Psychiatric Mental Health Nurse Practitioner: New Program to Address the Needs in Illinois

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There is a critical need for more qualified, graduate degree-prepared nurses to address our nation's increasing mental healthcare needs (Institute of Medicine, "Future of Nursing", 2010). The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) has given Illinois a failing grade in provision of mental health services, including mental health service co-pays, inpatient services, infrastructure and overall access to mental health services (Cantrell, 2006). In 2007, 19% of the population in Illinois was treated for a mental illness (Holzer & Nguyen, 2007). HRSA reports that of the 203 counties listed for Illinois, there were a total of 1,070 designated mental health shortage areas (HRSA, 2012).

In an effort to respond to the lack of mental health services, the University of St. Francis (USF) in Joliet, Ill. will be rolling out a very unique post-master’s certificate this summer. It is a program intended for registered nurses with a clinically based graduate degree in the mental health field who wish to attain their Psychiatric Mental Health Nurse Practitioner (PMHNP) certification. This program is especially intended for Psychiatric Mental Health Clinical Nurse Specialists (PMH CNSs) who would like to ensure their future by respecializing as PMHNPs; this is important since the American Nurses Credentialing Center is retiring the certification for the PMH CNS. Qualified individuals will be able to complete the 500 required clinical hours over one summer. This intensive practicum experience will exemplify what PMHNPs are capable of, and will meet the needs of students who are able to complete a full-time immersion experience during the summer. In addition, the MSN degree for the Psychiatric Mental Health Nurse Practitioner will begin accepting students this fall. This is for the more traditional student
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who is interested in completing a master’s degree in psychiatric mental health nursing. USF’s online graduate nursing programs were recently ranked number one in Illinois by U.S. News & World Report.

The idea for the PMHNP program at USF emerged from faculty who worked at the university’s St. Francis Health and Wellness Center (HWC) and saw the unmet need for qualified mental health services for the chronically mentally ill and people struggling with multiple chronic conditions, including depression, addictions and bipolar disorders. The HWC exemplified a new nursing model of affordable holistic primary care services, with integration of mental and physical primary health care services for all regardless of employment status or income level. The HWC restructured as the St. Francis Health Center in 2011 and in the summer of 2012 became affiliated with Aunt Martha’s Federally Qualified Healthcare Center in Joliet so patients would have uninterrupted care. The model of being nurse-managed and providing interprofessional services remains, and the now-Aunt Martha’s St. Francis Health Center will be one of the primary sites where PMHNP students from USF will be able to obtain their clinical experiences starting this summer.

PMHNP students at USF will develop specialty expertise in the care of vulnerable populations and develop outcomes-based comprehensive psychiatric/mental health programs of care. Online distance learners will have their clinical practica arranged in healthcare settings in their locale with specialists who may be PMHNPs, psychologists, or psychiatrists. PMHNPs can significantly impact the treatment of mental illness in Illinois by providing direct diagnostic evaluation and treatment, psychotherapy, consultation, case management, program direction, clinical research, education, and liaison services. Board-certified PMHNPs are licensed Advanced Practice Nurses (APNs)-- registered nurses with a graduate degree in nursing, who are
prepared for advanced psychiatric/mental health practice in primary care throughout the lifespan in accordance with the ANA’s scope and standards of psychiatric and mental health nursing. This practice includes independent and interdependent decision-making and direct accountability for clinical judgment. PMHNPs assess, diagnose, prescribe for and treat a variety of psychiatric, behavioral, and physical conditions. PMHNPs from the USF program who have participated in didactic and clinical interprofessional education learning activities will "enable effective collaboration and improve health outcomes” (World Health Organization, 2010, p.7). PMHNPs can significantly relieve shortages in mental health care and providers, particularly in Mental Health Professional Shortage areas in Illinois.

References
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