That there is a shortage of nurses in the United States today should surprise no one. The scope of the current shortage of nurses at the bedside is well documented. In a recent article in Health Affairs, Auerbach, Buerhaus and Staiger (2007) estimated that by the year 2020 the shortage of nurses in the United States may well reach 340,000. The American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) cited a 2007 report from the American Hospital Association describing a national registered nurse vacancy rate of 8.1% amounting to 116,000 unfilled positions (American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2008a). Failure to solve the shortage may have dire consequences for the people who entrust themselves to us for healthcare. Articles in the Journal of Advanced Nursing, New England Journal of Medicine and the Journal of the American Medical Association consistently cite the need for a staffing mix with a sufficient proportion of registered nurses to ensure better patient outcomes (Aiken, Clarke, Cheung, Sloane, & Silber, 2003; Tourangeau et al.; Friese, Lake, Aiken, Silber, & Sochalski, 2008). Yet the percentage of nurses with a baccalaureate degree remains well below that of graduates of associate degree programs.

Exacerbating the nursing shortage is the concurrent shortage of faculty at our nursing schools. Over 42,000 qualified applicants were denied entry into baccalaureate and graduate nursing programs in 2006 because of insufficient numbers of faculty (AACN, 2008b). Obviously we cannot address the nursing shortage without also addressing the shortage of faculty in our schools. Hinshaw (2001) described the circuitous course of the shortage in a 2001 article in the Online Journal of Issues in Nursing noting, "The shortage of nurses requires the educational programs of the profession to supply more graduates. But the shortage of nursing faculty will limit student enrollments and likely decrease the number of graduates" (p.1). Over seventy percent of nursing schools responding to a 2007 AACN survey reported turning away qualified applicants from baccalaureate programs. These same schools reported a faculty vacancy rate of 8.8% equal to 2.2 vacancies per school. The vast majority of these vacancies were positions preferring a doctoral degree (AACN, 2008b). Contributing to the faculty shortage is the continuing failure to graduate sufficient numbers of nurses from master’s and doctoral programs. Livsey, Campbell, and Green (2007) cite AACN data indicating that despite an increase in the number of nurses enrolling in graduate programs, the graduation rate of doctoral nursing students has remained flat, averaging only 406 students each year from 1995 through 2005.

The federal government has long recognized the crucial position nurse’s hold in the healthcare system by supporting the funding of nursing education in the United States (US). For example, the federal government created the U. S. Cadet Corps in 1943 to provide support for nursing education (Willever-Farr & Parascondola, 1994). In 1963 the Surgeon General’s Consultant Group on Nursing identified an impending shortage of nurses and prompted Congress to pass the Nurse Training Act which added Title VIII to the Public Service Act. The Nurse Training Act provided funding in the form of construction grants for nursing schools, student loan programs, education grants, and traineeships for advanced practice nurses. The Health Professions Education Partnerships Act of 1998 created the National Advisory Council on Nurse Education and Practice (NACNEP) to advise the federal government on policy within Title VIII. In 2002 the NACNEP cited the need to ensure the availability of an adequate number of qualified nursing faculty to teach prospective students (Reyes-Akinbilege & Coleman, 2005). The Nurse Reinvestment Act of 2002 amended Title VIII to incorporate key recommendations of NACNEP including career ladders to recruit and retain nurses; nurse education, practice, and retention grants; internships and residencies; comprehensive geriatric education; nurse faculty loans; and the Nurse Scholarship Program. More recently, in 2005, nursing was added as an area of need under the Graduate Assistance in Areas of National Need (GAANN) program via the Higher Education Act allowing schools of nursing to fund research-focused doctoral students. Livsey, et al. (2007) cited a 2006 U. S. Department of Education report noting $2.4 million was awarded to 14 programs to support 57 nurses in doctoral programs.

Most currently, in fiscal year 2007, the Bureau of Health Professions in the Health Research and Services Administration (HRSA) awarded $37 million through a total of 134 education, practice, and retention grants to basic nursing education programs. Nine percent of the money was granted to nurses and nurse aides, 20% to associates degree programs, 25% to diploma programs, and 66% to baccalaureate programs. HRSA

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