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Nursing degrees advancing as physician supply wanes

Andrea Tortora | For Business First

Nursing is a career with big earning potential in Central Ohio, especially as the need for health-care providers grows.

As more Central Ohioans obtain health insurance through the Affordable Care Act, nurses with advanced degrees will be in particularly high demand. Nurse practitioners, who can diagnose illness and prescribe medications, earn a median salary of \$87,000 in Ohio, the **Bureau of Labor Statistics** reports.

That's not a bad return on investment considering the cost of a four-year undergraduate nursing degree plus two or more years of graduate school at Central Ohio institutions ranges from \$72,000 and \$150,000.

Nurses will be called on to mitigate an anticipated national shortage of 90,000 physicians by 2020. The **Association of American Medical Colleges** warns that the nation will lack enough doctors in primary care, specialty offices and hospitals. At the same time, the national shortage of nurses is expected to hit 1 million, according to the Health Resources and Services Administration, with every state feeling the pinch by 2015.

The insufficient supply is expected to put a strain on the health-care system and increase the demands placed on RNs, said [Bernadette Melnyk](#), chief wellness officer and dean of the College of Nursing at **Ohio State University** in Columbus.

"We have a shortage of primary care physicians in many counties throughout the state and nation, and we have to produce all the primary care nurse practitioners we can produce," she said.

The registered nurse work force is the top occupation in job growth through 2020, according to government employment projections. The number of employed nurses is forecast to grow to 3.45 million in 2020, an increase of 712,000, or 26 percent more than the 2.74 million employed RNs in 2010.

Health reform is driving the increased need, which is amplified by an aging population. The median age of nurses is 46, and more than 50 percent of the nursing work force is close to retirement, according to the American Nurses Association. At the same time, the baby boomer

generation is entering the over-65 age group, which presents more medical and health needs.

In Franklin County, there is one primary care doctor for every 609 residents and there is one nurse for every 89 people, says the Central Ohio Hospital Association.

All of these facts conspire to create huge demand for nursing degrees. Many nursing schools, including Ohio State, the **Mount Carmel College of Nursing** in Columbus and Otterbein University in Westerville, are reporting record enrollment. And more are adding online programs designed to boost the number of students in the nursing pipeline while easing bottlenecks for practical and clinical requirements.

The way nurses are taught also is changing. The dawn of health reform and the move toward the so-called "medical home" model means a big focus on evidenced-based care and holistic well-being, as well as training health care professionals to work together in teams.

"We know that in order to save money in health care, our graduates must give as much emphasis as they can to the health of the metropolitan population and to the promotion of wellness and health education," said [Ann Schiele](#), dean at the Mount Carmel College of Nursing.

To respond to the increased health-care demands, nurses must increase their scope of practice so they can perform many of the primary care tasks usually reserved for physicians, according to a 2010 **Institute of Medicine** report. A national push is underway to ensure that 80 percent of nurses earn a bachelor's degree by 2020 and to double the number of nurses who pursue doctorates.

"We have fabulous opportunities," said Ohio State's Melnyk. "However, we have to find innovative ways to output more nurses to meet the demand we have."

To assist the community in staffing up, schools are stressing RN-to-BSN programs and accelerated second-degree programs to quickly certify more nurses who are prepared to pursue advanced degrees.

Mount Carmel saw record enrollment with its most recent class of 1,100 undergraduate students. Its 13-month Second Degree Accelerated Program is highly competitive, enrolling just 64 students a year.

Ohio State's RN-to-BSN program saw enrollment double from spring 2011 to spring 2012. (It has soared 600 percent in the past eight years.) Enrollment also doubled in OSU's graduate nursing degree programs between 2010 and 2013.

The **American Association of Colleges of Nursing** reports U.S. nursing schools turned away 75,587 qualified applicants from baccalaureate and graduate nursing programs in 2011 due to insufficient number of faculty, clinical sites, classroom space, clinical preceptors and budget constraints.

Andrea Tortora is a freelance writer.