

SCSU nursing program on mend with new chair, national accreditation

By LEE HENDREN, T&D Staff Writer

South Carolina State University's Department of Nursing is on the mend, with a new chair, a new curriculum, new testing programs and national accreditation by the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education.

Just a few years ago, enrollment had fallen to below 100 students, and only half of its graduates passed the state nursing exam.

The department is "recovering from a very difficult five-year period," said Dr. Barbara Westphal, who became chair in January and has more than 40 years of administrative and clinical nursing experience.

Also in January, the department gained state accreditation. National accreditation for a three-year period was conferred in April.

National accreditation is the key that "will allow this program to grow and develop," Westphal added. One example: it opens the program to participation by veterans with military scholarships.

This fall, enrollment is expected to be around 309, with grade point averages of 3.0 and above, Westphal said.

An evening program to give registered nurses the opportunity to upgrade to a bachelor of science degree in nursing will begin in January 2005 in conjunction with The Regional Medical Center. That is expected to attract an additional 70 students, Westphal said.

Westphal taught at the Medical University of South Carolina for 17 years after serving as assistant director for staff education and orientation programs at Children's Hospital in Philadelphia.

Westphal said she appreciates assistance by groups such as the South Carolina Area Health Education Consortium, a health education agency that works to increase the number of minority health care workers in rural areas of South Carolina.

AHEC, which has been in existence for about a quarter-century, works with students at the middle school, high school and college levels.

For two years, Lowcountry AHEC's Student Development and Diversity Program has awarded scholarships to nursing students at SCSU.

"South Carolina State is the only HBCU (historically black college or university) in the Lowcountry AHEC's 12-county region that has a nursing program," said Tavy Smalls, coordinator of the agency's Student Development and Diversity Program.

This year's three recipients of \$1,000 scholarships are excited about the prospect of a career in health care.

"Nursing is a continuous learning process that is exciting because you are making a difference in people's lives for the better," said Barbara J. Benson of Newberry.

Benson said her high school health occupations teacher, who was a registered nurse, "encouraged me to pursue a career in health sciences as she thought I would do well in that field. She was a wonderful role model and had set a beautiful example for me."

Benson postponed her career goals to raise a family. Now she and her two children are all in college. Benson is set to graduate from SCSU's nursing program in December. She works at Self Regional Hospital on weekends.

Her career goal is "to assist people, no matter where they might live or what point they might be in their life. ... There will always be someone who is in need of nursing services. I believe a nursing career is right for me; I will keep going until I reach my goals!"

Tomy' Miles of Bennettsville said nurses "have to be committed to endure the long hours ... and still provide the best and most efficient care ... without selfishly thinking of themselves."

Nurses "help others in their most vulnerable times, always making sure that they receive the right type of care. ... The nurse also takes time with the patient to teach them how to stay healthy and to prevent any further damage to themselves.

"It's an overwhelming feeling knowing that I help to contribute to someone's life, and knowing that I made a difference to them. The patient will always remember the nurse who took the time out to spend with them."

Miles is a recipient of SCSU bronze and silver Presidential Scholar medallions and participates in campus and religious organizations. She hopes to earn a master's degree in nursing.

"Nursing is a career where I can help to give back to my community," she said. "I will show a great deal of compassion to my clients and treat them as if they were my own family members."

A high school dropout and teenage mother, Charlene Pruitt of Cordova said she "realized that I could still do or become whatever it is I wanted to be."

She earned a GED, then an associate degree in medical technology at Orangeburg-Calhoun Technical College, making the Dean's List. At SCSU, she was the Outstanding Junior in the nursing program.

"The awesome thing that makes nursing an outstanding career choice for me is the many opportunities that are wrapped up in the nursing profession," she said.

"As a registered nurse, I want to work in the intensive critical care and coronary care units. I will seek to receive all of the accreditations and certifications in advanced life support and critical care nursing," she said.

Her goals include earning a master's degree, conducting research on obesity in African-American women, managing a community services clinic and helping youths pursue careers in the nursing profession.

"The amazing thing about my future nursing career goals is that it is all attainable and not in the least bit far-fetched," she said. "That's what I love about the nursing profession."

For information on SCSU's Department of Nursing, call 803-536-8605 or log on to www.scsu.edu/nursing.

For information on AHEC and its scholarship opportunities, call Tavy Smalls or Diane Kennedy at 803-943-5052 or e-mail tsmalls@lcahec.com.

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South Carolina State University nursing students, from left, Tomy' Miles, Charlene Pruitt and Barbara Benson are this year's recipients of scholarships from the Lowcountry AHEC, which was represented by Tavy Smalls, standing. The students say they are excited about the opportunities available after they graduate from SCSU's Department of Nursing, which gained national accreditation this year. LARRY HARDY/T&D