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Southeast Wisconsin Health Care Grads Earn Higher Degrees, but Worker Shortages Remain

Findings highlight need for additional measures to respond to growing need for workers

The number of students completing bachelor's and advanced degrees in health science fields at southeast Wisconsin colleges and universities rose considerably in the last decade, providing much-needed talent to one of the largest, fastest-growing sectors of the region's economy.

Yet attainment of associate's degrees and certificates for other in-demand health science fields declined, according to a new report from the Wisconsin Policy Forum.

Meanwhile, area health systems continue to report shortages of nurses, medical assistants, and other health care professionals. This challenge may only be exacerbated in coming years by additional trends in Wisconsin such as an aging population requiring more health care, and shrinking enrollment in colleges that produce the next generation of health care workers.

These findings emerge from a Forum analysis of data from the [18 institutions that form the Higher Education Regional Alliance \(HERA\)](#) and from interviews with higher education and health care industry leaders. HERA tracks the number of students who complete academic programs across its partner institutions and categorizes all programs into 15 career clusters, one of which is health science.

This cluster includes a number programs tied to specific occupations such as nursing, dentistry, and public health, which account for close to 90% of health science graduates; the remaining 10% complete programs in more general health-related areas such as biology, biochemistry, and neurobiology. Notably, the Medical College of Wisconsin is not part of HERA and none of HERA's partner institutions have a medical school that trains physicians.

These data show that the total number of students completing degrees and certificates in health science fields at HERA institutions was modestly higher in 2019 compared to 2011. The number of students completing bachelor's and advanced degrees in health science fields, however, was 45.6% higher in 2019 than in 2011.

Meanwhile, the number of students completing shorter certificate and associate degree programs in health science fields declined by 14%. This suggests some of the increase in bachelor's and advanced degrees represents an upward shift among students to higher-level programs that require longer time commitments. Other notable findings include:

- In 2017, more students completed bachelor's degrees than certificates in health science fields – a striking change from 2011 and 2012 when nearly twice as many certificates were awarded as bachelor's degrees. One factor contributing to this is the introduction of new

programs at HERA institutions including in pharmacy and pharmaceutical sciences and administration; physiology, pathology, and related sciences; and public health.

- Changes in nursing also contributed to the growing number of bachelor's degree completions. The two largest program categories in the health science cluster are in nursing, together accounting for roughly half of the total degrees and certificates awarded by HERA institutions. The increase in bachelor's degree completion among nursing students follows a national industry trend that has accelerated over the past decade.
- Those completing primarily certificate-level "Practical Nursing, Vocational Nursing, and Nursing Assistant" programs declined by 26.7% between 2011 and 2019. The overall result of these trends is a slightly increasing number of registered nursing graduates, but fewer graduates preparing for entry-level certified nursing assistant (CNA) and licensed practical nursing (LPN) positions – and fewer nursing graduates overall.
- Between 2011 and 2019, men earned less than one of every five degrees and certificates awarded by HERA institutions in health science fields. Black and Latinx students are also underrepresented among health science graduates at the bachelor's degree level and above. Higher education and health system leaders we interviewed said improving the representation of men and especially people of color in health care occupations is a priority. One specific way health care organizations are seeking to strengthen the diversity of the health care workforce pipeline is through outreach to high school students.

The challenges examined in this report appear to be intensifying, as area health care industry leaders report growing worker shortages. And preparing enough health care workers to meet the demand may become an even bigger challenge in the future, as enrollment has declined since 2010 at many HERA institutions including UW-Milwaukee, UW-Parkside, and UW-Whitewater.

Untapped potential to reverse the trend remains, however, as a large share of high school graduates do not enroll in any college. HERA leaders say the challenge is to get more students to enroll in college and to create welcoming and supportive environments for them once they arrive.

Heightened demand for health care workers may also create a need to continue to find ways to create new and expedited pathways to degrees and certificates in critical fields. This could include expanding opportunities for non-traditional students to complete programs more quickly and potentially do so while they are also working.

Click here to read the full report, "Health Care Grads Earning Higher Degrees, but Worker Shortages Remain."

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