

Training the next generation of nurses — fast

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January 10, 2022



Maria College campus on Thursday, Dec. 16, in Albany, N.Y. Will Waldron/Times Union

From hospitals and long-term care facilities to private homes, nurses are in high demand. They're also severely burnt-out as health care personnel prepare to face a third year of almost unrelenting pandemic-related stress.

Still, a new generation of students hasn't been deterred from rising to the challenge.

Looking back on his long career, Maria College President Thomas Gamble believes the field remained "relatively stable" over the years. New technologies, enhanced education, telehealth and teaching simulations all came into play without dramatically altering the profession. COVID-19 is a different story entirely, and Gamble believes it has and will continue to change the vocation of nursing.

"It's a really fraught situation: There's a lot of emotion, a lot of turmoil, a lot of turnover," said Gamble, who will step down from his role at Maria in 2022 after six years at the helm of the nursing school. "The profession is a strong profession, full of really dedicated and gifted people, but we can't beat them up the way we've been doing."

Gamble has yet to see a slowdown in students who want to go into the field, but his biggest fear is that the current upheavals may lead to less interest in nursing education in the years to come.

And in the near term, he's concerned academia can't educate enough nurses to meet employers' needs.

One major challenge: Because present-day nurses are already overworked, it's hard for them to supervise students in their clinical rotations, too. "Schools could really educate a whole lot more students to become nurses if we had more options in terms of clinical experience," Gamble said.

Jeanine Santelli, executive director of the American Nurses Association in New York, agreed. "We need to see more opportunities for nurses to get their clinical experiences as nursing students so that they're ready to work when they graduate and get their license," she said.

One option is doing more in what might be described as the virtual clinical realm. While simulations are not a replacement for clinical education, Santelli and Gamble think they can surely supplement students' learning for the limited amount of experience available to them right now.

"High-fidelity simulation," as Gamble described it, has proven a solid resource for students to understand patient outcomes. Santelli said simulations allow students to step back after making a mistake, see how it worked out and what could have been done better.

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Some states, including New York, allow simulations to supplement students' clinical learning hours; the American Association of Colleges of Nursing's Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education has encouraged the use of simulations so long as it's paired with direct-care learning.

Glenda Kelman, a nursing chairperson and professor at Russell Sage College, recalled a decade-old prediction that there would be a nursing shortage; the pandemic only served to exacerbate the problem.

The key to improving and potentially resolving the problem, according to Kelman, is to foster more pathways to nursing beyond improved clinical availability. To her, that includes developing more scholarships and nurse educators, increasing loan forgiveness, helping others who come in with other scientific degrees make the transition to nursing quicker and

attracting those who don't traditionally see nursing as a career. (All are similar to prescriptions that have been put forth to address a similar lack of fresh troops in the education field.)

Santelli had a similar outlook regarding the need to strengthen the workforce by diversifying it, and cultivating a labor pool that reflects the patient populations it serves.

"We're still ... majority white women, and that's not reflective of the population," Santelli said of the profession's demographics.

More men are becoming nurses, but the percentage remains small: Data from the National Forum of State Nursing Workforce Centers shows that in 2017, men accounted for about 9.1 percent of registered nurses in New York compared to the 8 percent total in 2015. The same study determined approximately 19.2 percent of registered nurse respondents were minority members.

Santelli believes one of the major challenges to diversifying nursing is ensuring science, technology, engineering and mathematics — the so-called STEM fields — are boosted throughout primary education. She said young people who don't see nurses who look like them won't be inclined to consider it as a career or pursue other STEM-related careers.

"We're trying to work on that a little bit by little bit, but these are important initiatives," she said.



10f5Thomas Gamble, president of Maria College on Thursday, Dec. 16, in his office on the school campus in Albany, N.Y. Will Waldron/Times Union

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