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Saint Leo University Bachelor's in Nursing Receives National Accreditation

Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education accreditation 'real testament to the quality and dedication behind what we do.'

ST. LEO, FL – Soon after celebrating the graduation of its first nursing students on May 7, Saint Leo University reached another nursing milestone. The Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education (CCNE) on May 28 accredited the Bachelor of Science in Nursing Degree Program. The accreditation was effective as of November 2024, CCNE stated.

Saint Leo began development of its nursing degree in 2019, striving to create a nursing program that not only meets the requirements of nursing education, but also creates new nurses who are caring and well-prepared to meet the challenges of the field.

"The focus of program development was on assuring that the highest nursing education standards were addressed," said Dr. Kathleen Van Eerden, dean of the College of Health Professions. "The Florida Board of Nursing requirements and the CCNE accreditation standards were incorporated in Saint Leo's program."

Accreditation is a peer review process in which nursing experts conduct an on-site evaluation completed by CCNE representatives, Van Eerden said. The site evaluation is comprehensive over several days. "During the visit, the evaluation team reviewed hundreds of materials, including a detailed self-study document prepared by the faculty, and met with nursing faculty, students, administrators, support staff, and community representatives. The evaluation team then completed a written report which was shared with the program and with CCNE whose board does further review and renders a decision. The Saint Leo University BS in Nursing Program received the maximum allowable accreditation term of five years."

Dr. Debra Peterson, chair of Saint Leo's Nursing Program, said she views the CCNE accreditation as "a real testament to the quality and dedication behind what we do. It shows that our BSN program meets high national standards, not just in academics, but in how we support our students and continually strive for excellence."

For Peterson, the accreditation means much more. "On a personal level, this accreditation reinforces the responsibility to make sure our students receive the best education possible," she said. "It reflects the hard work and dedication of our faculty and confirms that we're preparing nursing graduates to meet the real-world demands of health care."

"Above all, I'm proud that our program reflects Saint Leo University's core values such as excellence, integrity, and community by preparing nurses who are compassionate and respectful, and who confidently apply their clinical judgment and expertise to lead in the nursing profession and make a real difference in people's lives," Peterson continued.

Filling the Need

The demand for registered nurses increased during and following the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, making Saint Leo's program even more needed in the state of Florida and nation. Data from the Florida Hospital Association shows Florida is experiencing a shortage of nurses and projects a deficit of about 59,000 by 2035 while the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts the country will need more than 200,000 registered nurses from now through 2031.

After developing its nursing degree, Saint Leo in 2021 enrolled its first students in its pre-nursing program. In fall 2023, following successful completion of their college courses with a 3.3 GPA and passing the standardized ATI Test of Essential Academic Skills, the now-juniors started their core nursing classes. They began their hands-on learning, practicing their skills in simulation labs and a clinical setting at Blue Heron Senior Living in nearby Wesley Chapel, FL.

In Spring 2024, Saint Leo partnered with AdventHealth Zephyrhills and later with AdventHealth Dade City for an innovative learning experience — a Dedicated Education Unit. The DEU provides nurse-mentors at the AdventHealth hospitals for the university's nursing students. They began clinical rotations with their preceptors/mentors, working 12-hour shifts side-by-side, with Saint Leo nursing faculty member Paige Porter on site, providing instruction and guidance. The goal was to give the students hands-on clinical experience and train possible future AdventHealth employees.

For Laynee Marsee, one of Saint Leo's first nursing graduates, the DEU experience was invaluable. "The DEU at AdventHealth gave us the opportunity to follow a nurse, who matched our learning styles, throughout our clinical experience," Marsee said. "It allowed us to really understand what goes on in a full 12-hour shift and what nursing is really all about. For me, the most important part of the DEU was being able to put what I've learned into practice. Practicing on a mannikin is nice for understanding the process of the skills learned but doing them on an actual person builds our confidence in our skills and helps us to fully understand how the skills are incorporated into practice."

Building on Success

Saint Leo's nursing program gained its own dedicated floor when the second floor of Benedictine Hall was renovated to create a state-of-the-art simulation and learning space. A grand opening took place in February to showcase the high-tech nursing classrooms and simulated clinical settings that provide immersive learning environments.

State funding as well as private donations helped build the nursing program and pay for renovation costs as well as equipment, hiring of faculty and staff, and other needs.

John Picciano, a Saint Leo University trustee *emeritus* and member of the Class of 1969, donated more than \$750,000 to the university's Bachelor of Science in nursing program and to help with construction of the new nursing floor. The program also received support from other generous donors and \$740,000 from the Florida Legislature in its 2023-2024 budget.

"Nursing changes the lives of others, and I hope others will support Saint Leo's program, help it to grow, innovate, and graduate caring and competent nurses," said Picciano, who is the CEO of Oglethorpe Inc.

What's Next

The first cohort of nursing students graduated May 7, with many of them already accepting positions or having offers locally at AdventHealth, Lakeland Regional Health, Tampa General Hospital, Moffit Cancer Center, and BayCare health care facilities. "This cohort brought something truly special to our program — an energy rooted in excellence, compassion, and connection," said Porter, Saint Leo nursing instructor. "Their impact will continue to echo through the halls of this program, influencing and inspiring future cohorts for years to come."

And more pre-nursing students are on their way with more than 100 incoming first-year students set to attend in Fall 2025, Van Eerden said, which is a record number to date of enrollees in the program.

The university also is continuing its Nursing Housing Award for 2025-2026, which offers an annual financial aid award of \$7,680 to cover on-campus housing costs. In 2024-2025, nursing students used that award and were part of a Nursing Living Learning Community in one of the residence halls. In 2025-2026, "There are plans to offer two Nursing Living Learning Communities in the residence halls," Van Eerden said.

In addition to its current health care partners such as AdventHealth Zephyrhills and Dade City, BayCare, and Gulfside Healthcare Services, the program also plans to join with other entities to train Saint Leo's nursing students as well as provide care for patients in the surrounding communities.

"The program is continuing to grow, and we are engaged in ongoing expansion of our health care organization relationships," Van Eerden said.

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Photo cutlines

At the February 2025 grand opening of Saint Leo University's nursing floor, student Samantha Chapman explains the IV lab during a tour.

In March 2024, AdventHealth Zephyrhills nurse preceptor Bianca Cook shows Saint Leo student Grace Lundfeldt a patient's chart. Lundfeldt of Land O' Lakes, graduated in May and will work for AdventHealth Zephyrhills in the emergency department.

Emily Edwards, Laynee Marsee, Brenna Reinhard, and Emma Hayhurst at AdventHealth Zephyrhills during Spring 2024 at AdventHealth Zephyrhills.

About Saint Leo University

Saint Leo University is a Catholic Benedictine university dedicated to helping learners of all backgrounds and ages gain the competence and courage to be more. Offering more than 55 degree programs to more than 13,000 students each year, the nonprofit university is known for providing a values-based education in the liberal arts tradition and a community of belonging for those who seek a greater purpose in life. Saint Leo is regionally accredited and offers a campus

in the Tampa Bay area of Florida, regional education centers, and several online programs. The university is home to more than 106,000 alumni. Learn more at saintleo.edu.

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