

WKU nursing school to undergo renovation this summer

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Mar 11, 2020

WKU School of Nursing

More than 200,000 openings for registered nurses are projected each year over the current decade by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

That estimate probably doesn't surprise Dr. Tania Basta, who – as dean of Western Kentucky University's College of Health and Human Services – regularly speaks with local hospital CEOs clamoring for new nurses.



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“They ask me, ‘Is there any way you could produce more nurses?’ ” Basta said, characterizing routine conversations with local health care providers about their personnel needs. Health care providers in general spend significantly to recruit and retain nurses, she said.

“Right now, it is a sure bet career for students,” she said, particularly those who graduate from WKU. “Most of our students have jobs before they graduate.”



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That’s one big reason WKU’s School of Nursing and Allied Health will undergo a \$1.5 million renovation this summer.

Located in the Medical Center/WKU Health Services Complex, the nursing school wants to convert three classrooms with space for 90 students each into two larger classrooms with minimum seating for 140 students per space. The project requires removing two walls and adding one back, along with upgrading equipment to improve videoconferencing capability.



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Campus leaders are working on a tight timeline to have the project complete by Aug. 15, just in time for the start of classes.

In an interview with the Daily News on Friday, shortly after the university's Board of Regents authorized the project, WKU President Timothy Caboni said the nursing program has outgrown the space.

“What we know is that there is tremendous demand in the local and regional economy for nurses,” Caboni told the Daily News. “We’ve done a good job growing that program, but the facility wasn’t built for the size program that we have today. It was built for a program about five to seven years ago.”



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During a meeting Friday before the Board of Regents ultimately voted to approve the project, nursing school officials also spoke about the need to address an issue that could affect the school's accreditation.

Dr. Mary Bennett, who directs WKU's nursing school, told the board that in response to growing enrollment and a shortage of instructors, the school began employing videoconferencing technology to stream one teacher's instructions across classrooms. However, that approach has at times inhibited students' and instructors' ability to communicate with each other.

"We've had technical issues, which has created a lot of stress for the faculty and the students," she told the board. She added that she recently learned another nursing program was recently cited for this approach to instruction by its accrediting body.

In an email Tuesday, Bennett said WKU's School of Nursing and Allied Health currently has 1,630 students – 668 of which are pre-nursing students. It staffs 42 full-time nursing faculty members who teach across several nursing programs and certificates.

"All of the nursing faculty teach classes, due to the shortage of nursing faculty," Bennett wrote, adding that she's currently teaching more than 250 students between her classes.

In addressing the issue, Basta said the school views a classroom renovation as the solution that makes the most sense given the situation.

“We felt the best that we could do at this time was to turn three classrooms into two,” she said.

The end result will give students more direct classroom interaction with their instructors and, with more students, the school may be able to hire more instructors in time, Basta said.

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