Intensive Care
How Ridgewater's healthcare programs are making an impact on the surrounding region

Inside!
New Customized Training Options
Summer Camps for Kids
Minnesota Transfer Curriculum Update
Welcome to the first issue of Ridgewater College magazine. Ridgewater College’s mission is straightforward: to provide quality education in accessible, affordable, and supportive settings. It’s the intent of this magazine to explore the human side of that mission by telling a little about our faculty, programs, students, and graduates. Some of you may know the people or the programs mentioned in the stories, but regardless of whether you know a lot or a little about Ridgewater College, I hope the magazine helps bring to life our college’s people, programs, students, and the communities we serve.

The feature article in this edition focuses on Ridgewater’s nursing program. That program is just one example of where our continuing quest for quality and innovation is leading us. With the implementation of the pathways model of curriculum delivery and the introduction of simulation-based training, Ridgewater has positioned itself as a leader in preparing the nurses and healthcare workers of tomorrow, as well as expanding the skills of today’s healthcare professionals. As evidence of those efforts, Ridgewater College was recently named a Center of Excellence for Integrated Health Science and Practice in partnership with Winona State University, Rochester Community and Technical College, Pine Technical College, and Minnesota State College–Southeast Technical.

With programs and simulation labs at the Hutchinson and Willmar campuses, nursing is just one example of where our innovation is having a regional impact. Additional improvements occurring at both campuses include the development of “smart” classrooms, the construction of new science labs, the implementation of a five-year, $1.25 million federal Student Support Services program, and the evolution of our successful Customized Training and Continuing Education programs. Ridgewater’s recognition as an educational leader is a testament to the commitment of our faculty and staff who are continuously trying to improve what we do.

I hope you find the stories in this inaugural issue both interesting and educational. It is exciting to have the opportunity to share some of our stories with you—the individuals and communities we serve. Your feedback on the magazine and the college is important to us. As you receive this and future issues of Ridgewater College, please drop us an e-mail and let us know what you think at: RCMagazine@ridgewater.edu.

Ridgewater College and you—growing together to meet the educational needs of Minnesota.

Dr. Douglas W. Allen
President

Ridgewater College — Fall 2005
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"We’ve been working with businesses for many years to identify viable training and educational solutions. The work we do allows them to remain focused on their core missions."  page 8

"Last year we awarded $203,000 in student scholarships."  page 9

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NEWS & NOTICES

Close To Home

Bob Thurston has built a successful career, but hasn’t forgotten the Ridgewater education that gave him start. In 1970, armed with a degree in agriculture business from Ridgewater College, Bob Thurston took his first steps toward a successful 35-year career in the seed corn business—and he shows no signs of slowing down. Today he continues to head Thurston Inc., an Olivia-based corn brokerage he founded in 1980, and Thurston Genetics, a corn genetics licensing company he founded in 1993. He also is a co-founder of American Bank in St. Paul, and is chairman of the board of American State Bank in Olivia and in Renville.

Starting out

After earning his degree, Thurston went to work for Trojan Seed Co. in Olivia. "It was a young company on a growth curve," he says. "I became the quality control person and part of the research program. That’s how I got into genetics."

Seven years later, at the ripe old age of 25, Thurston was transferred to Illinois, where he managed an 8,000-acre corn production facility for Trojan. Two years later, he signed on as vice president of operations for a new company—RBA Seeds in Olivia. A year later, in 1978, however, Thurston and the company suffered a devastating loss, when six members of RBA’s top management were killed in an airplane crash. The company was sold two years later to Stauffer Chemical, which offered Thurston a top management position. By then however, the entrepreneur had had enough. "I went to the bank and borrowed a small amount of money to start a seed corn brokerage (a firm that brokers wholesale quantities of seed corn)," he says. "I thought, if I can’t make it in six months, I’ll get a job. Without six months, I had paid the bank back in cash. That company—Thurston Inc.—still exists and is one of the leading corn brokerages in the United States."

In 1993, Thurston started a second company in Olivia. Today Thurston Genetics has five offices throughout the country and licenses corn genetics to seed companies worldwide. Although he sold the company in 2002, Thurston continues to serve as its president. "I ran it as if I still own it," he says.

A trusted resource

Thurston often turns to Ridgewater College for the talent he needs to staff his operations. "We are continually looking for and desperately need good, qualified people to serve in my industry, and Ridgewater is a great feeding ground," he says.

Thurston’s dedication to the companies he heads is equaled only by his dedication to Ridgewater. A board member of the Ridgewater College Foundation, he is sincere in his desire to give back to the institution that, he says, gave him so much. "I recognize the importance of education and of finding your career path," he says. "I want to contribute to something I gained so much from, to help guide the staff on curriculum and scholarships, and to help solicit funds to maintain the school that served me so well. I’m very proud of Ridgewater and what it has accomplished."

—Vicki Stavig

Made to Order

Ridgewater’s Customized Training and Continuing Education Center provides clients with individually designed courses that meet their needs.

The list is impressive: 3M, Northwest Airlines, the Jennie-O Turkey Store, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, the Minnesota Department of Transportation, the Hutchinson Police Department, Rice Memorial Hospital, and Willmar Public Schools. What unites this seemingly disparate group? They are a small sampling of the organizations that RBA’s top management at the Jennie-O Turkey Store, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, the Minnesota Department of Transportation, the Hutchinson Police Department, Rice Memorial Hospital, and Willmar Public Schools. What unites this seemingly disparate group? They are a small sampling of the organizations that have needed help to offer courses for local employees and have turned to Ridgewater.

Bob Cannon, vice president of Customized Training and Continuing Education at Ridgewater, says, "We are continually looking for and desperately need good, qualified people to serve in my industry, and Ridgewater is a great feeding ground."

"We teamed up with Ridgewater in 1999 to form the Highway/Heavy Construction Partnership," says Mathiowetz Vice President Julie Anderson, who also serves on the Partnership’s advisory board. "We have about 50 courses, all to do with road construction in Minnesota. It’s been very successful."

Truth in numbers

Numbers give testimony to the appeal of the many programs offered through the Center. During fiscal 2005, it had 330 contracts to provide customized training for 166 companies. Over the same time period, it also registered 11,993 people in its customized training and continuing education courses. "There are many benefits to a Customized relationship," says Mathiowetz Construction, a Sleepy Eye-based heavy highway and road construction company, turned to Ridgewater for employee training and had the center train some of those employees to be instructors in the Center’s Heavy Equipment-Operator Training Program. "We teamed up with Ridgewater in 1999 to form the Highway/Heavy Construction Partnership," says Mathiowetz Vice President Julie Anderson, who also serves on the Partnership’s advisory board. "We have about 50 courses, all to do with road construction in Minnesota. It’s been very successful."

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"We are continually looking for and desperate...
The college invests in sophisticated new laboratory facilities.

Last year, chemistry students at the Willmar campus of Ridgewater College sat surrounded by pillars that blocked their view of the instructor. Biology students were hunched over short benches sticking out from the wall. And over on the Hutchinson campus, biology and chemistry students shared a rudimentary, temporary lab.

The scene is far different today. After more than a year of planning, renovation, and construction—and a race against the clock to finish all of the work by the time classes began last August—both campuses have brand new labs for chemistry, biology, and physics. “They’re great facilities,” says Joseph Bessie, dean of transfer education for Ridgewater College. “They’re bright, clean, and wonderful to work in.”

In with the new

The labs are also packed with new features. Facilities on both campuses have been outfitted with computers; the chemistry labs have computer workstations for every pair of students and are outfitted with a ceiling-mounted projector. The biology labs also have new fume hoods, new dishwashers, and new distilled water distribution system. Even the tables have been designed with thoughtful attention to detail. Each table features a set of three arm-like projections that serve as individual workstations, which allows for individual movement and greater student-teacher interaction. “The setup is unique, and a lot better than the benches we had,” says Randy Curtiss, a biology instructor on the Willmar campus. “I have more accessibility as far as getting to each student.”

The new labs came at the perfect time for Ridgewater, which has long prided itself on the strength of its core science classes. Over the last several years, an influx of students in allied health, especially nursing, has made the updates critical. “It’s important to have modern facilities in order to teach at the quality we want to maintain,” Bessie says. “We wanted to expand our ability to serve our students and to continue as a state-of-the-art facility.”

So far, Bessie has only heard rave reviews. “People love them,” he says. “One instructor in Hutchinson said that the students seem to have a whole different view of and appreciation for what they’re studying.”

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Curtiss says a few past students have been so impressed that they want to return to school. “Some of the students who were in my class before the new labs have said they wish they could come back again,” he says.

Ridgewater students Sri Vidyas (left) and Janet Hugo at work in one of the new science labs.

School’s in for Summer

Ridgewater College reaches out to area middle-schoolers with its Summer Camp for Kids program.

They built robots out of Legos. They discovered the basics of news reporting. They took photos, designed newsletters, worked on a forensic science-related project, and learned the secrets of animal behavior.

In only one week’s time last summer, more than 100 middle school students learned something new at Ridgewater College’s Summer Camp for Kids. The camp, which began on the Willmar campus in 2004 and expanded to Hutchinson in 2005, invites students who have finished sixth, seventh, and eighth grades to campus for four days of classes in a collegiate setting.

“I was amazed at how engaged all the students were in all the different activities. The instructors connected well, and the students really loved what they were doing.”

—Susan Mattson, Summer Camp for Kids coordinator, Center for Customized Training and Continuing Education

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On the Move

The Minnesota Transfer Curriculum makes it easy to transfer credits between educational institutions.

By any measure, Ridgewater is an excellent choice for students looking for an educational experience that features a first-rate faculty, an environment where students are treated as more than numbers, and a price tag considerably lower than that of a four-year college. But that's not all. Another key aspect of the Ridgewater experience is the ability to easily transfer credits to a four-year institution.

Not all that long ago, students who wanted to transfer from a two-year college to a four-year college without completing a degree program found themselves struggling through the credit-transfer process. Not anymore. Thanks to an option known as the Minnesota Transfer Curriculum, students attending two-year institutions, including Ridgewater, can have credits transfer as a complete package.

No more guesswork

"Minnesota Transfer takes the guesswork out of transferring to another institution," says Betty Strehlow, vice president of Academic Affairs at Ridgewater. "It's a package of so very diverse, general education goal areas. By the time students have completed coursework in all 10 areas, they have completed a minimum of 40 credits that are guaranteed to transfer as a package to any public college or university in Minnesota."

Strehlow adds that any Ridgewater student who has earned an associate of arts degree also has completed the Minnesota Transfer Curriculum as part of that program. The curriculum is especially appealing for students who are not completing a two-year degree but who want to transfer to another college or university. In the past, courses transferred on a course-by-course basis, and students often found themselves retaking classes similar to those they already had completed—and losing time and money in the process.

"Students who only partially complete the curriculum but who complete individual goals—maybe completing three courses for nine credits in communication, for example—will find that goal area also will transfer," Strehlow says. "It's not an all-or-nothing deal."

The Big 10 Minnesota Transfer Curriculum Areas

- Written and oral communication
- Critical thinking
- Natural sciences
- Mathematics/symbolic systems
- History and the social and behavioral sciences
- The humanities—arts, literature, and philosophy
- Human diversity
- Global perspective
- Ethical and civic responsibility
- People and the environment.

We have about 1,100 applications for scholarships each year and award 300.

While most of the Foundation’s contributions go to fund student scholarships that range from $500 to $1,000, contributors also earmark donations to support specific programs. The Foundation recently raised $150,000—which was matched by community donations—to help establish two new nursing simulation centers, one on each campus (see “Intensive Care,” page 10).

"The biggest need is for unrestricted money that we could use to perhaps establish more minority or female scholarships or other new programs, and to help us handle emergency needs," says Mattison. "I recently heard about a student who needed a protective welding helmet, which costs $300. That was enough to make him quit school."

Community focus

Overseeing the Foundation’s operations is a 13-member board of directors, which Mattison describes as a “cross-section of the communities we serve.” Members include alumni and area business people, while ad hoc members represent faculty and staff.

Getting the Ridgewater story out to the public is an important focus for the Foundation, which developed Ridgewater Reflections. Through that program, college representatives, including students, provide monthly campus tours and information to supporters and potential supporters to create awareness of the college, its programs, and its needs. “People in the communities we serve realize the importance of having a college located in their area and how our students give back to those communities,” Mattison says. “It’s called economic development.”

For more information on the Ridgewater College Foundation, go to www.ridgewater.edu/college-foundation.

—Vicki Stavig
Intensive Care

Sooner or later, all of the nursing students at Ridgewater College will come face to face with Vital Sim Anne and Mega Code Kelly, a pair of regular patients. In the process, they’ll get to experience real-life scenarios that mirror the ones they’ll eventually encounter in hospitals, clinics, and other healthcare facilities.

On some days, Anne will be in cardiac arrest, taking abnormal breaths and showing no signs of circulation. Kelly will have been critically injured in an auto accident, and there will be bloody bandages to unwrap, open wounds to treat, and vital signs to record. Depending on the severity of their injuries, Ann and Kelly sometimes communicate with their nurses, offering clues as to the specifics of their conditions.

Annie, Kelly, and a few of their companions such as Sim Man and Sim Baby aren’t quite human. They are, in fact, disarming—life-like computer-activated mannequins that can be programmed to interact verbally with students. They have lung and heart sounds. They discharge blood and sputum. They realistically replicate hemorrhage situations. And they’re playing a key part in Ridgewater’s new state-of-the-art simulation centers on both the Willmar and Hutchinson campuses.

Created through partnerships with nine area healthcare organizations and with financial support from the Minnesota Job Skills Partnership, several foundations, and countless individuals, the simulation centers have become the heart and soul of the nursing program—one of the largest and fastest-growing programs at Ridgewater College. “The simulation centers provide us with a paradigm for teaching and learning that is dynamic and experiential in nature,” says Lynn Johnson, director of Ridgewater’s nursing program.

“Engaging learners in solving ‘real human’ issues and phenomena, and advancing their critical thinking, decision-making, and communication skills ultimately leads to a well-prepared workforce. And a well-prepared workforce leads to improved patient outcomes, improved worker satisfaction, and reduced worker turnover. Simulation is a strategy to provide quality, state-of-the-science learning experiences.”

In other words, it creates a class of nurses who have been there and done that before they enter a clinical setting. “We can offer them exposure to certain medical conditions that we can’t guarantee they’d see in a clinical training environment—and in a safe setting,” says Barb Peterson, a registered nurse (RN) and simulation specialist for Ridgewater College. “Not every student gets to put his or her hands on a defibrillator in a clinical, nor do they get the opportunity to simulate life-saving measures. Here, we can afford them the opportunity to begin to realize that these situations are very real possibilities.”

Terri Freitag, who started her second semester in the nursing program this fall, appreciates what she is learning. “It’s been a good experience,” she says. “[Interacting with the mannequins] gives you a much better idea of what you’re going to deal with in a hospital. And it gives you confidence for when you do go into your clinical—and it’s easier to identify normal sounds when you’ve already been able to hear them.”

But it’s not just students who have been able to benefit from the simulation centers. Many of the partnering organizations, including healthcare facilities in Willmar, Litchfield, Glencoe, Dassel, and Hutchinson, have taken advantage of the technology to sharpen their skills and provide professional development. Peggy Sietsema, chief nursing officer at Rice Hospital in Willmar, says her staff often uses the lab. “We use it for everything from training to competency checking to teamwork development,” she says. “We can develop scenarios of emergency codes and get a whole team of healthcare workers—not just the nurses, but the whole team—together to work on it.”

No matter who uses the simulation models, the outcome is the same: better understanding of patient care. “It gives us the permission to be creative, and allows us to re-create situations that students will likely run up against during their careers,” Peterson says. “It helps us put out better-prepared nurses. That’s what it’s all about.”

While Peterson is speaking about the simulation center, she could easily have been describing Ridgewater’s overall approach to healthcare education. Over the last several decades, the College’s innovative and forward-thinking healthcare education efforts are playing a vital role for its surrounding communities.
A willing workforce

A growing need for well-prepared nurses has helped forge the partnerships between the College and area hospitals, clinics, acute, and long-term care facilities. Although many parts of the country are already seeing severe shortages of nurses, the Midwest is still preparing for the worst of it. “The predictions are very dire,” Sietsema says. “It’s quite likely that we are going to see extreme nursing shortages here in the Midwest in the next few years. We will all be challenged to find good staff.”

The pipeline of Ridgewater nursing graduates will be an important part of the antidote to that shortage. In the program’s 20-year history, approximately 1,000 licensed practical nurses (LPNs) and 800 RNs have entered the workforce, and many have stayed in the area. “We know that greater than 80 percent of our graduates are going to stay within our immediate communities or within a 30- to 50-mile radius,” Johnson says. “Only a very small percentage move out of state.”

Pat Oss, director of nursing at Glen Oaks Care Center in New London, can speak from experience about how important Ridgewater nursing graduates are to her facility’s success. Right now, 13 of the 15 licensed RNs on staff at the 62-bed facility are from Ridgewater, Oss reports. That’s almost 90 percent of the nursing staff. And that doesn’t count the nursing assistants and LPNs who also studied at the College, or the staff members who have relied on Ridgewater for its continuing education opportunities.

Oss earned her associate’s degree in nursing from Ridgewater College in 1986, back when it was still Willmar Community College. She admits that she may be a bit biased about her alma mater, but that’s not the only reason she has such an affinity for fellow graduates. “They’re well prepared,” she says of the Ridgewater grads who come to work at Glen Oaks, a long-term care facility. “They’re quick to learn. They’re excellent nurses.”

Stacey Zondervan has had the same experience at the Family Practice Medical Center in Willmar. Zondervan, who earned her associate’s degree from Ridgewater in 1993 and is now the clinic’s patient services director, reports that 10 of the 14 LPNs and medical assistants on her staff are from Ridgewater. “Right now, as I look at potential employees and interview graduates from a number of facilities, it’s clear that Ridgewater graduates are well prepared and very professional,” she says. “They’re a top-notch group of students.”

The same scenario is repeated at other healthcare facilities throughout the region. From New London to Glencoe, Willmar to Hutchinson and beyond, graduates of Ridgewater College’s healthcare programs are making a significant impact on the quality of care in the area. Whether they are nurses, medical assistants, physical therapists, radiology technicians or, eventually, doctors, many of them help serve the area in which they were educated.
Experienced, Knowledgeable, Dedicated Accountants.
And, We’re Ridgewater College Graduates.

“Many of them are from this region and are interested in staying in this region,” says Sietsema. “That is good for all of us.”

Charting the path
Ridgewater College’s healthcare programs, from the pre-med course of study that prepares students for transfer to the University of Minnesota to the Nursing Pathway program that offers a flexible curriculum with an array of career choice options, are almost universally based upon a solid core of science classes. And those biology, chemistry, and physics courses recently got a shot in the arm, thanks to a major renovation and expansion of the labs on both the Willmar and Hutchinson campuses. The students appreciate those sorts of investments in their education, along with the efforts and focus of faculty members. “I appreciate the way the instructors treat the students,” says Freitag. “The classes are small, and the instructors know us all by name. We’re almost like a family.”

Angie Wunsch, a first-year nursing student at Ridgewater’s Hutchinson campus, appreciates that camaraderie as well. “One reason I enjoy it so much here is because I’m with such a good group of students,” she says. “Everyone seems to care about being good nurses. We all get along very well.”

Freitag and Wunsch are among the first students taking part in the Nursing Pathway program. After the first year in the program, students have three options. They can choose to exit and take the licensure examination to become an LPN and work as an LPN while progressing into year two, or they can choose to move directly between year one and year two. At the completion of year two, they are eligible to take the licensure examination for registered nurse and become an RN. LPNs currently working can advance their education to become an RN by entering year two. At the end of the program they also are eligible for licensure as an RN.

“We’ve really responded to the need for nurses by changing our program with a total curriculum redesign,” Johnson explains. “We have had more and more students who want these types of options, so we created this pathway which allows them to move more cost effectively and time efficiently through the program. We’re also stepping up to meet the needs of the healthcare industry."

Although both Freitag and Wunsch plan to continue in the program until graduating with associate’s degrees, they appreciate the opportunities and the variety of options it offers. “Going to become a nursing assistant or a home health aide gives students a solid opportunity to have a good-paying job to help fund college as they continue through the program,” Wunsch says.

Freitag, who will be ready to take her licensure exam to become an RN in December 2006, says she started on the Nursing Pathway because she had a passion for helping others. “I chose nursing because I wanted a career where I would be helping other people,” she says. “I thought it would be rewarding.”

Johnson reports that LPN and RN graduates have a virtually 100 percent placement rate—and a large proportion of those choose to work at Hutchinson-
Willmar-area hospitals, clinics, and long-term care facilities. Freitag, who hails from nearby Danube, is among those who hopes to find work nearby when she graduates. “I would very much like to stay close to the area,” she says.

**Next steps**

Graduation is rarely the end of the story, however. Not only do Ridgewater students often come back to their alma mater for further licensure—LPN grads, for example, return to earn their associate’s degree and become RNs—but many students decide to advance their studies even further. Wunsch, who is currently working towards her associate’s degree, plans to enroll at Winona State University as soon as she graduates from Ridgewater. “I’ve known all along that that is what I want to do,” she says. “Starting here helped me get started in that direction, and it’s less expensive too.”

Some former students even come back to serve as faculty at the college. “We have a good handful of faculty who started in our program,” Johnson says. “Many of them have advanced on and are either working on their master’s degrees or already have them.”

Julie Buntjer, who first graduated as an LPN from Ridgewater in 1980 and later returned for her associate’s degree, is now a full-time faculty member. After earning her bachelor of science degree from Graceland University in Independence, Mo., she’s now taking graduate courses as well. She hopes that her commitment to continued education will rub off on the students she works with every day. “It’s good for them to have role models,” Buntjer says. “And it helps me understand them too. Since I’m still in school, I can empathize with what they are dealing with, and at the same time show them that it’s possible to continue your education at different points. If I’m committed to their education, I need to be committed to continuing my education as well. The more I learn and grow, the more I can bring back to the program.”

Freitag appreciates having alums leading classroom discussions and clinical lessons. “They seem to understand the perspective we’re coming from,” she says. “They understand that it takes a lot of work, and they’re willing to help us with that.”

**Community effort**

Rice Hospital’s Sietsema, who says that “a significant proportion” of her nurses have had some relationship with Ridgewater, says that the College has a long history of giving back to the communities it serves. And there’s more to that payback than the graduates it provides. There is, for example, the availability of continuing education for her staff and the ability to collaborate on learning experiences and simulation projects. And there’s the ongoing relationship between her staff and students that benefits both parties equally. “It’s good for our staff to work with these students,” she says. “They’re constantly challenged to make sure they themselves are current.”

Oss feels much the same way. She knows that Glen Oakas—as well as all the other healthcare facilities in the area—are blessed to have a partner like Ridgewater. “We have excellent care here on all levels,” she says. “Ridgewater has a lot to do with that.”

Sara Gilbert is a Mankato-based freelance writer.
The prescription for survival as a company is to offer educational opportunities to learn and grow and advance in one's industry.

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