



Dr. Stephen R. Briggs

# Strengthening the communities of tomorrow



**DESPITE OUR POLITICAL DIFFERENCES** and the heat of this presidential-election season, many Americans will agree that our nation's health care system is gravely ill. Although we may be satisfied with the care we receive personally from our

local doctors and medical community, we also know that the system itself needs to change. We cannot sustain the escalating health care expenditures of the last two decades, and we cannot be content with a system that neglects the basic health needs of many citizens.

Insurance premiums have escalated rapidly, in part because more than 20 percent of adult Americans have no insurance and often no means to pay for preventive or acute medical services. The uninsured have limited options for care, which leads to increased use of high-cost resources such as emergency rooms, the cost of which is passed on to the health care system at large. Aging baby boomers are worried about affording quality health care through their retirement years.

Long-term data collected by the international Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) shows that Americans pay significantly more for health care on average than people in other developed nations. For example, more than twice as much per capita was spent on health care in the United States in 2008 than in 14 other developed nations (\$7,538 versus \$3,665). Yet, we have below-average outcomes with regard to life expectancy (calculated at birth or at age 65), infant mortality and other key health indicators. We are also below average per capita in terms of the number of doctors, nurses, acute-care hospital beds and consultations.

## CONTRIBUTING TO THE SOLUTION

There are no easy cures for systemic ailments of this sort, but this is the world

that Berry graduates are entering. Part of Berry's responsibility, therefore, is to prepare our graduates to grasp the complexity of these problems and serve as leaders who help identify and implement effective solutions. From its founding, Berry has taken to heart its obligation to meet the pressing needs of society, especially as these needs are manifested in the local communities of our region.

Consider, for example, Berry's commitment to service in the area of education. For decades, the college has sought to prepare teachers who understand and embrace the need to make a difference in two different spheres. Certainly, we want Berry teachers to excel in the classroom as they guide and inspire individual students with competence and enthusiasm. It is just as important, however, that they accept responsibility (or ownership) for the quality of their schools and districts. Berry graduates should strive to improve and transform the places where they live and work.

As we look to the years ahead, it makes sense for Berry to focus its attention and resources in areas for which the college has practical opportunities and special assets. We believe that health care is one such area given the quality and importance of the health care industry in the Rome area. Berry already has a strong record in preparing students for graduate programs in such fields as medicine, psychology, pharmacy, physical therapy, dentistry and veterinary medicine. In coming years, however, we anticipate a growing need for and dependence on baccalaureate-prepared nurses as part of the structural solution for our health care system.

We believe that nurses will play a significant, front-line role in a reformed health care system, serving as an initial point



Alan Storey

Lauren Franke (above) and Patrick Frantz (top right), students in Berry's current five-year dual degree nursing program with Emory, will help meet a pressing need as liberal-arts educated nurses. Berry plans a new Bachelor of Science in Nursing (B.S.N.) program that will enable nursing students to stay at Berry and graduate in four years.



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of access and as the primary educator for patients. For that reason, Berry recently announced its intention to seek approval from the Georgia Board of Nursing to offer a Bachelor of Science in Nursing (B.S.N.) program beginning in 2013.

#### EDUCATING NURSES

The federal Health Resources and Services Administration estimates that without deliberate action Georgia alone faces a looming shortage of nearly 40,000 registered nurses by 2020. National numbers are even more staggering with retirement, attrition and low growth in the number of new nurses predicted to produce a nationwide shortage in excess of a million RNs by the end of the decade, with all 50 states affected.

Yet, these figures capture just one part of the problem. If nurses are to negotiate, improve and effectively manage our increasingly complex health care system, experts cite the need for a comprehensive college education. Nurses need the advanced analytical, communication, problem-solving and decision-making skills associated with a strong liberal arts education. In 2010, the Institute of Medicine released a landmark report on *The Future of Nursing* that calls for increasing the number of baccalaureate-prepared nurses to 80 percent of all RNs and for doubling the population of nurses with doctoral degrees. Both Georgia and the nation fall far short of these targets; the northwest region of Georgia has a nursing workforce prepared predominately at the associate degree level.

Berry College's planned nursing program will build on the strengths of our strong

curriculum in the sciences, social sciences and humanities. Berry nursing students will study the complexities of the social, economic and political systems in which we live as well as the complexities of the biochemical systems by which we live. All RNs must master the core knowledge and clinical skills necessary to provide competent care.

Because the overriding aim of our program will be to graduate nurses with the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to improve the quality and safety of the health care systems within which they work, the curriculum will emphasize interdisciplinary teamwork and the use of evidence to improve practice. We also intend our program to focus on emerging needs, preparing nurses to lead in areas such as health care informatics, cancer care, gerontology and community health promotion. Finally, we expect to include special experiences in cross-cultural service settings to foster spiritual growth and in keeping with Berry's "head, heart and hands" approach to education.

Strong emphasis will be placed on preparing nurses for advanced degrees. Such a focus is critical because efforts to increase the numbers of RNs at all levels are severely hampered by a shortage of advanced-degreed nurses in the role of nurse-educator. More than 75,500 qualified applicants to professional nursing programs were turned away in the U.S. in 2011, according to the American Association of Colleges of Nursing, many because of a lack of nursing faculty. It is in this area that I believe Berry can make the greatest contribution to a long-term solution to the nursing shortage. The

numbers of our nursing graduates who go on to graduate programs will become a central measurement of our success.

#### PROCESS AND PARTNERS

We will begin developing our nursing program at full speed as soon as approval is received from the state board. We are asking for an accelerated implementation timeline and plan to make key administrative and faculty appointments as early as this summer. Our hope is to accept applications for the first nursing class in the fall semester and to begin classes either in January or August of 2013. Our goal is to graduate 30 to 40 students per class.

Berry is honored to enjoy strong relationships with Northwest Georgia health care providers, many of whom have already pledged clinical training sites for our students. Because we will be committed to educating nurses prepared to serve in both acute-care and community settings, clinical training sites are being developed with home care, cancer center and hospice providers as well as with the local hospitals. Health care is the largest industry in Floyd County, and we are blessed to have exceptional expertise locally in many of the areas in which the need for nurse proficiency will continue to grow.

#### PRACTICING THE LIBERAL ARTS AND SCIENCES

Berry was founded 110 years ago in response to pressing local needs. The world has changed in dramatic ways, but there are still pressing needs in every direction. A liberal arts education should prepare us to tackle these problems by helping us to analyze the systems that we take for granted – those into which we are born. We can offer such critical thinking and analytical skills to nursing graduates. They can, in turn, apply these important aptitudes where they live and work – for the benefit of their patients and our ailing health care system.

We continue to find wisdom in Martha Berry's approach of combining a challenging intellectual education with meaningful practical experiences as a way of preparing students to serve and strengthen the communities of tomorrow. A nursing program is a natural fit for Berry and a fitting complement to our continuing commitment to the liberal arts and sciences. **B**