

Louisiana Catholic university graduates nurses early to meet COVID-19 needs

BATON ROUGE, La. (CNS) – Amid the ongoing coronavirus pandemic and a shortage of nurses and other health care workers to treat patients with COVID-19, a Catholic university in Baton Rouge has been graduating nursing students early and accelerating its respiratory therapy program for seniors.

Madison Hurst, a Franciscan Missionaries of Our Lady University nursing student who graduated early, said what she looked forward to most is being able to make a difference and serve her community.

“I am excited for the chance to make a difference in people’s lives, but I know many of my patients will make a difference in my own life,” said Hurst, who graduated Nov. 14 and now has a job at Baton Rouge General.

“I am thankful to have chosen a career that will provide me with opportunities of lifelong learning and growth. Becoming a nurse is tough, but I know it will be so rewarding and all of our hard work will be worth it,” added Hurst, who is from Louisiana.

Amy Hall, dean of the School of Nursing, said that when the fall semester was being planned, school officials anticipated there would be another spike in COVID-19 cases, so the students started taking their clinical course early and completed all their clinical hours by Labor Day.

Since the students started early, they finished all of their coursework early.

“Because of their experience in the spring, I think they were

eager to get started with their clinical experiences early. They wanted to be able to graduate on time," she said. "They are excited about it – in fact, they are the impetus for it – they came to us asking if they could graduate early and agreed to have their didactic courses taught in a compressed amount of time so they could finish early."

The program is the only one in Louisiana to graduate students early to help with the pandemic, according to a news release from the university.

"This is such a monumental time in their lives," Hall said about the recent nursing graduates. They left well-prepared "to care for their patients," she added. "I can't wait to see what they accomplish in the future."

Lindsey Fruge and Peyton Durnning also were among the early nursing school graduates at FranU, as the university is popularly known. Like Hurst, both are from Louisiana and they too already have jobs.

Fruge, who will be working at Our Lady of the Lake Regional Medical Center in Baton Rouge, said the university not only prepared her academically but also emotionally and spiritually.

"FranU's staff leads by example and always puts their students' needs first," she said.

She praised the clinical training portion of the nursing curriculum, noting that for graduation, the school requires each student spend 144 hours in a clinical setting working alongside a registered nurse.

This practical experience and training in their last semester, she explained, is where "the academic portion and skills portion of the curriculum come together, and critical thinking is developed."

Durnning said she was eager to help alleviate the country's current nursing shortage. She'll be working at Ochsner Medical Center-Kenner in Louisiana.

"The nursing shortage has been a growing issue in our profession and is rapidly intensifying," she said. "I am ready to join my fellow colleagues and attempt to combat the nursing shortage to provide a higher quality of patient care."

Besides nursing students graduating early, FranU also graduated 11 students early with bachelor of science degrees in respiratory therapy. They are trained to manage ventilators and provide respiratory care to patients, especially those with COVID-19, which attacks the lungs and respiratory system.

About 5% of those with COVID-19 cannot sustain normal respiratory function and need to have a breathing tube inserted into their airway.

"Respiratory therapists determine the appropriate ventilator settings to match the patient's respiratory needs," the university noted. "From that point, they provide constant monitoring and assessment and modify the setting as the patient's condition improves or worsens."

Franciscan Missionaries of Our Lady University's regularly scheduled graduation will take place Dec. 12 with an outside ceremony for over 70 students who have earned bachelor's degrees in various academic programs, including arts and sciences, nursing and other health professions.