

## **University Administration Declines \$225,000 to Increase Nurse Faculty Salaries**

**by Judith Cohen, Professor of Nursing**

March 2008 – Last month the Vermont House Health Care and Appropriations committee considered a bill (H887) to provide \$450,000 to improve salaries for nurse educators in Vermont. This bill was originally targeted so that the funds would go solely to the Vermont State College (VSC) system, but thanks to the advocacy of Steve Finner and United Academics, the committees decided to evenly divide the targeted funds between VSC and UVM.

Why was the state legislature considering setting aside nearly half a million dollars for nursing faculty salaries? Because our legislators recognize that the key to addressing the problem of a diminishing nursing workforce is to recruit and retain nurse faculty who can educate the next generation of nurses—a considerable challenge because salaries for nursing faculty have lagged far behind what nurses can earn in clinical settings. At UVM since 2001, in our effort to serve the state nursing workforce needs, we have *doubled* our undergraduate enrollments and *tripled* our graduate enrollments at the same time that we have *lost* tenure track lines and nurse faculty. When we try to recruit for faculty, we typically get only two or three applications because of the nationwide demand for nursing faculty. Even when we're able to set up interviews, we often lose potential faculty—and have difficulty retaining our present faculty—because of salaries. The University of Vermont administration has not addressed this market disparity, continuing to use data from Oklahoma State University and other poorly paid nurse faculty for our market-adjustment comparisons, and while we have made some small gains through the efforts of United Academics, we continue to lose excellent nurse faculty or are unable to recruit new faculty. The state of Vermont has committed precious assets in trying to enhance the nursing workforce through its loan repayment and loan incentive programs, but these programs aren't enough to address the acute issue of the market disparity between nursing faculty salaries and nurse clinician salaries with a master's and doctorate in the clinical market. Recognizing this, the House committees proposed including in H887 nearly \$250,000 to boost the base salaries of nursing faculty at UVM.

But top UVM administrators—President Fogel and Government Affairs Office—opposed this legislation, seeing an appropriation as a threat to the University autonomy and governance. While I recognize it might be seen as an unusual step to supplement salaries, this approach has been adopted by many states across the country because of the recognition of the now critical nursing workforce shortage and the even larger and more critical nurse faculty shortage. While faculty salaries are a bargainable issue, the legislation had the support of United Academics, as it was seen as a win-win situation whereby external funds could supplement faculty salaries without taking existing salary pool monies from one faculty group to give to another faculty group. University administrators did not consult with United Academics nor the academic

leadership of the College of Nursing and Health Sciences before taking this action against the bill, affecting the general welfare and recruitment and retention of nurse faculty.

In place of a significant supplement for faculty salaries, university administrators instead proposed that the legislature put the money into the current loan repayment program, administered through the State Department of Health, to which nurse faculty could apply to decrease their loans. This proposal was likewise made without consulting the academic leadership of the College of Nursing and Health Sciences and the Director of the Office of Nursing Workforce, Research, Planning and Development—an affront to the shared governance values to which we all ascribe and to the very governance and autonomy about which President Fogel was so concerned. If university administrators had consulted with either the College academic leadership or with the Director of the Office of Nursing Workforce, they would have discovered that we already have a loan repayment program in the state funded by the legislature and that this strategy does not address the real issue of market disparity in salaries that affects nurse faculty recruitment and retention, including of experienced faculty without outstanding loans.

As of this writing, UVM has lost the money while the Vermont State College System has retained the money (provided the bill makes it through the Senate Appropriations Committee) that our legislators wanted to commit to nurse faculty salaries. Since President Fogel has declined the assistance that the state of Vermont wanted to give to UVM, with the full support of United Academics, I ask the university's administration for its solutions to this nurse faculty crisis. A nursing faculty shortage will mean we must decrease enrollments at a time when the demand for nurses is expanding exponentially—with ominous implications for the health and welfare of Vermont citizens.