. Maureen Murphy, chairwoman of Curry's nursing department.

Massachusetts officials said they hope to increase the proportion of nurses with bachelor's degrees from 55 percent to 66 percent by 2020.

The state is slightly ahead of the pace needed to meet that target, but officials say the path toward their target calls for steeper increases in the number of nurses with bachelor's degrees in the years to come.

To meet the goal, additional investment will be needed by the state and by campuses, including to increase the capacity of nursing programs, many of which are filled.

Still officials said the early results have been encouraging and state higher education leaders, colleges, and businesses are planning similar initiatives in other fields.

“We think this process needs to be replicated in other subfields of health care and in [information technology] and other fields,” Freeland said. “This is an innovation in how state government starts to anticipate needs in workforce development in ways that haven't been done before.”

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