

## Shifting Employment and Education Trends For New Nursing Graduates

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Now in the seventh year of consecutive data collection on employment of new RN graduates (National Student Nurses Association [NSNA] members), the NSNA annual report gives us a fresh look at today's new graduates and probes for insights related to education and employment trends with prior data. We can begin to associate data over the years around numerous areas from the first survey (reported in 2008) to the data today. The reported decline in entry-level RN positions from early years may be continuing to trend in some areas, but as the health care environments have heeded the call of the Institute of Medicine (IOM) 2010 report – *The Future of Nursing: Leading Change, Advancing Health* – a new snapshot of employment juxtaposed with new graduates' reports of continuing their

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**Table 1.**  
**Employment Trajectory Following Graduation Dates**

Employed as an RN?	2012 Survey	2013 Survey	2014 Survey
> 6 Months (Graduated Winter)	86% (56)	87% (1,048)	88% (1,130)
< 4 Months (Graduated Spring)	71% (2,194)	76% (2,158)	78% (3,026)
> 1 Month (Graduated Summer)	51% (411)	56% (378)	62% (621)
<b>All Respondents</b>	<b>66% (2,702)</b>	<b>76% (3,584)</b>	<b>78% (6,393)</b>

education might be a bright ray of sunlight in the overall national picture. Graduates' challenges in finding employment in some regions and the hiring preferences of BSN graduates over Associate Degree graduates remain among the respondents' commentaries. But the self-reported data that these new nurses are seeking continuing education for advanced degrees in nursing generally bodes well for the discipline.

In September 2014, approximately 4-6 months following spring graduations, NSNA collected data from 8,902 new RN graduates (a 46% increase in responses from 2013). As in previous years, most of the respondents graduated in spring and summer 2014 (74%). Students from all types of RN programs completed surveys: baccalaureate degree (46%); associate degree (36%); diploma (3%); accelerated BSN (13%); and other (2%). Of those with a previous degree, more than half (56%) had bachelor's degrees prior to nursing school; 37% had associate degrees, and 6% had non-nursing master's degrees. Compared to the prior year, the BSN respondents increased and associate degree respondents decreased 2%. For follow-up comparisons with prior years,

the data were reduced to include only respondents who reported RN employment or unemployment (n=6,051), which were not different on sensitivity measures for demographics. For employment and education comparisons, data were filtered for baccalaureate (pre-licensure and accelerated n=4,802).

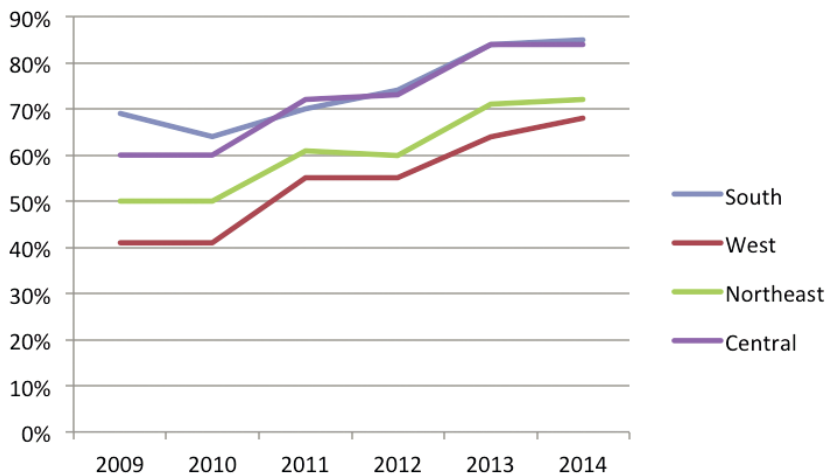
At the time of the survey, with the reduced sample of those who responded to the employment question ("yes" or "no"), 100% reported that they passed the NCLEX exam (n=6,051). To understand when job acceptance for these new graduates might be occurring most rapidly – from unemployed to employed as an RN – it appears that many recent summer and spring graduates continue to be searching for employment as in recent years (62-78%); but at 6 months or more, the job procurement stabilizes at 88% for all of the respondents, all above the previous years (see Table 1). When asked if they have an RN position, 78% (n=3,026) said "yes" with a continuously upward trend in all regions over the prior years. By program type, the data revealed that 82% of the baccalaureate graduates, 72% of the associate degree graduates, 81% of accelerated BSN graduates

Percentages are rounded. The convenience sample of nursing students – members of the National Student Nurses' Association (NSNA) who indicated that Spring 2014 was their graduation date – responded to the survey via SurveyMonkey®. Total number of email recipients (39,791) minus opt-outs (372) and bounced emails (1,603) yielded a return (both partial and complete) of 24% (n=8,902).

**Table 2.**  
**New Graduate Employment as RNs by Types of Program**  
**(Spring Graduations)**

Currently Employed as an RN	2012	2013	2014
<b>Types of Programs</b>			
Associate Degree (ADN)	61% (966)	72% (1,316)	72% (1,013)
BSN Pre-Licensure	72% (1,364)	81% (1,686)	82% (1,698)
Accelerated BSN Program	58% (218)	69% (386)	81% (204)
Master's Degree (Pre-Licensure)	61% (27)	84% (36)	90% (17)
Clinical Nurse Leader Master's (Pre-Licensure)	50% (13)	89% (25)	83% (10)

**Figure 1.**  
**Percentage of New Graduates Employed by Region**  
**(NSNA Annual Surveys 2009 – 2014 Spring Graduations)**



(increased 12% from previous year), 84% of master's degree (pre-licensure) (increased 6% from previous year), and 83% of Clinical Nurse Leaders were employed as registered nurses. These data indicate positive changes since the prior year survey with the exception of the Clinical Nurse Leader Master's, which decreased 6% from the previous year (see Table 2). This suggests an interesting trajectory in data from prior years that may give us insights about the future. With a closer look at those who are not working (n=1,357), 21% are currently enrolled in school and 13% planned to enroll by Spring 2015. This is a marked difference from last year (17% enrolled at the time) and the graduates' education plans were explored further. This survey yields evidence of improved employment opportunities in some regions, as well as academic program differences in trends related to work and educational advancement.

When the question, "Are you currently employed as an RN?" was broken down by region of the United States, the "yes" responses ranged from 68-85% nationally, with all regions improving slightly. Regional employment trends

over the past 2 years of the survey indicate a flat pattern of employment successes, with the exception of the West (see Figure 1). It appears that the slow and incremental increases from prior years rose in all areas, most notably the West (from 64-68%) and Northeast (from 71-72%), which continue to lag behind the Central (84%) and South (85%) regions. Employment success can also be tracked to programs in the survey related to public (79%), private (non-profit) (78%), and private (proprietary, for-profit) schools (74%), all increased from last year (3%, 1%, and 6% respectively).

For those respondents who are employed as RNs, as last year, 86% reported full-time work and 11% are part-time. This year, 38% reported working night shift (down from 42% last year). Thirty-one percent were hired before they graduated; 24% reported it as their dream job; 56% reported getting the job they wanted, with little difference from the previous year. Close inspection suggests that these negligible differences are not clearly reflecting a different job market for those who are employed, and only the relocation data suggests any differences: 83% this year found jobs in their

own community, and 8% this year had to relocate to get a position compared to 16% from two years ago. The commuting distances remained the same for this year's respondents: 76% work within 25 miles; 20% drive up to 50 miles; 5% commute over 50 miles.

New 2014 graduates who responded to the trends questions on the survey (n=6,341) reported similar observations from prior years of the following trends in searching for jobs:

- Employers filling positions with experienced RNs (72%);
- Older RNs are not retiring (62%) (down 6% from last year);
- Too many new graduates are flooding the market (55%) (down 4% from last year and 8% from the prior year);
- Hiring BSN graduates over associate degree graduates (74%) (up 2% from last year and 5% from the prior year);
- RNs working full-time are also working part-time in other RN positions (56%);
- Hiring per diem nurses without benefits (51%);
- Nurses who were formerly working part-time are now working full-time (29%) (down 6% from last year and 21% from the prior year);
- Hospitals are hiring travel and agency nurses (50%) (up 4% from last year);
- Long-term care facilities are hiring new graduates (52%) (up 5% from last year and 8% from the prior year);
- Hospitals are creating residency programs (49%) (up 4% from last year);
- Hiring freezes (26%) (down 10% from last year);
- Sub-acute facilities are hiring new graduates (35%) (up 3% from last year);
- Home care and community health agencies are hiring new graduates (33%) (up 4% from last year);
- Hospitals discontinuing new graduate orientation (21%) and residency programs (12%) (both down 3% from last year);
- Hospitals are closing departments (20%) (down 3% from last year);
- RNs are being laid off (13%) (down 8% from last year);
- There is no general nursing shortage in (my) geographic area (57%) (down 5% from last year);
- Schools are not aware about the job market or have told students there are plenty of jobs for new grads (23%); 21% believe they were misled about the nursing shortage.

The majority of new graduates who are employed work in medical-surgical areas (19%); specialty units range from intensive care (8%), telemetry (8%), and emergency departments (8%), to pediatrics (5%), long-term care (5%), maternity/labor and delivery (5%), oncology (4%), and psychiatry (4%). Smaller numbers work in neonatal intensive care (3%), cardiac intensive care (3%), operating room (3%), rehabilitation, (3%) and home care/community health (3%).

An important continuing trend to be noted from previous years is the apparent employer preference of BSN graduates over ADN graduates and rising employment for accelerated bachelors (pre-licensure) noted by respondents and evident in comparisons. By groups, ADN graduates reported working as an RN the same as last year (72%) while BSN graduates reported 82% employed (up 1% from last year and 10% from previous year) and Accelerated BSN graduates reported 81% employed (up 12% from last year and 23% from the previous year) (see Table 2). Analyzed by regions, the south ADN employment (80%) vs. BSN employment (88%) demonstrated the least preferential differences compared with the west ADN employment (61%) vs. BSN employment (73%), central ADN employment (76%) vs. BSN employment (88%), and the north-east ADN employment (67%) vs. BSN employment (74%). When compared, the ADN graduates (33%) more often expressed that their programs did not give them accurate information about the availability of job opportunities than BSN graduates (29%), but an interesting reciprocal trend occurred: greater number of ADN graduates (91%) reported that they are currently enrolled in school or plan to enroll in the next two years, compared to the BSN students (45%). In fact, one out of three ADN graduates reported currently being in school. The changes in employment availability for these graduates seem to have fostered the desire to continue education despite – or perhaps because of – their difficulty in finding jobs.

### Plans to Advance Education

For all new graduates who responded, only 9% reported that they have no plans to return to school for another degree, slightly less than last year. Of those who said “yes,” 16% were currently enrolled (Fall 2014), and 62% were currently enrolled or plan to enroll by next year. More graduates this year aspire to achieve doctoral degrees than last year, but the numbers of those desiring to pursue other advance degrees in nursing were similar to last year: (BSN) 16% this year vs. 16% last year, (MS) 46% this year

**Table 3.**  
**Education Plans for New Nursing Graduates**

Year of Graduation	Degree	Degrees Pursued					
		RN to BSN	RN to MSN	BSN to PhD	MS to APRN	DNP	MS to Edu
2013 Graduates	Associate	68%	15%	1%	8%	2%	1%
	BSN	N/A	14%	6%	36%	13%	7%
	Accelerated	N/A	13%	7%	34%	15%	11%
2014 Graduates	Associate	63%	18%	1%	9%	1%	2%
	BSN	N/A	17%	5%	35%	13%	7%
	Accelerated	N/A	13%	5%	40%	13%	6%

vs. 49% last year, and (doctorate) 38% this year vs. 34% last year.

When queried about the type of instruction in the programs of 2014 graduates, 23% reported at least some courses were online, with 3% reporting some courses were all online and 19% reporting at least some courses partially online. When graduates were asked to estimate how much of their clinical experiences used simulation, 67% reported that at least some courses used partial simulation; 5% reported some clinicals were all simulation, and 4% reported that many were all simulation. With changing educational technologies in nursing education today, new graduates are increasingly more likely to look to furthering their education using technologies: ADN graduates (72%) were more likely to select online programs (up 8% from last year) when they return to school than BSN (18%) and Accelerated BSN graduates (18%). Almost half of BSN (42%) and Accelerated BSN (43%) preferred combination online and traditional (blended) programs, similar to last year.

For all graduates, when asked to indicate the highest degree that they are planning to achieve, 16% (n=933) indicated the baccalaureate degree in nursing; 46% (n=2,753) of all graduates plan to go on for a master’s degree in nursing (down 4% from last year); 30% (n=1,773) plan to achieve a doctorate in nursing practice (DNP) (up 3% from last year); and 8% (n=329) plan to attain a PhD. When asked about their future plans, ADN graduates this year reported RN to BSN (63%) (down 5% from last year); however, 18% reported RN to MSN (up 3% from last year). Accelerated BSN graduates reported an increase in plans for the MS in Advanced Practice Nursing from last year (34-40%) and BSN/Accelerated BSN graduates reported similar plans for the doctorate in nursing practice (DNP) (13%) (see Table 3).

### Discussion

Although it appears from the data that hospitals continue to favor BSN over

ADN graduates, many previous trends about employment that all respondents reported in looking for jobs this year have begun to improve for these new graduates (i.e., reporting that fewer older RNs not retiring; fewer hospitals/departments are closing; less hiring freezes). Finding jobs after graduation has slightly increased over last year for all regions, and at the same time, these respondents describe their career plans more likely to include advancing their education. What appears to be co-occurring with employment trends may be the impetus for advancing education for all nursing graduates. This may be interpreted with the recent Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), “Report on Nursing Workforce Projections through 2025,” to shed light on emerging trends (HRSA, 2014).

The full report released from HRSA used the federal government’s *Health Workforce Simulation Model* to identify the projected supply and demand over the next 10 years. Their modeling, which is based on current supply and demand, yielded numerous projected findings that suggest the U.S. supply of registered nurses (RNs) will more than meet the projected demand (more than 300,000), with a distributional imbalance reported at state levels. The report cautions that projections are based on assumptions that may be confounded by numerous factors, but nonetheless, the principal findings conflict with previous notions of an impending nursing shortage that looms in America. In fact, the calculations of RN supply minus RN demand yields similar results forecasted by Feeg and Mancino (2014) using the employment data from the annual NSNA survey trends and the National Council of State Boards of Nursing annual RN licensure data. What differs is the methodology (HRSA uses simulation modeling; NSNA uses real-time surveys of graduates seeking employment) and the state-specific results: HRSA concludes that the RN supply is projected to exceed demand in 34

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states, while 16 states will experience a nursing shortage through 2025. (NSNA data continues to report that new graduates in the west have difficulty finding employment, but many states in the HRSA report are listed as facing a potential shortfall in 2025). The insights from the annual survey related to educational shifts may offer some explanation about the discrepancy.

This year, the annual survey suggests that employment post-graduation has slightly improved: all regions show a modest increase in jobs and students' reports of softening job market barriers related to retiring nurses and other economic indicators. Employment in the west and northeast continues to lag behind the central and southern states, validating the discrepancies in state level workforce projections in the HRSA report. Clearly the NSNA trends since 2009 reflect the impact of the recession, and HRSA suggests an alternative scenario related to economic influences in their potentially under-estimated demand data.

The most striking changes in the NSNA results continue to show a shift in new graduates' career plans and the optimism of the responses related to their

intentions to continue their education. The *Future of Nursing Report* (IOM, 2010) strategized ways to influence nurses returning to school, and it appears to be materializing in the shifting trends related to labor market forces and education. In fact, an equal change in baccalaureate and associate degree graduates planning to move from RN to master's degrees (3%) from 2013 to 2014 and more ADNs reporting their highest planned degree as master's (49%) than BSN graduates (44%) may indicate movement at all levels of education toward advance degrees in nursing. These trends corroborate new findings in a report by the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN, 2015) confirming enrollment surges in schools of nursing.

We have yet to explore the unintended consequences of this accelerated academic progression. Will there be an oversupply of Advanced Practice Registered Nurses and undersupply of registered nurses? It may come to pass that another provider delivers direct patient care at the bedside or in the community. With the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) projecting a 21% growth in nursing assistants (BLS, 2014b) and orderlies and a 48% job

growth in home health aides (BLS, 2014a) between 2012 and 2022 to respond to the movement of health care services out of acute care settings, we just may have a preview of who will be providing "nursing" care in the future. **DN**

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