

NEXUS

The Holy Names College Answer to the Nursing Shortage

by Joe Devney '93

California needs more nurses

Fewer nurses enter the profession each year. Sicker patients are admitted to hospitals each year. Nurses in patient care must work longer hours to fill the demand. The increased workload causes job dissatisfaction, leading experienced nurses to leave the profession and discouraging young people from entering it.

Holy Names College is doing its part to help break this cycle.

The shortage of patient-care nurses is national—the Bureau of Labor Statistics states we will need another million nurses by 2010—but it is especially acute in California, and its effects are felt more strongly away from the state's urban centers. A new distance-learning program called NEXUS is bringing Holy Names nursing education to remote sites throughout the state.

leaving the profession is difficult. Nursing schools often cannot accept as many applicants as they like because of a shortage of qualified faculty. For this reason and others, fewer new nurses take the national licensing exam, the NCLEX-RN®, each year—there was a drop of 28 percent between 1995 and 2001. At the same time, an aging population will need more medical care of all kinds as time goes on.

The shortage itself exacerbates the problems, and the situation discourages young people from considering nursing as a career.

In addition, the profession draws from a limited pool of potential candidates—nationally, nearly 90 percent of nurses are white, and nearly 95 percent are female. (These numbers are lower in California.)

Because so many different factors contribute to the crisis, there are several solutions that need to be put in place. Young people from diverse backgrounds need to be encouraged to enter the profession, and experienced staff members must be offered incentives to remain.

How the NEXUS Program at Holy Names College Helps

The NEXUS program aims to keep more nurses in the profession by expanding their career options. Sr. Rosemarie Nassif, HNC president, says that the long-term goal of NEXUS is “to increase the satisfaction of nurses in the workforce, impact the retention within the profession, and improve the quality of healthcare delivery.”

The immediate goal of the NEXUS program is to bring nursing education—specifically a registered nurse-to-Bachelor of Science in nursing path—to nurses in remote areas. *Nexus* is a connection, especially a connected group. The program connects the Holy Names campus through interactive video to eight Catholic Healthcare West hospitals throughout California, with the largest group of students in Stockton.

Classes began in January—broadcasting from rented studio space until the September 2002 completion of the on-campus videoconference studio. By fall, the NEXUS team hopes to have four more remote sites, three in California and one in Arizona.

Dr. Fay Bower, DNSc, the Chair of the Nursing Department at Holy Names, explains specifically how the NEXUS program will help ease the nursing



Holy Names College broadcasts live to eight sites around California.

shortage. The NEXUS students are registered nurses. They earned their RNs either through a hospital diploma program or, more likely, through a two-year community college program (an associate degree in nursing). Students who finish the program earn a Bachelor of Science in nursing (BSN). “It’s about retention,” says Dr. Bower. “Acquiring the BSN gives nurses more opportunities for their careers.”

Dr. Bower also points out that Catholic Healthcare West offers tuition reimbursement for students who continue to work at CHW after graduation, and so provides an incentive for the nurses to remain in the field. (The students are already CHW employees.)

The program also addresses another root cause of the nursing shortage—the lack of qualified faculty. All of the nursing instructors at Holy Names have doctoral degrees. The adjunct faculty at each CHW site have master’s degrees in nursing.

How NEXUS Works

“Typically people put cameras in a classroom. We put a class in a television studio.” That is one major advantage to the design of the NEXUS facilities, according to Dr. Erik Stilling, Director of Continuing and Distance Education at Holy Names. The new studio is in a high-ceilinged, windowless room that long ago served as a linen storage room for the Holy Names Sisters who lived on campus. This allows the cameras and lighting equipment to be mounted on the ceiling, out of the way of the class of up to 20 students.

The video signal is compressed and transmitted through telephone company data lines to the remote sites. The broadcasts will consist of a videoconference of a class session, with a class size of up to 20. At each remote location, an adjunct professor is available to assist the students. This type of mentoring is in keeping with Holy Names’ commitment to personalized education for each student. The adjunct instructors grade papers,

answer questions, facilitate discussions, and handle other tasks.

A NEXUS class is not simply a television show or videotaped lecture. The broadcasts are interactive, with the students in the remote locations able to participate.

The studio is not restricted to use by the NEXUS program. The College’s goal is to use it for other classes, and rent it out to people who might, for example, need to hold a videoconferenced business meeting. “We can go anywhere on the planet,” says Dr. Stilling, “without extra long-distance charges.”

NEXUS Partners

Holy Names is not doing this alone. The NEXUS program is an outgrowth of an earlier distance learning effort with nurses at Kaiser Permanente. When the Kaiser program ended, Holy Names looked for new partners for a more ambitious project. Its two partners in this endeavor, Catholic Healthcare West and The California Endowment, are both committed to easing the nursing shortage to improve healthcare statewide.

Catholic Healthcare West

Catholic Healthcare West is a non-profit health care system. Besides providing the onsite facilities within its hospitals for the classes, CHW is helping

some students to pay for the education. They offer students \$5,000 in tuition assistance, if the student agrees to work at a CHW hospital for two years after completing their BSN. Students receive \$3,000 in tuition assistance if they remain with CHW for one year following graduation. Also, because CHW is cosponsoring the program, Holy Names is able to offer the students a 15 percent discount on the usual cost of the classes.

CHW was founded in 1986 by the merger of the health care ministries of two religious congregations, the Sisters of Mercy of Auburn and Burlingame. It has since grown by incorporating several other religious congregations, as well as non-Catholic and community hospitals. It now operates 42 acute-care hospitals in California, Arizona, and Nevada.

The California Endowment

The College’s other partner in this venture is The California Endowment, which gave a grant of \$272,560 to build the on-campus studio and provide scholarships for RNs. The California Endowment is a philanthropic foundation that was created as a part of the privatization of Blue Cross of California in 1996. The mission of The California Endowment is to expand access to affordable, quality health care for underserved individuals and communities, and to promote fundamental improvements in the health status of all Californians.

The California Endowment is committed to easing the nursing shortage by attracting new people to the profession. In addition to providing the funds to construct the videoconference studio, The California Endowment donated \$50,000 of a \$100,000 matching grant for scholarships to Holy Names. They are using a combination of scholarships, faculty endowments, expanded nursing degree programs, and other efforts to educate nurses from underrepresented groups, and to provide nurses to the underserved Central Valley. ❖



Dr. Fay Bower and Dr. Erik Stilling prepare for the evening’s broadcast with faculty member Lee Anne Kinzel.

Reasons for the Nursing Shortage

The crisis in nursing is a complex one, with many causes. Most of the nurses working in patient care are in the second half of their careers: the average working nurse is in her middle forties—somewhat older in California—and many do not keep working until the customary retirement age of 65. (In fact, it is not really accurate to speak of a shortage of nurses—many qualified nurses simply no longer work in patient care.) Replacing the nurses