Negotiating the Rapids

It’s a disruptive environment for higher education, but institutions of all types are evolving their business models and processes to navigate safely.
Nursing Enrollment Back to Health

TREND: Colleges and universities will need to adapt academic programs to meet the greatest needs in the local or regional community.

University of Maine at Fort Kent
Fort Kent

- Small public institution
  - More than 1,300 undergraduate students.
- Challenge
  - Decreasing high school population and declining enrollment.
- Opportunity
  - Expand existing programs to best meet current and future workforce needs.
- Measurable Moment
  - Realized 40 percent growth in nursing program from 2011-13. In addition, overall enrollment for fall 2014 reached a record high (more than 1,300 students)—nearly a 25 percent increase over the past four years.

Faced with a drop in high school graduates in the region and a need to retain all nurses in the state earn bachelor of science degrees by 2020, the University of Maine, Fort Kent (UMFK) began shifting resources to expand its nursing program.

“Nursing is currently our largest program,” says John D. Murphy, the university’s vice president for administration. “Prior to that, the education program was the strongest, but we knew enrollment in that program was going to trail off, and we needed to see where best to shift our resources.”

Murphy says, “Health care was the front-runner, because we saw the most potential there and knew there was a demand for jobs.” According to the 2014 Health Occupations Report by the Maine Department of Labor, nursing is the largest health occupation in Maine, and the number of nursing jobs is expected to increase another 20 percent within this decade.

UMFK has a well-established nursing program with a strong reputation in the community for having excellent faculty and for graduating highly qualified job candidates. “When we looked at our resources, we saw an excellent nursing faculty and a reputation for having the highest first-time pass rates on state nursing license exams,” Murphy says. “These factors made us think we could be successful.”

In addition, UMFK had developed an excellent network with hospitals in the county and throughout the state. “Hospital administrators began seeing our students in the workforce and saying, ‘we need more.’”

The first objective outlined in UMFK’s Strategic Nursing Plan for 2011-15 is “satisfactorily [meeting] workforce demands in our region, particularly in increasing percentage of BSN prepared nurses.” To that end, the university’s online courses for the registered nurse to seek a bachelor of science degree are targeted specifically to working adults who want to begin or finish completing their degrees.

In addition, earlier this year, UMFK launched a 1+3 program in partnership with the University of Maine, Augusta. Students will complete their first year at Augusta and then automatically transfer to UMFK’s nursing program. They will attend classes both online and face-to-face.

Through this program in particular, UMFK is contributing to the mission to fulfill the state’s need for more nurses. “We have to continue to serve the state’s needs, but we also have to cover our expenses and look at our true return on investment,” says Murphy. These are just two components of the multifaceted nursing program. One key metric highlighted in the strategic nursing plan is achieving a 75 percent graduation rate within the next four years, and this will be monitored across the board.

Murphy says UMFK is “exceeding initial enrollment goals for the nursing program.” However, expansion comes at a cost. For example, it’s more expensive to run this program than it was to administer the earlier education program. One increase in costs can be attributed to staffing.

“Nursing requires a lot of clinical work,” Murphy explains. “We have hired adjunct faculty to help us with that.” UMFK also recently hired a transfer officer in enrollment management to provide support for adult learners coming into the university with prior degrees.

However, despite the additional investments in the nursing program, Murphy says, “We haven’t denied resources to our other programs.” Moving forward, he believes managing technology efficiently will be important for solidifying the positive changes that have been made.

“When you start delivering programs in multiple modalities, it requires using lots of technology,” he says. “It’s been a challenge to keep technology working for us, instead of against us. We want to avoid creating manual processes to serve these different groups.”

Murphy must also examine the changes at UMFK within the larger context of the entire University of Maine system. “We are balancing changes on our campus along with the systemwide call for change,” he says. “For example, there’s been a push to centralize the accounts payable process.

“We’re trying to leverage efficiencies and savings to work as a system rather than a federation,” he continues. “We’re juggling both sides.”

APRYL MOTLEY, Columbia, Md., covers higher education business issues for Business Officer.
amotley27@aol.com

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