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## It's just what the doctor ordered

### UWF school takes aim at health-care industry

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A new school at the University of West Florida should help the regional health-care industry by creating more educational opportunities.

This fall, the recently created School of Allied Health and Life Sciences will join forces with high schools in Escambia, Santa Rosa and Okaloosa counties to get students thinking sooner about health-care and life-science careers in the Panhandle.

Director George Stewart said collaboration between Pensacola Junior College and Okaloosa Walton College will help build a bridge from high school graduation to university enrollment. Getting students planning during their high school days can trim up to a year -- and thousands of dollars -- off health-care degrees, he said.

"We're laying these pathways so students can follow right into what they want to do," he said.

Stewart said the push to bump up student interest is a result of recent and upcoming demands in the health-related job market.

That job-market increase, along with the steady growth of the Pensacola Bay Area's health-care providers, has local business leaders convinced the life-sciences sector is the best hope for generating a new wave of high-paying, sustainable jobs.

Recognizing the impact potential, Gulf Power Co. has formed the Northwest Florida Life Sciences Council. The group was organized to present a unified marketing and recruitment approach to attract new life science companies to Escambia and Santa Rosa counties and the Panhandle.

John Hutchinson, Gulf Power Co. spokesman, said the university's expansion is part of other life-science advancements in the two-county area, including the

Andrews Institute for Orthopaedics & Sports Medicine in Gulf Breeze, the Florida Institute for Human and Machine Cognition in Pensacola and Trinity DNA Solutions in Milton.

"We want to establish Northwest Florida as a center of excellence for life sciences," Hutchinson said. "Whether we're talking about health-care delivery or research or pharmaceuticals, we want to take what we have and build on it."

Physician Pierre Barkhuizen, an Allied Health school director, said Northwest Florida must build quickly to fill health-care industry gaps.

About 700 registered nursing positions are expected to open up in Escambia and Santa Rosa counties by 2013.

And within the next five years, retirement will claim about half of the public health work force in the Panhandle, he said.

"This is a reality we must face," Barkhuizen said. "We have to ask, 'Who is going to hold these spots?'"

Stewart said the Allied Health program opens doors to careers in physical therapy, occupational therapy, nursing and disease control, among others.

The school includes undergraduate programs in health sciences, nursing and clinical laboratory sciences, along with graduate programs in public health and health communication.

Upcoming additions include a master of science in nursing and a certificate in geriatric nursing, Stewart said. In conjunction with the University of Florida, UWF also will offer a doctorate program in nursing beginning this fall. The two schools also have plans to establish a doctor of pharmacy program.