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New skills,new jobs

Options to train or retrain in healthcare abound at regional community colleges



Students at Bellingham Technical College hone their skills in surgery, ready for the real world.

By Amanda Baltazar

An aging population brings good and bad news. It means more stress on an already over-burdened healthcare system, but at the same time it means more jobs open up in this sector, and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

More jobs during an economic downturn isn't just something to celebrate; it's something to take advantage of.

To that end, many residents of Skagit and Whatcom counties are either looking to add a new skill in the healthcare field and make the switch from an unsatisfying job, or are picking up skills as a result of being laid off or graduating from high school.



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The field is attractive. According to Laura Cailloux, dean of workforce education at Skagit Valley College, Mount Vernon, there are 120 openings in this area in the healthcare field every year, which is the highest number of any of the professional fields she looks at. In fact, the growth rate for this industry, she said, is anticipated to be 1.8 percent to 2.6 percent between 2006 and 2016.

Terry Cox, workforce education director at Whatcom Community College in Bellingham, pointed out that all of the healthcare courses offered at this school (except massage therapy, because these jobs are typically independent) lead to jobs that are expected to grow by 13 percent to 31 percent between 2007 and 2017. This, she said, is according to Workforce Explorer, a service of the Washington State Employment Security Department that provides labor market information.

Whatcom's students are not having trouble finding jobs. Cox said students from the physical therapy assisting and nursing programs who graduated last year all had jobs prior to graduation. A third of this year's medical assisting graduates have jobs even before they've completed their practicums. This good news for graduates comes even though demand for workers in this field has dropped off slightly, due to the economy.

"It's down because budgets have been cut and because people who were thinking about retiring, don't," Cailloux said.

The job market will pick up again fairly soon, she predicted. Cox agreed, and said the low demand won't last long.

"The baby boom generation is creating a large amount of demand for all healthcare occupations, so this current lull will be short lived."

Training the next generation of healthcare workers

Bellingham Technical College, Skagit Valley College and Whatcom Community College all offer healthcare training programs to ready students for the field of medicine, be it in hospitals, doctors' offices, clinics, pharmacies or long-term care facilities. Degree and certificate programs are offered at each school.

Despite the plethora of programs, most courses are filled to their maximum year after year and several have long waiting lists.

The number of enrolled students in healthcare workforce training at Skagit Valley College is the largest of any other program, according to Cailloux. Most of the students are people who need to retrain, but there are the occasional high school students who enroll, she said.

"The average student age is around 30 and a good portion of people have some experience," she said. "Many students want a certificate, but then they get hooked and keep adding certificates and move up to a degree."

Almost 20 healthcare programs are offered at Bellingham Technical College but the radiologic program has had the longest wait in recent years, according to Carol Lager, dean of health. The course accepts 32 students a year, but the waiting period is a year to enroll and has been as long as two or three years, she said. Nursing's wait list has also increased, she said, and has a one- to two-year wait period. This past winter a new dental hygiene course was launched, which only admits 10 students every other year.

"This is the only program with a selective admissions process and it has the most pre-requisites because it needs a much higher level to succeed," said Lager. "It's already popular because it's a high-demand field with high wages."

At Whatcom Community College, the registered nursing program is the most popular because there are shortages in that field and because the salaries are good. Physical therapy assisting, medical assisting and nursing assisting have also been in high demand.

"We have had more applications for those programs than we have slots for several years," said Cindy Woods, Pathways program director.

Studying healthcare at Whatcom Community College attracts so many students because the school offers the IBEST (Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training) pathway. This program helps students with basic skills to improve their



Almost 20 healthcare training programs are offered at Bellingham Technical College, attracting students from high school age up to 60.



The registered nursing program at Whatcom Community College is so popular because of the many jobs in the field and good wages.

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knowledge and practical experience and successfully join these workforce courses. The school offers an IBEST pathway in medical assisting and nursing assisting, and several of the slots open to students on both courses are reserved for those with IBEST status.

President Obama has recognized the highly regarded program, which began in Washington state, and hopes it will roll out to different states across the country.

“It’s a great way to get people into higher-paid careers that they wouldn’t otherwise have had access to,” Woods said.

Whatcom Community College has been admitting IBEST students for four years in medical assisting and one year in nursing assisting.

“They’re two-year certificates so we’ve graduated two classes so far,” Cox said.

“The students have done an outstanding job of getting through the program and sticking with it.”

For students who still want to attend a technical school, but may live a long distance away, a new technique is being adopted. Distance learning, or online classes, gives students the option to learn through a computer or screen. Skagit Valley College has seen a growing numbers of students participating in distance learning every year. “It’s people who need a little more flexibility – people who have kids or jobs,” Cailloux explained.

Whatcom Community College is hoping to offer online/hybrid courses for the massage practitioner, medical assisting and registered nursing courses, with 80 percent of the work carried out remotely, Woods said. For the remaining 20 percent of the time, students would be expected to travel to the school for lab work. “This would open [our courses] up to students who are place-bound or unable to get off work to attend classes,” she said.

The school already offers an online/hybrid course in physical therapy assisting, which has even attracted students as far reaching as Alaska and Michigan. While distance learning makes the courses available to more students, the student body for healthcare is already quite diverse. At BTC, students are often more experienced, around age 30, but some are 55 or 60, having tried other careers and decided to retrain. The trend seems to be everywhere, including Whatcom.

“The average age is about 30,” Cox said. “Which is higher than the general school population. The workforce programs are more attractive to returning adults because they provide very specific, practical skills.”

Connecting with the community

Keeping the courses up to date and containing the correct training is paramount for all three schools. All three share in a partnership called the Northwest Alliance for Healthcare Skills. Other partners include the five area hospitals, some extended care facilities and the Northwest Workforce Development Council.

Through the alliance, the hospitals provide funds to the colleges, specifically for registered nurse graduates, because they’re in such high demand, Lager said.

The alliance members also write grants together and work on future initiatives or needs, since the sum of all the alliance members is so much stronger than each one individually.

The three colleges also work together on getting their students placed for internships. Internships – also known as preceptorships or clinicals – are a vital part of the courses at the three schools. It’s the only place where the students can taste the reality of what the job is like, what the professional standards are and how they can apply what they learned in the classroom into real scenarios, Cailloux said.

A single coordinator works with the three schools and their students to make sure each trainee is placed in a suitable environment at the right time.

“This partnership is critical, and having that clinical coordinator allows our [training] programs to be bigger partially because we have her to determine the placements for so many students,” Cox said.

Skagit Valley College also brings professionals from the field into the school to talk to students as well as the academic staff. Each course has an advisory

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committee, which meets quarterly to check that the courses cover everything they need to, she said. Whatcom Community College works closely with St. Joseph Hospital in Bellingham to provide students with hands-on learning opportunities, she said. "They provide clinical sites for our preceptorships, and also participate on our advisory committees and help us with curriculum development, telling us which skills our students need to be learning," Woods said.

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