

# Pedraja: QCC rises to challenge of health care worker shortage

**Luis G. Pedraja**

Worcester Telegram & Gazette

Since 1963, Quinsigamond Community College has been the driving force in higher education, delivering skilled workers to Central Massachusetts. The college has remained vigilant to the needs of the communities it serves and constantly pivots to meet the changing and growing needs of Worcester and the surrounding cities and towns.

The U.S. is experiencing a shortage of health care workers of unprecedented proportions. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated already existing health care shortages and now our nation is struggling to keep up with the demand for nurses, licensed practical nurses, certified nursing assistants, respiratory therapists and home health aides.

The National Institutes for Health reported that Americans are aging at greater rates than ever before and that the U.S. population over 65 is expected to double between 2000 and 2030. Adding to this aging of our society is the “great resignation,” which has seen a mass exodus of health care workers after the pandemic.

At QCC, we recognize the challenges in the health care industry. Through programs that offer hands-on training, experiential learning and collaboration with local health care providers, we are able to provide trained workers who are positively impacting the shortages in the local, regional and national health care workforce.

Locally, the MassHire Central Region Workforce Board has identified nursing as being among the region’s highest-demand occupations. In early 2023, QCC and Worcester State University were awarded grants totaling \$1.6 million from the Baker-Polito administration to address the void Becker College’s

closing caused, to strengthen the region's nursing talent pipeline and improve career pathways for the nursing profession. The grants were designed to target the nursing shortage across Massachusetts and expand capacity to meet the continuing demand for highly skilled nurses in all health care settings.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that 275,000 additional nurses are needed from 2020 to 2030, and employment opportunities for nurses will grow at 9%, faster than all other occupations through 2026. QCC is working to address this need with its quality nursing programs.

The quality of QCC's associate degrees in nursing is reflected in our students' National Council Licensure Examination pass rate. At the national level, 79.14% of nursing students who took the NCLEX in 2023 for the first time passed, while 40.66% of those who repeated the test passed. QCC nursing students far exceeded these national statistics, with 85.57% of those who took the test passing on their first try, and 61.54% passing after repeating the test.

QCC has created and continues to create strong pathways to health care careers, offering relevant health care degrees and certificate programs that made up 31% of all QCC graduates from 2021 to 2023. In addition to nursing, QCC awarded postsecondary credentials in respiratory care, dental assistant, dental hygiene, occupational therapy assistant, radiologic technician, emergency medical technician, medical assistant, surgical technology, and paramedic.

There is a synergy between our community health care partners and our students, who work for our partners while completing their education. This type of collaboration is mutually beneficial to employers who need a skilled workforce that can hit the ground running, and to students who benefit from a supportive and nurturing environment.

The college has over 75 clinical sites, which foster a unique learning experience for QCC students. Through this type of competency-based training, students (and the businesses they work at) can be assured they have the skill

sets to successfully join the workforce after they graduate. QCC is also exploring partnerships with major hospitals and with other health care providers in the region, to address the need to develop joint programs and strategies to expand capacity, such as mentorships, shared clinical labs, scholarships and faculty resources. Jointly, we are also working with legislators to seek state funding and legislation to address this growing need.

At QCC, we believe quality education is as important as the variety of health care programs we offer. To that end, in 2023 our respiratory care program (the oldest in Massachusetts) became the first in the state to receive the President's Award for Excellence in Credentialing Success from the Commission on Accreditation for Respiratory Care.

CoARC accredits entry into professional practice respiratory care programs throughout the United States. The college achieved this award by having three consecutive years in which 100% of students earned the registered respiratory therapist credential, as well as meeting or exceeding CoARC program thresholds. Many employers either require the credential prior to beginning employment, or require it within a certain time frame to remain employed.

Similar to nursing, employment of respiratory therapists is projected to grow by 23% from 2016 to 2026, much faster than the average growth rate of all occupations, demonstrating the importance of programs such as this one to our communities.

As a valued educational partner in the region, we will continue to bolster our health care community with skilled workers who help to make a positive difference in the lives of others. Meeting the needs of our community as it changes and evolves; being an integral cog in keeping our community thriving and our populations' flourishing, is the crux of why a community college such as QCC is so vital.

*Luis G. Pedraja is president of Quinsigamond Community College in Worcester.*