

Good News/Bad News See-Saw: Upward Peak in Employment Suggests a Changing Future Landscape of Workforce Issues

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As the overall economy continues to improve, the growth of U.S. employment is reflected in the new graduate Registered Nurse (RN) workforce as reported in the National Student Nurses' Association (NSNA) Ninth Annual New RN Graduate Survey (NSNA Survey). Reflecting on nine years of NSNA Survey data, new evidence is emerging that reveals fewer barriers to employment of entry-level RNs. A progressive increase in employment of RN graduates from all programs, including associate degree graduates, is good news for graduates but portends an impending nursing shortage.

Consecutive data collection of new RN graduates for nine years, the NSNA Survey gives us insight into today's RN workforce and trends in nursing education, loan debt, and health care. The findings of the NSNA Survey show a continuous upward movement for new graduates finding jobs and employment opportunities in all areas of the country; converging toward a national 90% employment, while maintaining the rank order of highest employment opportunities in the central and south regions of the country (see Figure 1). Many of the job-seeking challenges for new RN graduates may be easing. This is partly influenced by the areas of RN positions being vacated, including the retirement trends reported by Buerhaus, Auerbach, and Staiger (2017). What might this mean for a future upswing in pervasive RN workforce shortages regionally, intellectually, and experientially? What might be good news for new graduate employment may be a foreboding concern about impending workforce changes.

Percentages are rounded. The convenience sample of nursing students are members of the National Student Nurses' Association (NSNA) and indicated that Spring 2016 was their graduation date. They were sent the survey via SurveyMonkey®. Total number of email invitations sent (78,108) minus members with two email addresses (16,401), opt-outs (1,825), and bounced emails (2,731) yielded a return of n=7,005 (14%) (partial and complete).



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General Employment Findings for 2016 Graduates

In September 2016, approximately four to six months following spring graduations, NSNA collected data from over 7,000 new RN graduates who were members of the NSNA. Data were cleaned to reflect only those who had reported employment ("yes" or "no") (n=5,169) and graduated in Spring or Summer 2016 and Winter 2015. The NSNA Survey was completed by students from all

types of RN programs: baccalaureate degree (47%); associate degree (33%); diploma (4%); accelerated BSN (14%); and other (2%). Fifty-eight percent of respondents graduated from public nursing schools, 20% were from private nursing schools, and 13% were from private proprietary (for-profit) schools; 10% did not know if their program was public, private, or for-profit. These results are almost identical to the 2015 NSNA Survey.

At the time of the survey, 97% reported that they passed the National Council Licensure Examination (NCLEX). To understand when job acceptance for these new graduates might be occurring most rapidly – from unemployed to employed as an RN – it appears that all the new graduates' success in employment are trending upward from 75% (Summer 2016) to 94% (Spring 2016); with overall trends climbing over the previous five years of the NSNA Survey (see Table 1). When asked if they have an RN position, 89% (up 5% from 2015) said "yes," with a continuously upward trend in all regions over the prior years.

When the question, "Are you currently employed as an RN?" was broken down by

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Figure 1.
Percentage of New Graduates Employed by Region for 5 Previous Years

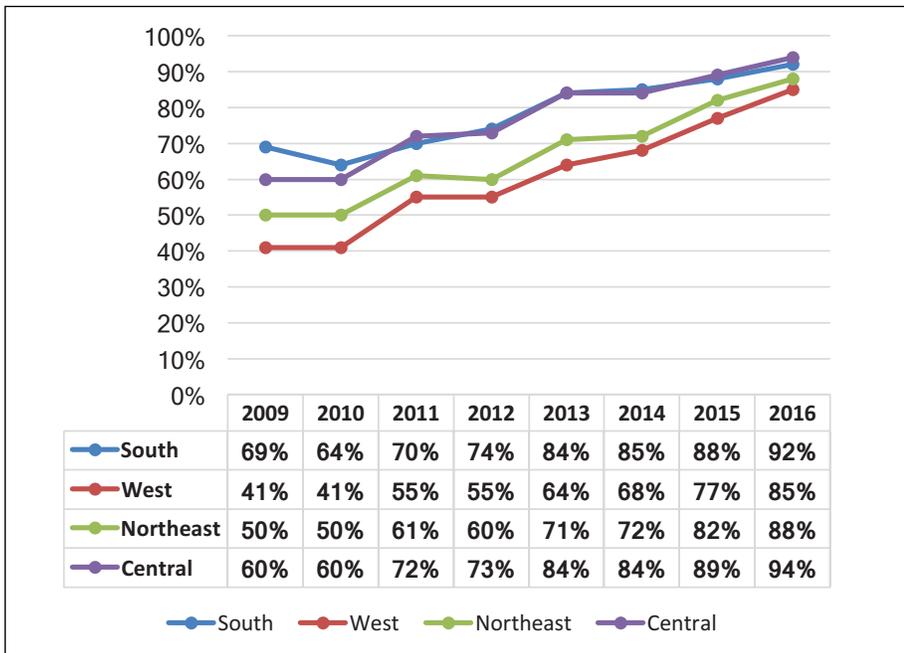


Table 1.
Employment Trajectory Following Graduation Dates for Previous 5 Years

Employed as an RN?	2012 Survey	2013 Survey	2014 Survey	2015 Survey	2016 Survey
> 1 Year (Graduated Prior Year)	—	—	—	90% (150)	96% (1,004)
> 6 Months (Graduated Winter)	86% (56)	87% (1,048)	88% (1,130)	94% (846)	94% (763)
> 4 Months (Graduated Spring)	71% (2,194)	76% (2,158)	78% (3,026)	85% (2,249)	88% (1,808)
> 1 Month (Graduated Summer)	51% (411)	56% (378)	62% (621)	71% (542)	75% (409)

Table 2.
New Graduate Employment as RNs by Types of Program for Previous 5 Years (Spring Graduation)

Currently Employed as an RN	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Types of Programs					
Associate Degree (ADN)	61% (966)	72% (1,316)	72% (1,013)	81% (708)	84% (610)
BSN Pre-licensure	72% (1,364)	81% (1,686)	82% (1,698)	88% (1,296)	92% (1,222)
Accelerated BSN Program	58% (218)	69% (386)	81% (204)	86% (163)	84% (138)
Master's Degree (Pre-licensure)	61% (27)	84% (36)	90% (17)	73% (11)	93% (13)
Clinical Nurse Leader Master's (Pre-licensure)	50% (13)	89% (25)	83% (10)	86% (12)	80% (4)
RN to BSN (Post-licensure)	—	—	—	100% (10)	83% (19)

region of the United States, the “yes” responses ranged from 85% to 94% nationally, with all regions trending upward. Regional employment trends over the past two years of the NSNA Survey indicate a gradual increase in employment successes. This positive and overall trend since 2009 suggests a changing landscape of employment nationally, but regional lower employment differences still exist on the two populated coasts (Northeast and West) than the Central and South regions.

By program type, the data revealed 92% of the baccalaureate graduates (up 4%), 84% of the associate degree in nursing (ADN) graduates (up 3%), 84% of accelerated baccalaureate graduates (down 2%), 80% of Clinical Nurse Leaders (down 6%), and 93% Master's Degree pre-licensure (up 20%). The upward trends for ADN and BSN new nurses are a positive indicator in general for the job market, whereas, the others are probably associated with the small sample of those nurses who were in the sampling pool related to NSNA membership and not generalizable (see Table 2).

Impact of Trends Up

The trends in 2016 data on education and employment success continue to show a positive growth in the overall national picture. Although all trends are upward, graduates continue to report challenges to find employment in some regions and the hiring preferences of BSN graduates over ADN graduates remain. One curious change appears in the trend related to new nurses seeking academic progression: while all new graduates report thinking about the future and seeking higher degrees in a similar pattern to previous years (see Table 3), ADN graduates, now able to find employment, may delay their enrollment in degree completion programs (see Figure 2). The “see-saw” impact of getting jobs is also a change worth noting.

Employment success can also be tracked to programs related to public (90%), private non-profit (92%), and proprietary for-profit schools (88%), all significantly increased from 2015 (5%, 6%, and 6% respectively) ($p < .05$). There continues to be a significant difference in employment success between private for-profit and private non-profit schools (95% confidence, $p < .05$), although not compared to public schools (see Figure 3).

Changes in 2016 Responses from Prior Years

For those respondents who are employed as an RN, there were a few answers that bear watching. For example, when asked “Did you get the job you wanted?” 66% of new graduates in 2016 reported “yes” compared to 62% in 2015. When asked if they got their “dream job,” 27% said “yes”; 93% are working full time (40% are working night shift); and 24% plan to stay a year or

Table 3.
Education Plans Following Graduation: Highest Degree Planned
(Comparison of 2015 and 2016 Responses)

Earned Degree	BSN 2015/2016	Master's Degree in Nursing 2015/2016	Doctorate in Nursing Practice (DNP) 2015/2016	Doctorate (PhD) 2015/2016	Unsure 2015/2016
Associate Degree	22%/23%	45%/46%	16%/15%	3%/4%	12%/12%
Baccalaureate Degree	7%/7%	37%/38%	30%/30%	9%/7%	16%/17%

Figure 2.
Enrollment in Advanced Education of Associate Degree Graduates
“If you graduated with an associate degree or from a diploma school of nursing and you are planning to pursue an RN to BSN or RN to MSN, when will you enroll?”

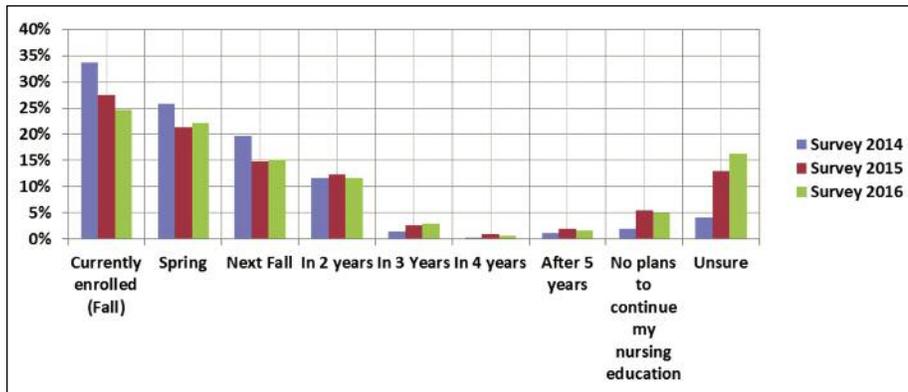
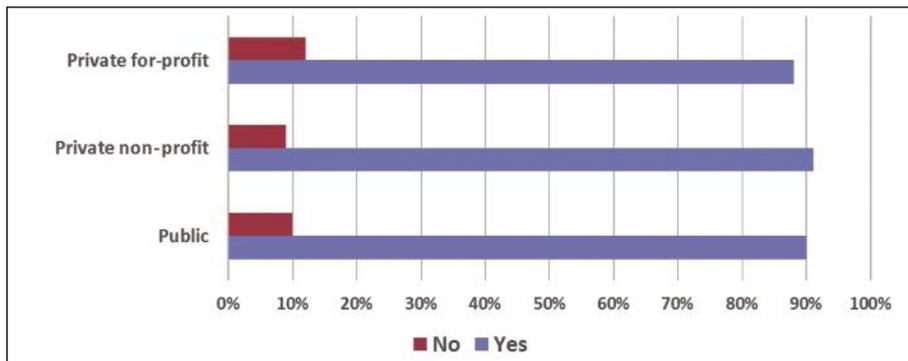


Figure 3.
Employment Related to School Types
(Are you employed as an RN?)



less. Compared to 2015 respondents where 26% got their “dream job,” 91% worked full time and 27% did not plan to stay more than one year. Jobs appear to be more desirable to the 2016 graduates as well as more available.

Over the past years, new graduates responded to a variety of questions about their perceptions of the job market. New 2016 graduates who responded to the job market questions reported upward and downward trends in searching for jobs. These trends supported the 2016 employment data. These can be seen as “good

news for hiring” (see Figure 4), and the corresponding “hiring bad news lessening” (see Figure 5).

Another set of positive trends from the 2016 NSNA Survey points to what has been reported by new graduates as decreasing “job market challenges” (see Figure 6).

Financial Impact on New Graduates Continues

While job opportunities appear to be improving, what continues to exist is the high loan debt that new nurses, like other college graduates, take with them beyond graduation. Loan debt can be described rel-

ative to investment in educational pathways and choices in types of schools that impact on a looming future economic issue for these graduates. This needs to be taken into account with the overall landscape about employment.

For all respondents who answered (4,418), many continue to report having financial aid and significant student loans (72%, down 2% from last year) to pay for school. When analyzed by public, private, and for-profit nursing programs, the loan debt continues to suggest that for-profit schools add the burden of carrying higher debt into the job market and unfortunately, are not comparing positively with job success for private schools as previously discussed (see Figure 7).

When calculating the amount of loan debt that is carried by the new nurse graduate, it appears that an investment into a nursing education is a worthwhile risk, given the better employment potential in the healthcare field today in general. Over the past years, this employment success trend gives even more credence to the wisdom of borrowing for a nursing education. Unfortunately, many students lack financial information about their loans. When asked if they knew if their loan interest was fixed or variable, 26% answered that they did not know. Thirty-three percent did not know the interest rate of their loan. It should be noted that when students reported student loan amounts, many students included loan amounts from previous degrees that were earned prior to entering nursing school. Of the 2,100 respondents reporting previous degrees, 40% held associate degrees, 54% bachelor degrees, and 5% held master’s degrees. Of those holding previous undergraduate degrees, 14% were medical or premedical students changing their major to nursing.

The difference in average loan debt is also remarkable by areas of the country, corresponding as well with the employment potential relative to the investments made for education (see Figure 8).

Discussion

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2017a, 2017b), the median annual wage for registered nurses was \$68,450 in May 2016, and employment of registered nurses is projected to grow 16% from 2014 to 2024, much faster than the average for all occupations. The good news for graduating nursing students entering the job market today is that the trends appear to continue in an upward trajectory for the whole country. However, regional differences in the West and Northeast continue to track lower and slower and to where education investment (i.e., average loan debt) is above the national average.

According to Millet (2016), average debt increase from college student loans

Figure 4.
Hiring Good News Growing

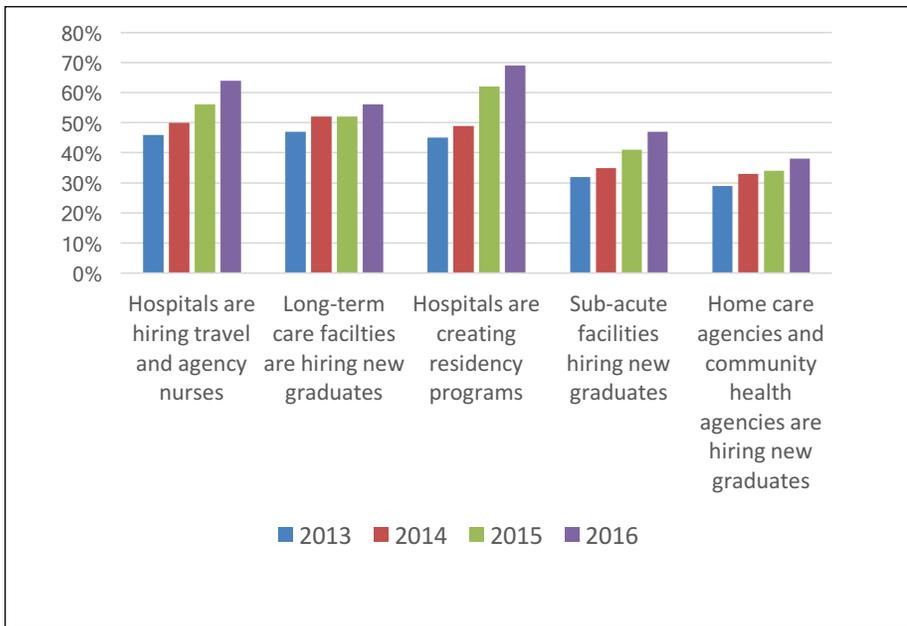
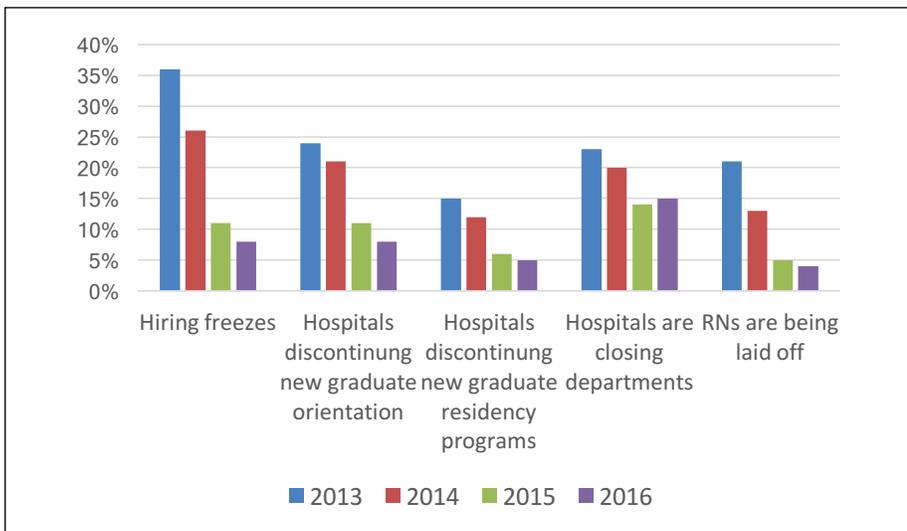


Figure 5.
Hiring Bad News Lessening



can be attributed to falling family incomes, rising tuition, and decreasing public investment in higher education. This does not bode well for students and families lacking resources or for preparing a diverse workforce. New graduates investing in furthering their education relative to getting a desirable job in nursing right after graduation may be one of the “see-saw” impacts that result from an improving job market and a shortage of qualified workers.

Increasing the Federal funds available to baccalaureate undergraduate nursing students for financially-challenged students will encourage students to select a nursing major. This appears unlikely however, when

reviewing the 66 programs being cut in the current administration’s proposed fiscal 2018 budget (Elis, 2017). With \$4.83 billion proposed cuts in health and human services (where nurse training funds reside) and cuts in the Education Department of \$4.98 billion, it is unlikely that healthcare professions will be funded at current levels and may even be discontinued.

Nursing programs need to step up their efforts to recruit underrepresented students. A prime target for recruitment is the body of students who already hold degrees and who have not yet settled in the field they prepared for. NSNA has programs to help fill this need with nursing students and faculty

forming collaborative teams to recruit students into their nursing programs. Since 1965, NSNA’s Breakthrough to Nursing (BTN) Project encourages the creation of recruitment and retention projects that support the success of all eligible students in nursing with a focus on regional and state diversity needs. Additionally, the Foundation of the National Student Nurses’ Association offers scholarships annually to diverse nursing students.

In a recent report by Buerhaus, Auerbach, and Staiger (2017), roughly 60,000 RNs exited the workforce each year since 2012, following the period of RNs steadily increasing from the baby-boomer cohorts, then aging in their jobs due in part to the economic recession. This represents accumulated knowledge and clinical experience that will gradually evaporate by 2020 given their estimates on the workforce data trends: 1.7 million “experience-years lost” in 2015 alone with these accelerating retirements.

The flip side of this bad news is that the new generation of nurses entering the profession learn technology skills quickly. They are comfortable with learning and using technology in their everyday practice. Although some seasoned nurses are mentoring new graduates, unfortunately too many nurses are still eating their young and generational misunderstandings emerge and escalate.

When selecting “which statement best describes your acceptance of your current RN position?” in the 2016 NSNA Survey, 43% stated, “I took this job so that I could gain experience to get my dream job.” With two-thirds of millennials planning to leave their jobs by 2020 (Lebowitz, 2016), it is no surprise that there is high turnover for novice nurses. Forty-five percent of new RN graduates responding to the NSNA Survey were 23-28 years old – a generation which is known for frequent job changing (Berger, 2016). Exit interviews may shed light on how to deal with and address RN mobility. On the bright side, younger RNs with experience are seeking new jobs.

The results from the NSNA Survey support with evidence the flip side of “good news” for new graduates seeking jobs, perhaps at least partially due to these demographic changes. Certainly, the upward trends all over the country suggest that openings exist. Innovative onboarding efforts may make all the difference in how long RNs remain at the institution of their first nursing position or move on to greener pastures.

With the downside of nurses retiring and the subsequent vacancies come opportunities for a younger generation of nurses to enter the profession and fill leadership

Figure 6.
Job Market Challenges Decreasing

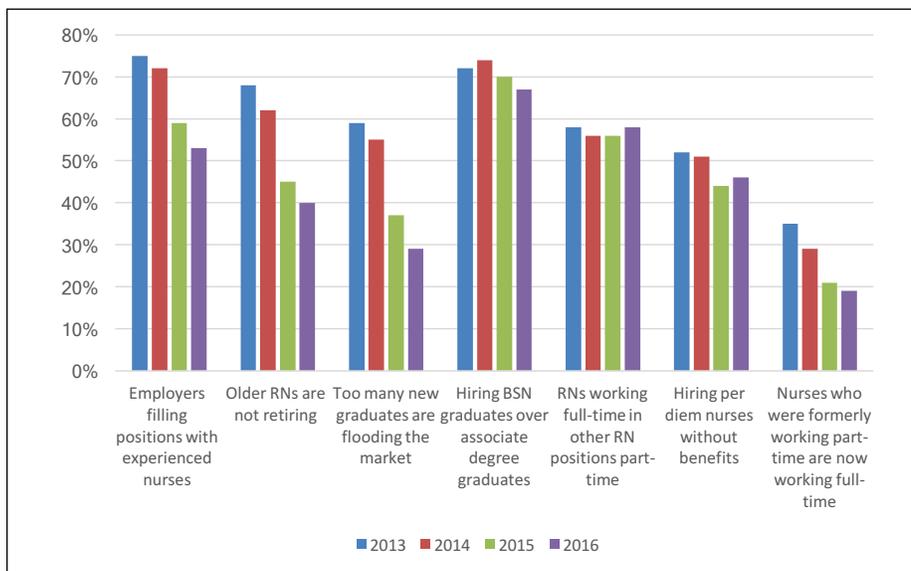


Figure 7.
Loan Debt

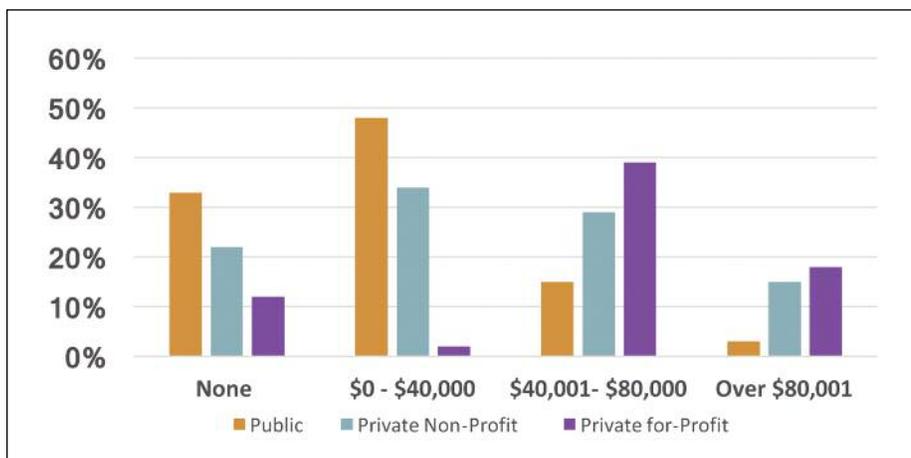
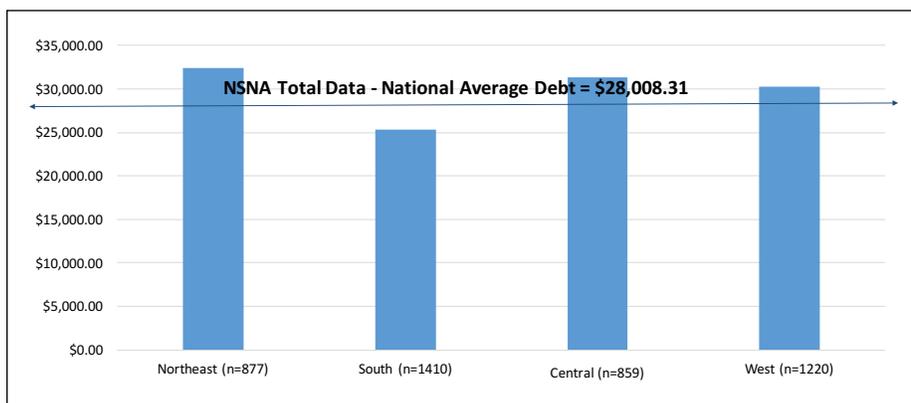


Figure 8.
National and Regional Average Loan Debt of New Nursing Graduates



positions. Bright nurses need to be mentored and encouraged to prepare for higher positions, academic progression, and leadership and management roles. This comes at a time when new graduates appear to be thinking less about advancing their education and more about paying off debt.

The data in the 2016 NSNA Survey gives a positive snapshot of the job market. What is not taken into account, however, and should be part of the complete conversation about workforce and nursing education, is the amount of loan debt accumulated by new nursing graduates today. Although graduates from nursing programs fare better than the average graduating student with a college education in obtaining employment (Feeg & Mancino, 2014), the loan debt they carry is similar and the job market is still a critical first step into the world of work.

When times are tough, returning to school may not be an option; when the job market is better, the prospect of working and paying down debt may be more attractive than school. The need for employers to support academic advancement through tuition reimbursement and for public financing to maintain a highly educated and experienced workforce continues to be critical to ameliorate the “see-saw” effects of the recruitment market, education, and ultimately patient care.

By the time you read this, the 2017 NSNA New Graduate Survey data collection will be underway. Stay tuned as the landscape keeps changing. **DN**

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November 2-5, 2017 • Town & Country San Diego, California

Please join us for the 35th Annual NSNA MidYear Career Planning Conference, November 2-5, 2017, at the Town & Country Hotel in San Diego, California. Career planning and leadership development are the foundation for the conference, which includes a 9-hour NCLEX-RN Mini Review Powered by Lippincott PassPoint; a Keynote address presented by Mary Foley, PhD, RN, FAAN; three panels with presentations by nurses in a variety of practice settings; and workshops, roundtables, and many faculty professional development programs. In addition, students and faculty will work to create interpretive statements for the NSNA Code of Professional Conduct.

Here's a sampling of contact hours (pending approval from the Maryland Nurses Association, accredited as an approver of continuing nursing education by the American Nurses Credentialing Center's Commission on Accreditation).



Career Mentorship – Novice Nurse and Beyond!

1.5 contact hours

Speaker: Lois Marshall, PhD, RN, Nurse Education consultant, author, speaker, Miami, FL

Master Clinical Teaching: A “Safety” Approach to JumpStart Your Students’ Success! **1.5 contact hours**

Speakers: Loretta Manning, MSN, RN, GNP, President, I CAN Publishing®, Inc., and Regional Director, Sylvia Rayfield & Associates, Duluth, GA; Lydia Zager, MSN, RN, Associate, I CAN Publishing®, Inc.

Breakfast and Update on Activities from the NCSBN

2.0 contact hours

Speaker: Nancy Spector, PhD, RN, Director of Regulatory Innovations, National Council of State Boards of Nursing, Chicago, IL

Leadership University Consultant Advisor Certificate Program

4.25 contact hours

Speakers: Diane Mancino, Executive Director, NSNA; Rosemary Mortimer, MS, MED, RN, ANA appointed consultant; Cheryl Taylor, PhD, RN, FAAN, NLN appointed consultant; and Dev Persaud, MA, NSNA Director of Finance and Administration

For more information and to register, go to www.nсна.org and click on *meetings*.