Nursing students may have to wait

By Jeremy Wallace

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At a time when health care is one of the few bright spots in the job market, Manatee Community College may be forced to delay its four-year nursing program until 2011 because of a paperwork glitch.

MCC officials were ready to begin enrolling nursing students next fall. The community college completed a state-required needs assessment and lined up support from area hospitals.

But that plan is now in jeopardy.

Because the school did not file a letter of intent with the state Department of Education in June, when MCC was changing presidents, the college could be forced to wait until 2011 to start its nursing program.

The letter of intent is required to give Florida's universities a chance to respond to a community college's plans over matters such as whether the program is needed or would harm four-year schools.

"It's absolutely mind-boggling," state Sen. Mike Bennett, R-Bradenton, said of the delay.

Bennett said current economic conditions make it imperative that MCC be allowed to move forward. He and other legislators from the area are urging the governor-appointed state Board of Education and State Education Commissioner Eric Smith to issue an exemption at their next meeting on Jan. 21 so the nursing program can start on time.

With Florida's unemployment rate at its highest level in 15 years and expected to surge to nearly 10 percent in 2009, jobs in construction, real estate and retail sales are drying up. But nurses remain in demand. The federal Bureau of Labor Statistics estimated that the number of nursing jobs in the United States will increase by more than 600,000 from 2002 to 2012.

MCC President Lars Hafner said local hospitals and other medical professionals support the four-year program at MCC to help fill that employment need.

"There's been a clamor from the community for this," Hafner said.
State Rep. Ron Reagan, R-Bradenton, said delaying the program is unacceptable. Amid the budget crisis, the Legislature is pushing state government to be more efficient, especially when it comes to creating more jobs, he said.

Enrollment in the MCC program is expected to be between 50 and 75 students per year. Although MCC focuses primarily on two-year degrees, it is among a growing number of schools petitioning the state to offer four-year programs, especially with state universities limiting their enrollment in the face of reduced state funding. Ten of Florida's 28 community colleges now offer some four-year degree programs.

*Jeremy Wallace can be reached at 361-4966 or jeremy.wallace @heraldtribune.com.*

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