Chicago area fights nursing shortage with local graduates

Chicago (April 3, 2009) — A looming nationwide nursing shortage might not be felt as harshly in the Chicago area due to the success of one local university in placing its high achieving graduates in the region’s health care facilities. Dr. Patricia Prendergast, chair of the Chicago State University nursing department, said 97 percent of its nursing graduates stay in the Chicago area following graduation.

“Everyone is looking for our graduates,” said Prendergast. “Nearly 100 percent of them are employed, having received multiple job offers.”

It doesn’t hurt that recent CSU students have one of the highest pass rates in the nation for the National Council Licensure Examination for Registered Nurses (NCLEX-RN). In the most recent test, Chicago State graduates scored a 97 percent pass rate, compared with 90 percent for Illinois and 87 percent nationwide. Thirty-seven nursing candidates from CSU took the examination; 4,596 took it statewide. Chicago State has consistently maintained a high pass rate on the exam.

The demand for highly qualified nurses is also being driven by a nationwide nursing shortage – a situation Prendergast thinks is only going to get worse and will have widespread consequences.

“The shortage has a major impact on patient care in all areas, not just in hospitals,” she said.

The problem stems from a large number of baby boomers reaching retirement age, relatively low wages for nurse educators, and not enough clinical sites for nurse training. Nurses can earn more money in the profession than as an instructor; nurse educators also must hold doctorate degrees.

“It’s a challenge to find doctorally prepared nursing faculty,” said Prendergast, whose department now has 15 full-time faculty members.

Nurse education requires hands-on experience in clinical settings, and many nursing programs are having difficulty finding clinical sites to place their students. Prendergast said CSU’s nursing department has several clinical settings for the students to practice and expand their skills.

The demand for a nursing degree has allowed Chicago State to be more selective in admitting students to its program. Out of the 120 applications CSU receives on average every year, only the top 40 are admitted into the professional program. The result is a nursing program that has a high percentage of well prepared, highly qualified students.

CSU’s 135 nursing students can look forward to writing their own ticket upon graduation and passing the licensure exam. Starting salaries for RNs in the Chicago area are around $52,800, and with additional training, nurses have many opportunities to move into higher paying fields such as nurse practitioner, nurse supervisor or nurse anesthetist.

“We are indeed very proud of the sterling achievement of our graduates on the NCLEX-RN,” said Dr. Joseph Balogun, dean of the College of Health Sciences. He attributed the success to the curriculum design, faculty effectiveness and the instructional resources available to the students.