



NURSED

to

*Technical colleges are
giving critical care
to the health industry's
labor shortages*

Health

BY MAT BOLCH

Craig McDaniel still tells a story from the mid-1980s about how Coosa Valley Technical College launched several of its healthcare programs in response to the needs of his community.

“A letter came across my desk from the director of respiratory therapy at Redmond Regional Medical Center almost begging us to start a respiratory therapy program,” recalls McDaniel, who was then VP of economic development and is now president of the college. “The three-page letter stated that there was a critical shortage. And we were motivated to make it happen.”

That letter prompted Coosa Valley and Floyd College to organize a health occupation summit in 1987 on the Floyd campus, which drew health professionals from Floyd, Gordon, Pope and Bartow counties in Georgia, as well as Cherokee County, Alabama. From that meeting came plans to start respiratory therapy, radiological technology, paramedic, surgical tech and medical lab assistant programs. Floyd College started the latter program, with Coosa Valley eventually offering the rest.

“That’s how it starts — with a letter or a conversation at a Rotary Club or Chamber meeting,” McDaniel says. “Our attitude from Day One has been if there’s a need, we’re going to meet it. We’ll add any new program that’s viable. If we ever hear of a need from the healthcare community, we don’t turn our back. We make it work.”

At a time when vacancies in the healthcare field are going unfilled because of labor shortages, that can-do attitude is helping beef up the ranks of Georgians qualified to work in this field.

While 11,400 jobs were added last year in the education and healthcare fields in Georgia, vacancy rates continue to hover in double digits in many healthcare professions. The Georgia Department of Community Health’s FY02 annual report shows an increase in the need for LPNs among state nursing homes rising to 15.5 percent. And between 1998 and 2008, says the Georgia Department of Labor, the number of annual openings for LPNs will be 1,160. Moreover, recruitment is a problem for three-fourths of the nation’s long-term health facilities, according to the American Health Care Association.

Fortunately, Georgia’s technical colleges have been preparing to fill these voids wherever possible. Not only are new nursing programs popping up, but colleges are adding courses in other health areas, from surgical tech and medical assisting to ultrasound, radiology and pharmacology. The courses are in demand, with waiting lists in some programs and enrollment climbing.

As they do with other local businesses, the technical colleges are working closely with area hospitals and clinics to identify the

need for new programs, then putting them in place.

PARTNERSHIPS ARE KEY

Some 16 years after holding the summit, Coosa Valley Tech is christening a \$9 million, 53,000-sq.-ft. health technology building to house existing health programs and begin new courses, including nuclear medicine, surgical tech and deep tissue massage. McDaniel credits local hospital support with securing funding for the new building through the governor’s office and state Legislature.

“Because of the concentration of healthcare providers in the Rome area, we have a very strong relationship with the healthcare community,” McDaniel says.

Nowhere in the state is there a stronger hospital-college partnership than in Columbus, where major hospitals have donated more than \$500,000 to the Health Science Division at Columbus Technical College. “We have a tremendous relationship with our hospital CEOs,” says Bob Jones, President of Columbus Technical College, which has one of the largest Health Science Divisions in Georgia. In fact, says Jones, all the major hospital CEOs are on the foundation’s board.

The college has experienced terrific growth in enrollment in its health sciences program, leaping from 257 students in 1999 to 1,295 in 2002. In response to demand, numerous new programs have been added, including an Associate Degree in Nursing (accredited in March), Dental Hygiene, Dental Assisting, Pharmacy Technician, Long Term Care Technician and Hospital Transporter. And recently the board of directors of The Medical Center of Columbus, which has operated a radiology school for many years, voted to transfer control of the Radiologic

Technology program to Columbus Technical College this fall.

Jones says the college has procured 29 acres of property with an eye toward expansion. “The first thing to be built will be a new health sciences facility,” he says.

“The physical facilities that Columbus Technical College has developed and proposed for the future have captured the interest of students,” says Larry Sanders, CEO of Columbus Regional Healthcare Systems.

“We made a conscious, major decision to align ourselves with them in a long-term partnership.”

Partnerships with local hospitals are benefiting the community as well. “Of the 26 students who graduated from the Associate Degree Nursing Program last year, 23 were hired by local healthcare facilities,” says Jones.



Craig McDaniel,
president, *Coosa Valley*
Technical College



Bob Jones, president,
Columbus Technical
College

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Other colleges, too, are benefiting from loyal relationships with their local medical facilities, and vice versa.

For example, Lanier Tech started a Surgical Technology program in response to a need in its service area, says Jamey Watson, program director. The Northeast Georgia Medical Center and Health System provided instruments and equipment, including an anesthesia machine, before the program started in fall 1999. More recently, the school bought laparoscopic equipment, and the hospital donated the instruments to go with it.

“Now, when our students go to clinicals, they’re already familiar with laparoscopic surgery, which is a huge advantage to them,” Watson says. “The hospital has been a partner in the success of the program. Most of our graduates go to work there.”

Anita Scott, the hospital’s academic liaison, says the Medical Center is taking a proactive approach to filling vacancies. “The position I hold is literally as a facilitator to bring people into healthcare fields,” she says. The Gainesville facility, which last year began conducting open-heart surgery, currently has only two vacancies for its 27 surgical tech positions. The number of vacancies is substantially lower than it was before the program at Lanier Tech started, says Scott.

In Acworth, North Metro Technical College greatly expanded its healthcare offerings after local hospitals expressed a need. Medical assisting and related courses were added in fall 2002, and a new practical nursing course starts this fall.

“In April 2001 when I got here, the only healthcare offering was the EMT program,” recalls college President Steve Dougherty. “Local hospitals were saying they needed a lot more people. They were quite concerned about not only the growth in demand for workers but also the prospect of their current workforce retiring.”



Ken Beverly, president and CEO of Archbold Medical Center, and Steve Dougherty, president, North Metro Technical College

Two key advisory board members at North Metro Tech — Cartersville Medical Center CEO Keith Sandlin and WellStar Health System VP Mark Haney — help the college stay attuned to local healthcare needs, typifying the technical

colleges’ symbiotic relationships with local businesses.

Perhaps the longest tie between a technical college and a local hospital exists in Thomasville between Southwest Georgia Technical College and Archbold Medical Center. The relationship dates back to 1963, when an Archbold nurse helped start the LPN program.

“We’ve been joined at the hip ever since,” says Ken Beverly, president and CEO of the hospital, who this year chairs the

Georgia Hospital Association. Beverly, a native of Thomasville, has been with the hospital for 29 years.

In a recent display of public-private cooperation, the hospital backed the college in its efforts to secure funding from the General Assembly for an expansion of the school’s health occupation facility. The hospital also agreed to help fund construction and hold a fund-raising drive to equip the facility. Beverly recalls that college President Freida Hill called him one winter day. “She said, ‘Gosh Ken, we really need your support on this.’ And we said, ‘Of course.’”



Columbus Technical College ran a clever ad campaign that seems to be paying off. Of the 40 students enrolled in this year’s Associate Nursing Degree program, 15 are men.

“If there’s a need, we’re going



Why such commitment? Currently, the nursing vacancy rates at Archbold are relatively low: 6 percent for RNs and 5 percent for LPNs. “Without Southwest Georgia Tech, we’d be in bad trouble,” Beverly says.

FLEXIBILITY FOR NURSING STUDENTS

The technical colleges’ healthcare programs are successful not only because they respond to local business needs, but also because they provide flexibility for students, especially nursing students.

A pilot project at DeKalb Technical College, for example, aims to accommodate students’ schedules in completing their clinicals at local hospitals. “In order to provide the kind of experience that students need, you have to be flexible enough to get into clinical sites at off times,” says Geri Moreland, chair of the Health and Human Services department.

“We’ll do whatever it takes so students get the best training possible,” Moreland says. “We have had high pass rates on the state licensing exam, so it signals we’re doing something right.”

Tamiko Smith, 30, a practical nursing student at DeKalb Tech,

says her 5 p.m. to 1 a.m. clinical rotation at Rockdale Hospital in Conyers allowed her to see a different side of nursing.

“It worked out well,” she says. “It was different, but it helped us help patients.” The odd shift meant that students met with two sets of nurses, who brought varying perspectives.

“The experience was touching to me,” Smith says, “being able to give patients one-on-one attention. They’ll ask, ‘How long will you be here?’ And I can say I’ll be around after they fall asleep — you can be there to ease them, to help them.”

At North Georgia Technical College, the need for flexibility among practical nursing students prompted the school to start a part-time program at its Blairsville campus. Here, as at the main Clarkesville campus, most students are already working in the healthcare industry. “They can’t quit their jobs to go to school, so this fits the bill,” says Joanne Greer, VP of instructional services

“The practical nursing program is the most rigorous and is among the most rewarding on campus,” says Parker. “They’re helping people who need their help on an immediate basis.”



**Anthony Parker, president,
Albany Technical College**

OTHER HEALTHCARE EFFORTS

Parker points to other sought-after healthcare programs offered at his college. Albany Tech started diploma and associate degree programs in pharmacy technology in response to a need expressed by area hospitals. And the radiologic technology course currently has a 24- to 36-month waiting list, Parker says.

One unique healthcare training program can be found at Atlanta Technical College. The National Kidney Foundation has endorsed its hemodialysis technology program, and the

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to meet it.” — **PRESIDENT CRAIG MCDANIEL, COOSA VALLEY TECH**



at the college. “It’s a creative program.”

Students have started studies in core courses, but the program doesn’t officially begin until Fall quarter. There are waiting lists for full-time practical nursing programs at both campuses, so the part-time program helps fill the ever-increasing demand.

“The demand from students far outweighs the supply,” Greer says. “It’s pretty true all over the state.”

And that’s because students recognize opportunity when they see it. Placement rates in health technologies programs are among the highest of all degrees and diplomas conferred in the Technical College System. At Albany Technical College, for instance, nursing graduates have a 95 percent placement rate.

But besides looking forward to ample job opportunities, nursing students can glean other, more intangible rewards, says Anthony Parker, president of Albany Tech.

“Our graduates are behind the scenes and at the forefront to provide patients what they need to get well or keep from getting sick,” he says. The college currently has 212 practical nursing students enrolled on two campuses.

HIGH-SCORING HYGIENISTS

Athens Technical College saw its 2002 dental hygiene graduates place 15th out of 236 associate and baccalaureate dental hygiene programs that took the National Board of Dental Hygiene exam.

Only four years old, the program has earned an outstanding reputation since Jamie Moss moved from Florence-Darlington (S.C.) Technical College to start the dental hygiene curriculum. “The students are my driving and motivating force,” says Moss, program director.

And that commitment has shown from the day Moss arrived in Athens. Besides shaping a quality program at the technical college, she and her team of staff and students provide dental care for the homeless and educate the community on the importance of dental hygiene. In recognition of her work, Athens-Clarke County Mayor Heidi Davison declared Feb. 25 Jamie A. Moss Day.

Despite the accolades heaped on Moss, she deflects the acclaim onto the faculty and, especially, the students. “Bottom line, it comes down to the students and what they want to do,” she says.

The dental hygiene program stresses whole-body health, with students learning how to take vital signs, perform head and neck examinations, update medical histories, screen for oral cancer and refer patients to their primary care physicians when necessary.

The curriculum finds students in the classroom nearly every weekday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. during the two-year program. Many students take core healthcare courses early to lighten the load of the dental hygiene program.

Graduates enjoy a high placement rate, commanding salaries of nearly \$40 per hour. Moss notes that many graduates migrate to urban areas, but that rural dentists also need competent hygienists.

The program director credits her students with “hunkering down and getting the job done” for scoring so high on the national tests. **R**



college has been recognized as the state provider of advanced hemodialysis training.

The program was started about a year ago at the request of the dialysis industry, says Constance Rowan, director of the Health and Human Services division of Atlanta Tech. Following two quarters of training, technicians wind up in private and hospital-run dialysis centers, earning between \$12 and \$15 an hour, depending on experience, Rowan says.

Columbus Technical College is teaching Fire Department employees to become EMTs. The consolidation of Columbus' emergency medical services and fire department spurred the desire to cross-train the fire personnel, says Linn Storey, chair

of the college's Health Science department.

Firefighters receive the same instruction offered on campus, but the curriculum is taken to the fire hall during workers' shifts.

Currently, firefighters who want to advance into the paramedic technology field must attend classes at the college.

But Storey says that might change if the number of firefighters who desire advanced training increases.

"I don't think the public has an appreciation of how rigid and demanding the EMT program is," Storey says. "It takes a lot of clinical experience and a lot of classroom work to be able to react quickly when the situation demands it."

Whether it's EMTs, nurses, radiologic technicians or surgical technicians, the need for well-trained healthcare professionals is ballooning — and will continue to do so in the foreseeable future.

"The crisis of healthcare is on us," says Ken Beverly of Archbold Medical Center, citing the aging population, the increased demand for health services, and what Beverly calls the "unbelievable" demand for chronic disease care. He notes that healthcare is the largest sector of the economy, accounting for 15 percent of the gross domestic product.

It will take several years of dedicated resources for the healthcare industry to keep pace with the growth, he says, adding, "Only with the DTAE will we catch up." **R**

FROM JEANS TO NURSING

When the Levi plant closed in June 2002, Fannin County lost its largest employer, and 400 people lost their jobs.

For 19 of those former employees, the future looks bright, thanks to a cooperative effort among several local, state and federal agencies that brought a special, one-time practical nursing program to an empty storefront in Blue Ridge.

Students will graduate in December, "and job prospects appear to be good," says Glenn Rasco, VP of economic development at Appalachian Technical College, which helped set up the class. A survey of displaced workers showed interest in healthcare fields, but respondents were unwilling to drive the 35 miles from Blue Ridge to Appalachian Tech's Jasper campus.

The solution? Bring the classroom to them.

Immediately after the plant closure was announced, Fannin County officials formed a task force to find ways to help. For the nursing program, Appalachian Tech staff worked with the Fannin County Economic Development Authority, the Georgia Department of Labor and the Coosa Valley Regional Development Center to secure federal

Workforce Investment Act funds. The money was used to set up the classroom, find an instructor and receive state approval to offer the one-time class exclusively to laid-off Levi workers.

"There's no one individual you can credit the effort to," Rasco says. "It was just through working together that we made this happen."

Nancy Smith had just moved with her family to North Georgia when the registered nurse applied to lead the program in Blue Ridge. "They're just a great group of ladies," Smith said. "They're totally dedicated to this training. They have a great work ethic, and are used to showing up on time and getting the job done."

Nearly 100 other displaced Levi workers are taking classes at Appalachian Tech, which provides transportation to the main campus from Fannin County for students enrolled in other courses of study.

Lynn Henry, 51, who worked for 22 years as a mechanic at the Levi plant, is looking forward to her new career as a practical nurse.

Henry and her daughter Julie Townson started taking core classes together before splitting to start nursing studies — Henry to Blue Ridge and Townson to Appalachian Tech's main campus.

Henry hopes to work at Fannin Regional Hospital or become a home healthcare nurse. She says she's "doing fine" with her studies.

"It's quite a bit different than fixing a sewing machine," Henry says. "People are a lot more complicated than machines." **R**