The history of the OHSU School of Nursing parallels the direction of the nursing profession itself, with a century’s worth of consistent growth and development. The roots of the school can be traced to Multnomah County Training School, which admitted its first students in 1909 and was one of the early 20th century hospital-based training schools for nurses in Oregon. In the summer of 1919, the University of Oregon introduced the state’s first professional courses in public health nursing at the Portland School of Social Work. These programs both came under a unified system of university control in 1932, under the Department of Nursing Education at University of Oregon Medical School.

The University of Oregon introduced a five-year Bachelor of Science program with a major in Nursing in 1926, which was accelerated to a four-year program during World War II. The school received official recognition as the UOMS School of Nursing in 1960. The school also expanded its regional reach in 1979 with programs in La Grande, followed in later years by campuses in Ashland, Klamath Falls and Monmouth.

The Portland campus of the school moved into its own building on Marquam Hill in 1992, reflecting its role as a major center for teaching, research, and collaboration.
At the turn of the 20th century, editorials such as “The Trained Nurse and Her Position,” which appeared in a 1901 issue of Journal of the American Medical Association, cautioned physicians that “over-trained nurses” graduating from hospital training schools sometimes forgot their role as a “purely ancillary one” to the medical profession, and threatened to “injure their usefulness by self-overvaluation.” Over a century later, the remarkable growth of specialization and research at the School of Nursing reflects the incredible expansion of the role of the nursing profession.

With the introduction of the Master of Science in Nursing Education in 1947, more baccalaureate-prepared nurses were able to continue their education to instruct future generations of professionals. The professional concept of the nurse further developed in the 1960s and 1970s, and the school introduced its Master of Nursing program in 1971. Incoming graduate students in the 1980s were able to choose from an increasing range of programs, including nurse-midwifery, family nursing, psychiatric mental health nursing, and community health care systems. Advanced practice nursing had arrived.

The admission of the school’s first PhD students in 1985 and the addition of the Doctor of Nursing Practice program in 2007 cemented the school’s commitment to training quality healthcare practitioners and researchers.
Student life and social activities

For much of the school’s history, student nurses lived on campus. Until 1926 when the first nurses’ residence was built, student nurses lived on the third floor of the hospital itself. Through the 1960s, students could only opt to move out of the residence halls if they were 21 years old, married, or made a case for cheaper living arrangements elsewhere (such as with family). As a result, student nurses lived, studied and worked alongside one another, fostering a sense of camaraderie and cohesion among cohorts.

Student activities such as the nursing honor society Alpha Tau Delta, seasonal events, and talent shows provided much-needed social outlets for busy students. Starting with The Pylon in 1939 and continuing with The Lamp, the school’s yearbooks document the many clinical experiences, social outings, recreational activities, and hijinks of each class.

The celebrated tradition of the annual School Wassail began after World War II as a way for the school to celebrate the winter holidays with students and to give thanks to the community of the nursing school. A special Wassail spiced cider recipe was created by faculty member Eva Davis and closely guarded for the occasion. After a hiatus in the 1970s and 1980s, the Wassail tradition was revived in 1993 by the Alumni Association.
The student nurse uniform

The 1946 student handbook declared, “The nurse’s uniform is the symbol of the profession and its significance should never be forgotten by the student wearing it.” The respect commanded by the nurse’s uniform made a lasting impression on generations of nursing students stretching to the earliest days of the school. Incoming probationary students to the Multnomah Training School in 1910 were instructed to bring several dresses of gingham or calico and their own white aprons and shoes. Only after their initial probationary period were the students allowed to don the official student nurse uniform of the school.

The nursing cap also held a prominent place in both the student uniform and the popular imagination. Each school had its own style of cap, often with elaborate folds, and through the mid-20th century one could identify the school attended by a student or graduate nurse by her cap style.

Before the 1960s, student nurses turned their uniforms in to the hospital laundry on Marquam Hill for washing and starching. These care-intensive uniforms were replaced by wash and wear synthetics in the 1960s. With the arrival in the 1970s of pantsuits, the precursor to contemporary scrubs, female students were afforded the same comfortable and easy to care for uniforms that male students already enjoyed.
1920: The Portland School of Social Work offers its first public health nursing courses.

1910: Multnomah County Training School opens.

1932: The Portland School of Social Work and Multnomah County Training School curricula are transferred to the UOMS Department of Nursing Education.

1919: University of Oregon offers its first courses in nursing.

1947: First Master of Science in Nursing education program is offered, thanks to a grant from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation.

1942-1945: During WWII, baccalaureate program is accelerated to 4 year program to meet demand.

1926: University of Oregon introduces a five-year Bachelor of Science in Nursing program.
1974: The University of Oregon School of Nursing, Dental School and Medical School are united as a single institution, the University of Oregon Health Sciences Center (later reorganized as OHSU in 1981).

1979: Undergraduate degree programs expanded to La Grande, Oregon, in order to provide the Eastern region of the state with baccalaureate prepared nurses.

1971: The school’s first Master of Nursing program is offered.

1960: Oregon State Board of Higher Education approves the expansion of UOMS Department of Nursing Ed to UOMS School of Nursing.

1990s: The Oregon Master of Public Health Program is developed and offered through Oregon Health and Science University, Oregon State University, and Portland State University.

2007: Doctor of Nursing Practice program is first offered at SON.
With thanks to the School of Nursing Archive Committee
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OHSU Historical Collections & Archives

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