



Fall 11-8-2006

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Recommended Citation

Aubry, Ann, "Hartweg Named to Advisory Board Tackling State Nursing Shortage" (2006).
News and Events. 3328.

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Hartweg Named to Advisory Board Tackling State Nursing Shortage

November 8, 2006

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. - Facing an aging population of baby boomers who will demand increasing medical care, the state of Illinois has projected a shortfall of 20,000 nurses by the year 2020.

To plan ahead and find ways to bolster its nursing workforce, the state has formed a new Illinois Center for Nursing. Among the 11 members appointed by Governor Rod Blagojevich to the Center's Advisory Board is Donna Hartweg, director of Illinois Wesleyan University's School of Nursing and the Caroline F. Rupert Professor of Nursing at IWU.

The Center is charged with developing a strategic plan for nursing manpower in Illinois, tackling issues surrounding nursing recruitment, preparation and retention. The related shortage of nursing faculty was raised as a key issue at the board's inaugural meeting Nov. 2, Hartweg said.

"You can't have more (nursing) students if you don't have more faculty," she said. "The average age of a professor of nursing in this country right now is 55.6. We anticipate that one-half of all nursing faculty will have been retired in the next 10 years."

Among the complex causes of the nursing faculty shortage is a past emphasis on funding for programs preparing advanced practice nurses, yielding more nurse practitioners in an effort to control healthcare costs. Yet higher salaries for those lines of work have made it harder for nursing faculty jobs to compete.

"You have to be careful when you're planning, because you can't just throw money at a problem," Hartweg said. "You have to understand the problem, and set not only benchmarks, but also careful periods of time to review what you're doing, so you don't just keep producing and producing, but better understand what you're doing and what you're spending it on."

Hartweg wants the board not only to look at supply, but also to consider changing demands. In addition to an older population, there will be healthcare problems related to children in poverty and increasing obesity, with those needs weighed against fewer people smoking. These forward-looking thoughts also relate to Hartweg's work at the School of Nursing.

"We're trying to revise the curriculum, and are looking at what it is a graduate needs to know and do, to function in the future."

Hartweg believes her selection to the board was based on the multiple perspectives she brings. She is the only member representing private higher education; she also chairs the BroMenn Healthcare Hospitals Board of Directors, serves on the BroMenn Healthcare System Board of Directors, and has chaired the Illinois Association of Colleges of Nursing.

Hartweg said nursing advocates have been working more than eight years to see such a Center created in Illinois. This, along with the realization of what she could contribute, swayed her to accept the appointment despite its demands on her time.

"I think I have a broader understanding of some of the healthcare issues, funding issues, and even legislation issues around staffing ratios," she said. "When you've been working to get something for a long time and it comes, and someone says, 'Will you help?' -- I couldn't say no."



Donna Hartweg