

Telehealth certificate at HSU strengthens rural health care

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As Hardin-Simmons University put together the new nursing school, the university saw an opportunity to address lack of access to medical care across rural West Texas by adding a telehealth certificate.

Access to timely, quality health care has become an urgent topic of discussion in the region—where geographic isolation, provider shortages and limited transportation continue to create barriers that leave many communities underserved.

National statistics underscore the seriousness of the issue. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, nearly 20 percent of Americans live in rural areas, where they face disproportionately higher health risks.

Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention also shows unintentional injury death rates are about 50 percent higher in rural areas compared to urban settings—often due to motor vehicle accidents, falls and opioid overdoses.

But rooted in a Christ-centered mission and a deep commitment to health equity, faculty at Hardin-Simmons University viewed these realities not as limitations, but as opportunities to innovate.

In designing the new on-campus nursing curriculum, advising faculty devised a telehealth certificate to prepare students to deliver care to those who need it most, no matter the distance.

Technological shifts in nursing

Whether across town, across the state or through a screen, HSU Nursing is blending foundational clinical training with digital communication and virtual care skills.

These changes give future caregivers tools to have a meaningful edge in today's health care workforce.

"Telehealth is no longer a niche offering—it's a core competency," said Katie Martin, instructor of nursing and simulation lab coordinator.

"Especially in areas like ours, where Abilene is seen as the medical hub for the 16-county labor shed. We want our students to graduate knowing how to serve those patients confidently and compassionately, no matter the setting."

Rather than limiting telehealth training to one course, the HSU nursing faculty embedded it throughout the curriculum.

Students begin learning virtual care techniques early in their studies and continue refining those skills through simulations, clinical placements and real-world practice.

"From early on in the program, our students are introduced to telehealth concepts," Martin explained. "They learn how to conduct virtual assessments, document care digitally, navigate patient privacy laws, and build rapport through a screen."

"These are essential, everyday skills now," she noted.

Martin also highlighted the intentional integration of specialized modules into the program.

"Students don't just get one certificate. They will graduate with multiple

certificates earned through integrated online training modules in various areas of study, such as rural health, mental health, and chronic disease management,” she said.

“These online modules mirror what’s happening in the field and allow our students to graduate with multiple telehealth credentials that speak directly to what employers are looking for.”

Martin explained national nursing education standards are shifting toward digital fluency and remote care readiness. Hardin-Simmons’ new nursing program prepares students to meet the changing expectations.

“Employers are seeking nurses who are not only clinically competent but also tech-savvy,” Martin said.

“Clinical partners have expressed strong support for integrating telehealth training, emphasizing that it directly addresses gaps they’re seeing in current nursing applicants.”

HSU’s telehealth program has a sound curriculum, but also benefits from the university’s partnerships with local hospitals, clinics and rural healthcare providers.

These collaborations bring classroom training to life.

“Our strong partnerships with healthcare providers like Hendrick Health allow students to see how telehealth is used in both acute and community settings. These real-world connections help reinforce classroom learning with hands-on experience,” Martin explained.

Looking ahead, HSU remains committed to keeping its program on the cutting edge.

“From hospital follow-ups to rural urgent care, HSU is staying ahead by ensuring our curriculum evolves with the field, preparing students not just

for today's health care, but for tomorrow's innovation," Martin said.