

*Editorial***WANTED! NURSING EDUCATORS**

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For a number of years, we have been speaking about the nursing shortage and the dramatic impact this shortage will have on health care outcomes for the United States healthcare system. The nursing shortage is especially problematic in the rural areas of our country where this shortage affects not only access to health care but quality outcomes for vulnerable rural populations. The thoroughly acknowledged nursing shortage is compounded by the shortage of faculty to teach nursing. Even in areas where nursing applications to schools of nursing have increased, students are unable to gain admission because there is simply not enough faculty to teach those nursing students.

Currently, there are approximately 3,500 nursing programs (practical nurse, associate degree, diploma, baccalaureate, master's, and doctoral), "housed" in nearly 2,500 schools of nursing. These schools enroll a total of approximately 300,000 students. With the projected "shortfall" of nurses to meet the health care needs of our increasingly diverse and aging population, schools may need to increase their enrollments by as much as one-third to "fill the gap," bringing the ideal number of enrolled students close to 400,000. Using a ratio of 10:1 (students: full-time faculty member), the number of full-time faculty required to teach those 400,000 students enrolled in today's 3,500 programs may be as high as 40,000. Current data suggest we now have less than 50% of that number, and the supply of individuals available to meet this demand is shrinking rapidly as the result of three phenomena: the retirement of large numbers of faculty (many of whom were prepared as educators), the limited number of graduate programs that offer options to specialize in nursing education, and the declining enrollments in graduate programs that are designed to prepare nurse educators (NLN, 2006).

To ensure an adequate supply of competent nurse educators, the National League for Nursing (NLN, 2006) strongly urges the nursing education community to engage in an immediate and focused effort to provide increased opportunities in graduate programs to prepare faculty and to provide greater support for faculty development activities. NLN also strongly advocates that careers in nursing education be promoted vigorously to talented neophytes and experienced nurses who have already demonstrated nurse educator skills, and that funding to support the preparation of nurse educators and the development of the science of nursing education be increased significantly. In light of the looming crisis in the supply of faculty to teach in schools of nursing, the time has come for the nursing profession to outline a preferred future for the preparation of nurse educators. This crisis must be used as an opportunity to recruit qualified individuals to the educator role, to ensure that these individuals are appropriately prepared for the responsibilities they will assume as faculty and staff development educators, and to implement strategies that will serve to retain a qualified nurse educator workforce (NLN, 2006).

NLN (2006) further asserts that the nurse educator role requires specialized preparation and every individual engaged in the academic enterprise must be prepared to

implement that role successfully. In addition, each academic unit in nursing must have a cadre of experts in nursing education who provide the leadership needed to advance nursing education, conduct pedagogical research, and contribute to the ongoing development of the science of nursing education.

The nursing shortage is already having a profound effect on rural areas in terms of health care. The nursing faculty shortage will also have an effect on our rural based LPN and RN educational programs which act as feeders for rural health care agencies. Therefore, this crisis caused by decreasing numbers of faculty is special cause for concern for our rural and frontier supply of nurses. What can we do? The time has come to encourage our best and brightest to consider a career as a nursing educator. We need to provide financial support and good access to programs that prepare nurses as faculty. We as a profession need to realize that nursing surely needs folks at the bedside but we also need them in administration, in research and most certainly in nursing education.