Employment Trends, Loan Debt, and New Graduates' Future Education Plans: The Pre-Pandemic Class of 2019

Veronica Feeg and Diane J. Mancino

As the overall economy in the United States continued to improve since the early days of 2009, the annual survey of the National Student Nurses' Association (NSNA) has reported on the growth of registered nurse (RN) employment and associated trends over the past 10 years. The 2018 results showed increases in employment of RN graduates from all programs continued – including associate degree graduates – which is good news for students (Feeg & Mancino, 2019). However, within those increases were potentially troubling signs of continued debt and reluctance to pursue advanced education. These trends continued for the graduating class of 2019.

The results of the New Graduate Annual Survey for the graduating class of 2019 (approximately 6-12 months post-graduation) provides a snapshot in time about employment, workforce trends, and loan debt for a cohort of new nurses that will undoubtedly vary for future new graduates following the unprecedented changes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The relevance of these findings will be critical in identifying a baseline upon which the impact of rapid deployment of graduating seniors in 2020 and the swiftly executed sweeping changes in nursing education will be compared in years to come. The year 2020 – "Year of the Nurse and the Midwife" and "Year of Coronavirus" – has collided into a landscape of workforce sea changes yet to be understood. Nonetheless, the Annual NSNA New Graduate Survey snapshot in time remains relevant. What were the trends in new graduate employment pre-COVID-19 and was loan debt a continuing problem?

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Background: COVID-19 Impact on NSNA Students

As nursing education across the United States entered spring of 2020, massive mandatory closures happened. Nursing schools everywhere were told on short notice to close campuses and immediately change the delivery of education to remote and simulation learning. In response to understanding how this affected NSNA members, a survey was conducted to seek answers to frequently asked questions (FAQs) about how nursing students had experienced alternative learning activities during the COVID-19 social distancing period in March and April 2020. The survey was designed and reviewed by the chief executive in the organization and researcher/nursing education expert to elicit responses to questions using the common '2-minute' questionnaire style members of NSNA frequently answer. The questions included background information from the respondents and closed-ended choice questions about several aspects of online, clinical, and simulation experiences. The responses included complete data on most items from 1,885 nursing students who are current members of NSNA, from almost all 56 state and regional memberships, with 63% of more than 10 responses per state, and only three state and regions with no responses (Delaware, American Samoa, and Northern Marianas Islands).

Student pre-graduation work was clearly different than the past. In response to how the current spring 2020 semester has changed due to the pandemic, 75% of the students reported their academic activities have been moved to online formats and 31% described a variety of 'other' offerings including: class and clinical simulations, virtual clinicals, case studies, and waiting for online courses or clinicals – or

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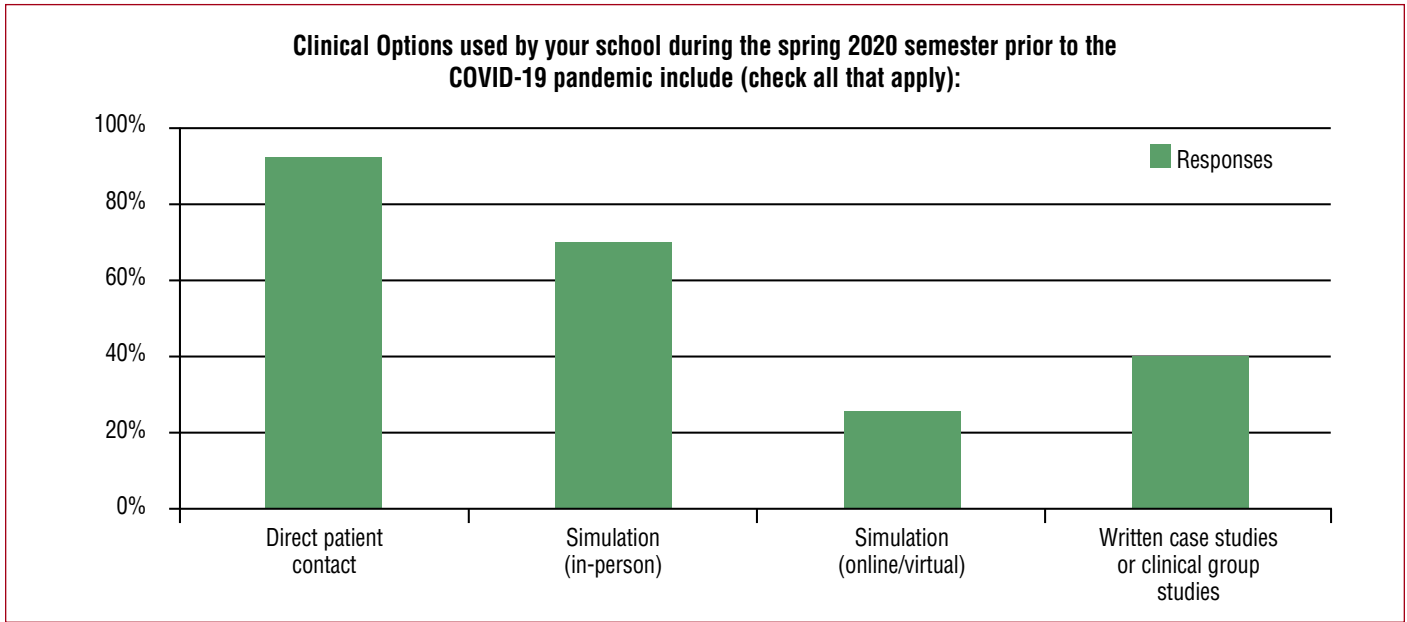
Figure 1A.
Clinical Options Pre-COVID-19

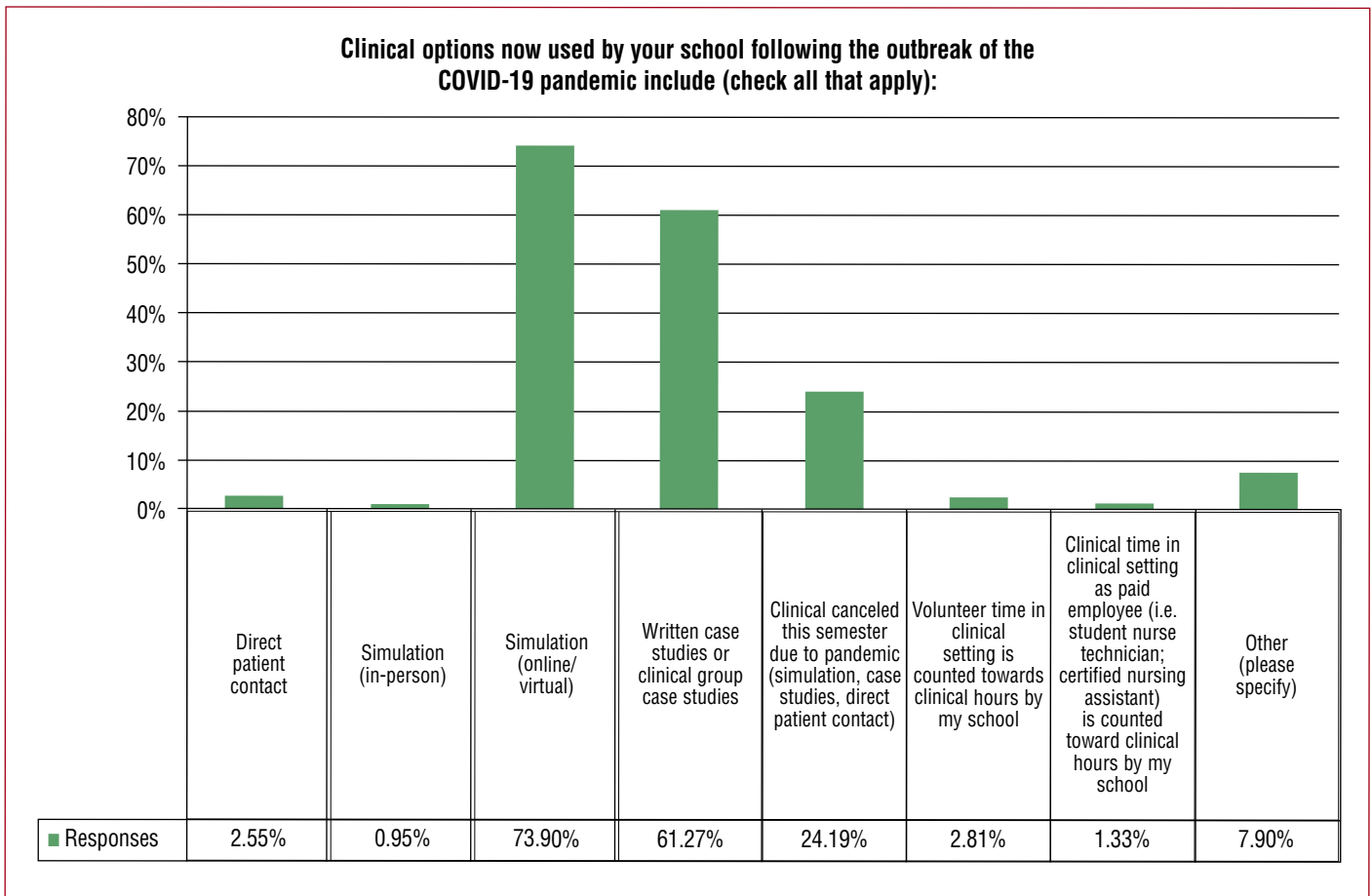**Clinical Options used by your school during the spring 2020 semester prior to the COVID-19 pandemic include (check all that apply):**

Figure 1B.
Clinical Options Post-COVID-19

Clinical options now used by your school following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic include (check all that apply):

	Direct patient contact	Simulation (in-person)	Simulation (online/virtual)	Written case studies or clinical group case studies	Clinical canceled this semester due to pandemic (simulation, case studies, direct patient contact)	Volunteer time in clinical setting is counted towards clinical hours by my school	Clinical time in clinical setting as paid employee (i.e. student nurse technician; certified nursing assistant) is counted toward clinical hours by my school	Other (please specify)
Responses	2.55%	0.95%	73.90%	61.27%	24.19%	2.81%	1.33%	7.90%

Figure 2.
Employment Rates by Regions of the Country for the Past 10 Years

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
South	69%	64%	70%	74%	84%	85%	88%	92%	92%	92%	91%
West	41%	41%	55%	55%	64%	68%	77%	85%	82%	84%	78%
Northeast	50%	50%	61%	60%	71%	72%	82%	88%	85%	87%	84%
Central	60%	60%	72%	73%	84%	84%	89%	94%	92%	92%	94%

◆ South ■ West ▲ Northeast ✕ Central
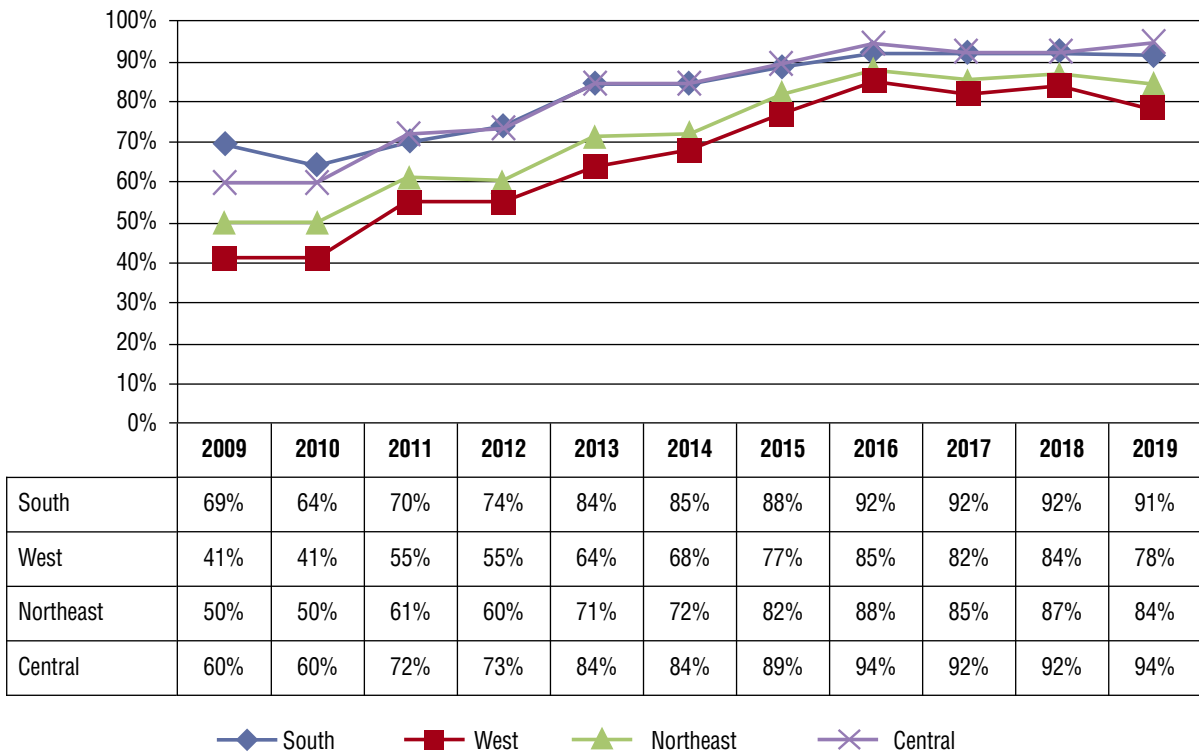
Figure 3.
Employment by Types of Educational Programs 2017-2019

	2017	2018	2019
Q7: Associate degree (ADN)	87%	87%	84%
Q7: Baccalaureate degree (BSN pre-licensure)	91%	91%	90%
Q7: Accelerated BSN program (pre-licensure)	85%	88%	84%

■ Q7: Associate degree (ADN) ■ Q7: Baccalaureate degree (BSN pre-licensure) ■ Q7: Accelerated BSN program (pre-licensure)
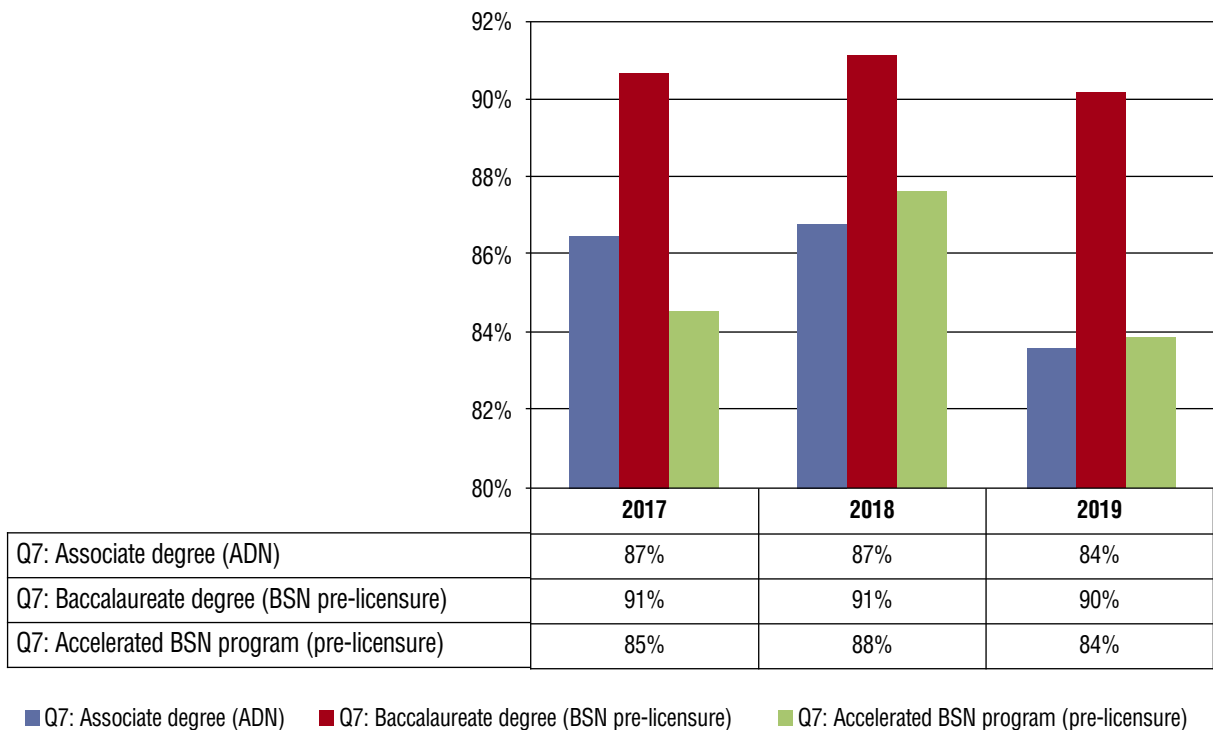
Figure 4A.
Overall Employment Rates by Types of Schools (Public, Private, Proprietary)

	2017	2018	2019
Public	89%	89%	87%
Private (not-for-profit)	88%	89%	88%
Private (for-profit)	84%	88%	83%

■ Public ■ Private (not-for-profit) ■ Private (for-profit)
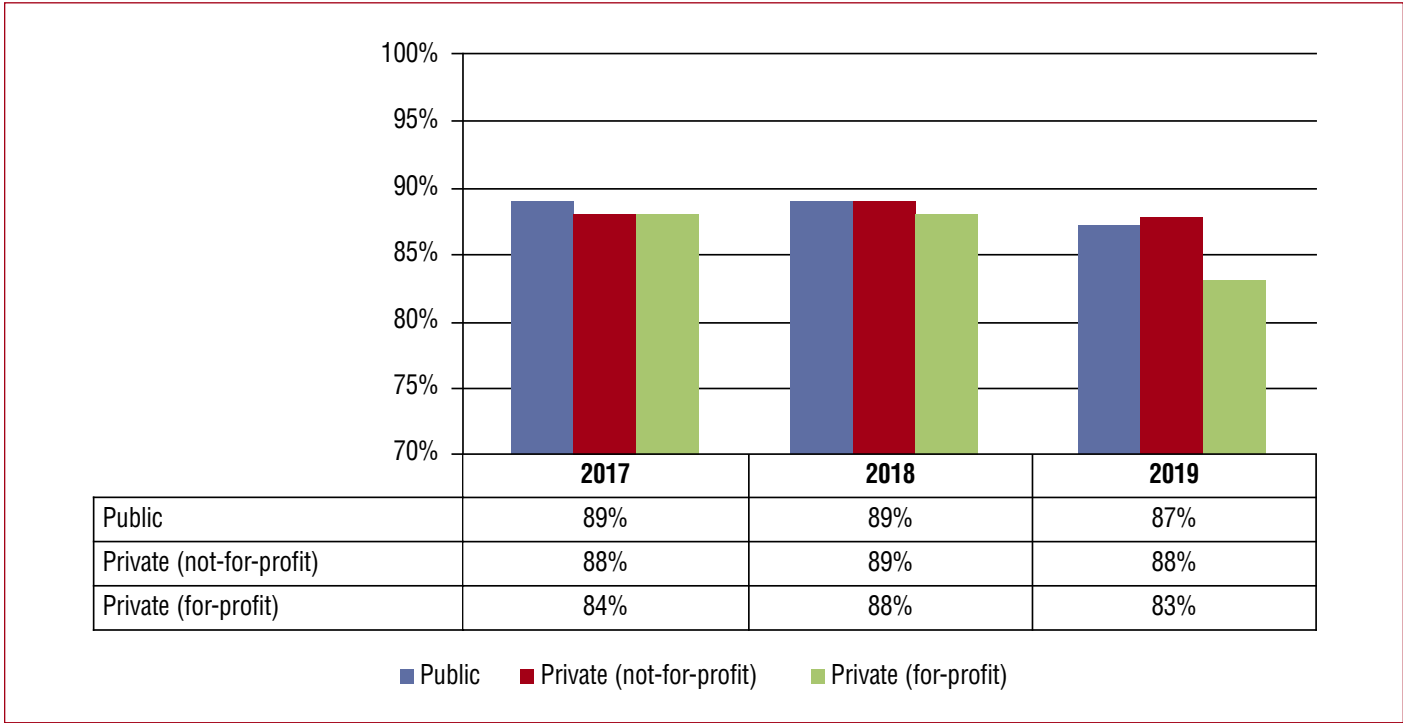
Figure 4B.
Regional Employment Rates by Types of Schools (Public, Private, Proprietary)

	South	West	Northeast	Central
Public	92%	76%	87%	95%
Private (not-for-profit)	92%	83%	83%	96%
Private (for-profit)	86%	81%	76%	92%

■ Public ■ Private (not-for-profit) ■ Private (for-profit)
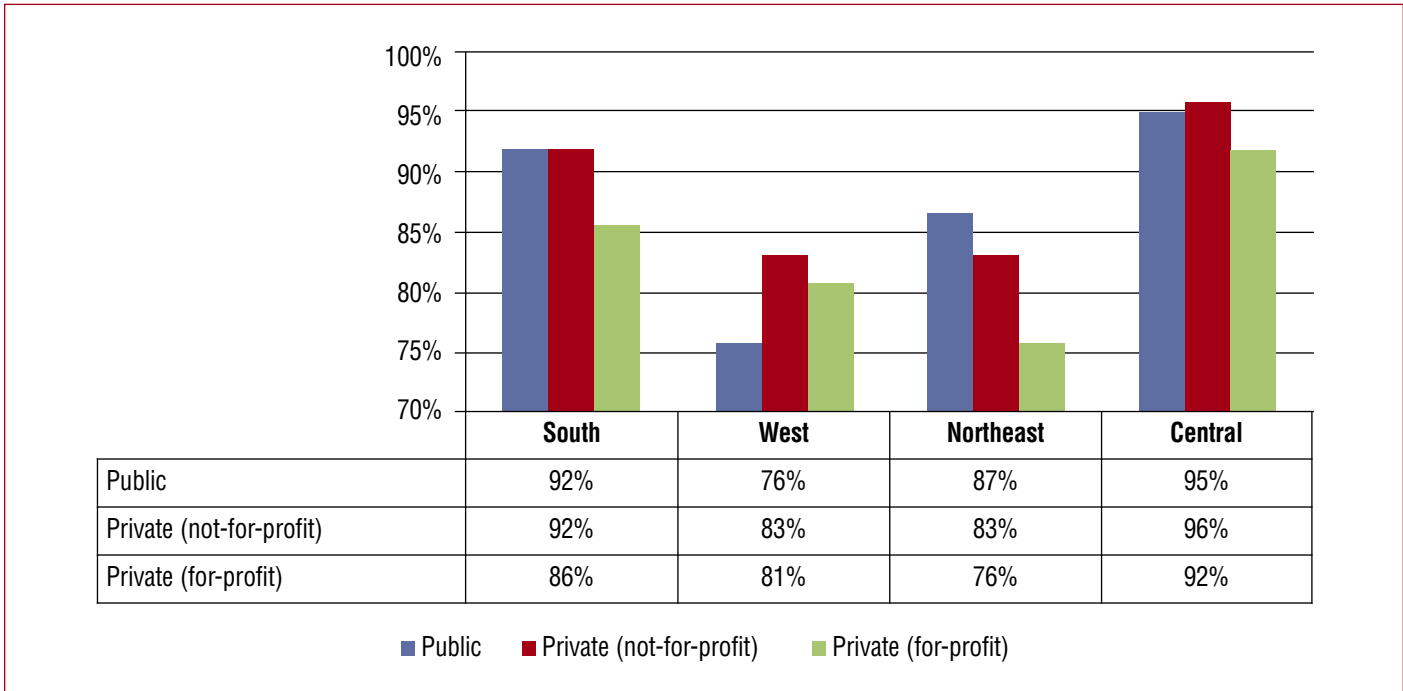
Figure 5.
Comparisons 2014 and 2019 Responses of Continuing BSN/MS Education

Question: If you graduated with an associate degree or from a diploma school of nursing and you are planning to purse an RN to BSN or RN to MSN, when will you enroll?
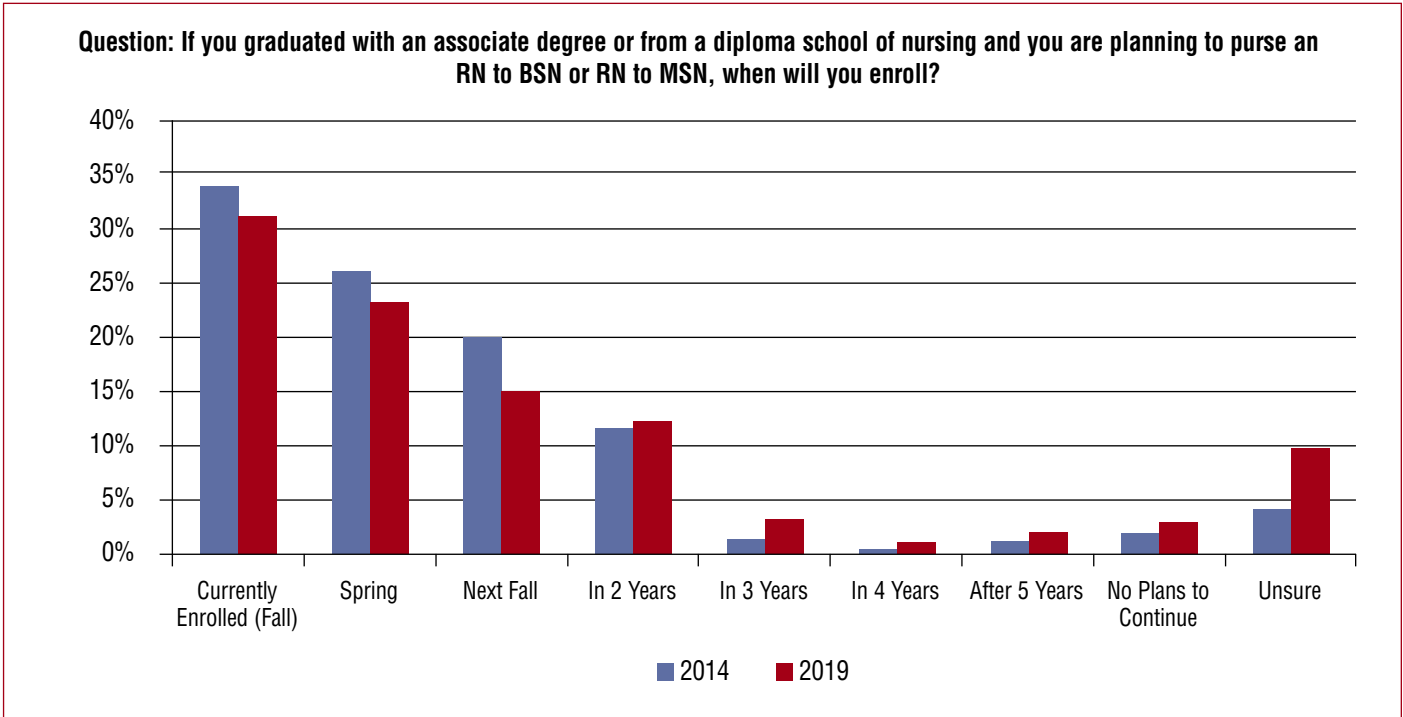
Figure 6.
Loan Debt by Type of Nursing Program
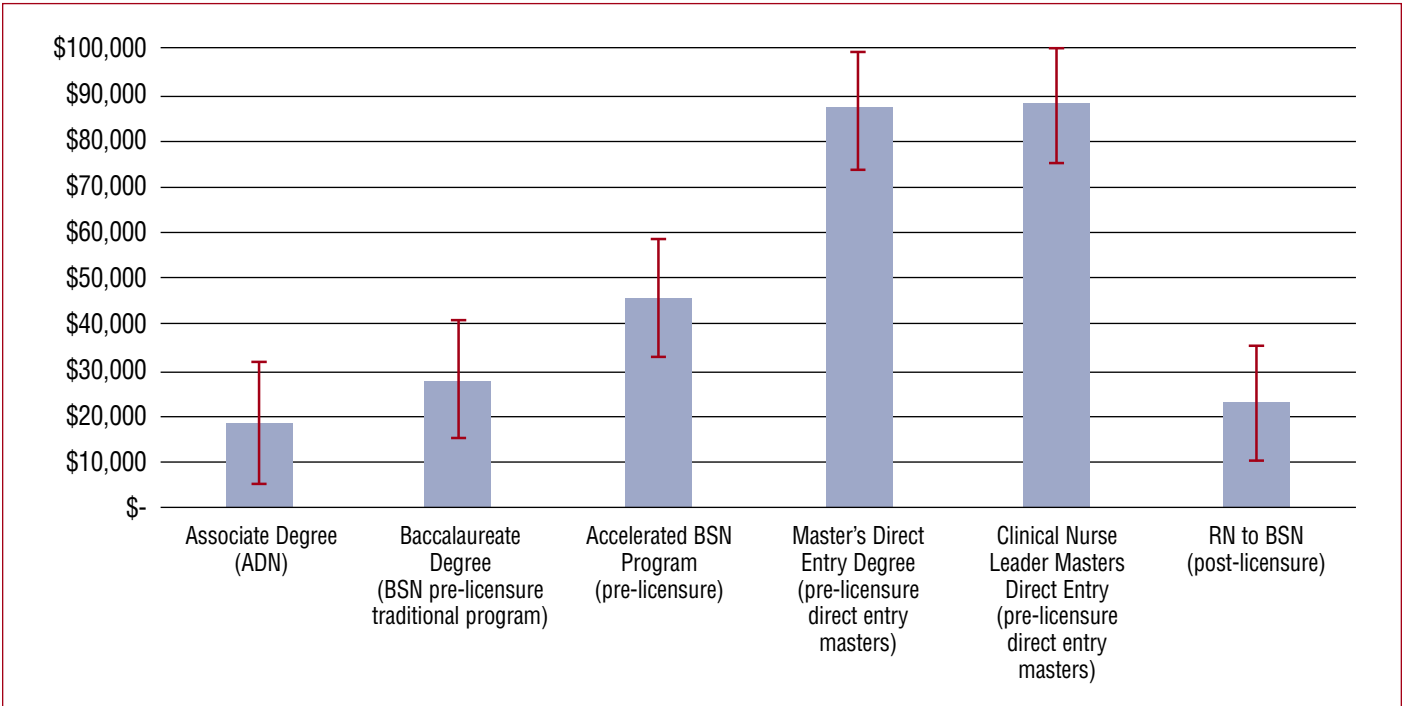
Figure 7.
Loan Debt by Types of Schools (Public, Private, Proprietary)
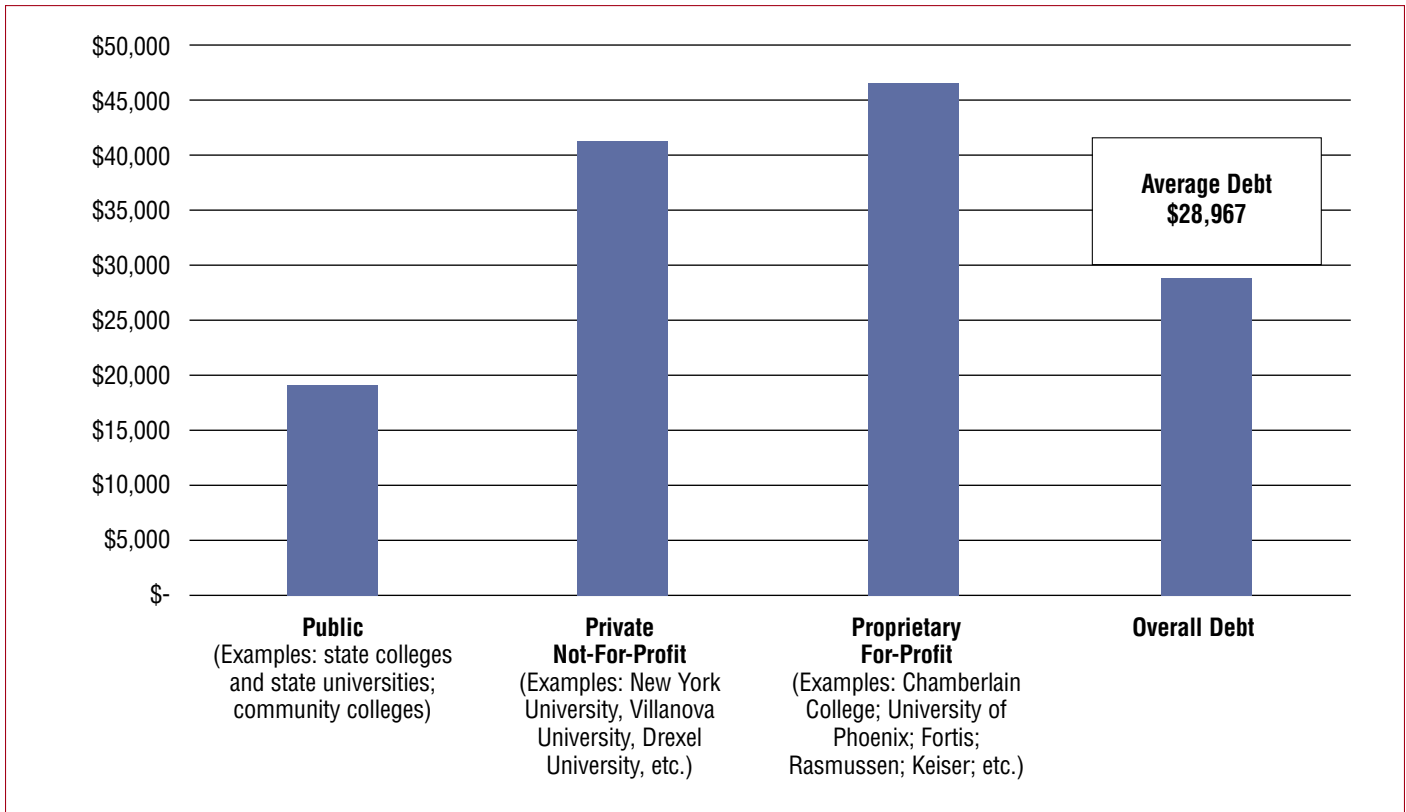
delayed indefinitely. In response to how clinical experiences were being implemented for spring 2020 prior to (and following) the COVID-19 pandemic, students selected a combination of options pre- and post- that were clearly different (see Figure 1A and Figure 1B). Less than 10% reported simulation/patient care as 50%/50%. In some cases (other typed in descriptions) students responded that 100% was simulation or virtual, with very few responding that 90-100% was patient care only.

New Nurses: Graduates From 2019

Consecutive data collection of new RN graduates from the NSNA survey reported over the past years provides insight into RN workforce and trends in nursing education, loan debt, and plans for additional education by nursing students. Clearly, these past trends may be impacted on the post-COVID-19 'Class of 2020' but, prior to this, employment demonstrated (over the past 10 years) a continuous upward movement or stable evidence of new graduates finding jobs and employment opportunities in all

areas of the country until this year; down overall from 2018 (89%) to (87%) in 2019, with a slightly downward trend all but the central region of the country (see Figure 2). If the trend indicates an emerging trend about employment, the class of 2020 – who were catapulted into practice quickly – and those students behind them who are experiencing more simulation-based education, may have a different employment experience than we have seen before 2019.

Breaking this down by types of programs, it appears that associate degree nurse (ADN) graduates were finding it more difficult to find employment (see Figure 3) ($p < 0.05$) in 2019 compared to previous years, and baccalaureate degree nurses (BSN) employment rates were higher than other types of programs.

To further explore how employment changed by types of schools (public, private [not-for-profit], and proprietary [for-profit]), findings suggest with the overall decrease in employment rates in 2019, especially regionally other than the central region, employment in all types of schools decreased from 2019 with the

widest drop in proprietary schools (see Figure 4A). This was also remarkable and varied by regions for 2019 (see Figure 4B) with low rates (76%) for public schools in the West. These differences suggest there may be differences in numbers of different types of schools responding by regions and the job market saturation impacts the West public schools even more than the other types of schools.

The Impact of Loan Debt on Future Education Plans

With the ongoing policy discussions about the burden of loan debt, it was important this year to examine the details about program choice and how nursing student loan debt may impact progression or continuation in nursing education. Does program type impact amount of loan debt and does loan debt influence students' plans to further their nursing education? These are important questions to raise with the national focus on student loan debt burden.

One focus was on whether or not ADN nurses planned to pursue higher education in general, and what plans all new graduates have in advanced

education. For a 5-year comparison, the question for analysis was:

> *If you have an Associates or Diploma Degree, when are you planning to enroll in advanced degree?*

Over the past years (2014-2018), the trend demonstrated diminishing plans to continue for a degree in the near future and more responses projected it as a future plan, with increasing unknown (see Figure 5).

Comparing 2019 and 2014, there is a clear downward trend in new graduates with ADN to pursue their BSN or MSN. For example, those 'currently enrolled' in 2019 (31%) were lower than those 'currently enrolled' in 2014 (34%); for those who are unsure or have no plans to continue, the increase is more than 7%. Analysis of the mean loan debt for these new graduates planning within 2 years ($m = $26,249) versus those without plans ($m = $29,704) was significantly different ($t = 3.55$, $p < 0.001$).

Comparing student loan debt data, programs were significantly different for program type as well as types of school. The overall loan debt for the Class of 2019 was $28,967 with a range of debt across different types of programs (see Figure 6). Although the average debt for Masters Direct Entry and Clinical Nurse Leaders Masters appear significantly higher, the mean scores are based on small samples relative to the ADN and BSN responses and should be interpreted with caution. Comparing ADN and BSN new graduates, there was a significant difference in average loan debt for ADN ($18,968) and BSN ($27,948) ($t = 9.98$, $p < 0.001$). Comparing types of schools, there was a significant difference in average loan debt for public ($19,007), private ($41,087), and proprietary schools ($46,664) ($p < 0.001$) (see Figure 7).

Discussion

With the introduction of COVID-19 into the world of health care and nursing, many new variables enter the examination of new RN graduate experiences. The data that will be collected beginning September 2020 will reflect a new graduate environment like none other than we have known in modern nursing. While it is early in the new world review of impacts on new graduate RNs, we anticipate a period of disruption followed by a leveling off once the population is vaccinated.

We will look to see what the impacts are from the alternations made in clinical requirements and settings for the nursing class of 2020. With the suspension of clinical experiences for nursing students by many hospitals, students were unable to meet the licensing exam requirements for clinical experience. The creation of a practice-academic partnership model, endorsed by the National Council of State Boards of Nursing (NCSBN) and several nursing organizations including NSNA, supports academic recognition for supervised clinical experience for senior students practicing in healthcare settings. The academic institution accepts work hours for the fulfillment of clinical hours. Success of this model has been reported in Idaho and Iowa for both ADN and BSN (NCSBN, 2020). As this model is embraced and more practice-academic partnerships are established, this innovative solution, born out of a crisis, may have a positive lasting impact on fulfilling clinical requirements and providing employment for nursing students.

In New York State, pre-licensure healthcare students may volunteer in healthcare facilities for educational credit without an affiliation agreement. The success of this model has not yet been reported.

The 2020 survey will investigate various scenarios reported by students such as not being able to graduate on time, job loss impact on completing school, and availability of entry-level positions. With an expectation that there may be a second wave of the virus before a vaccine is available places new graduates at high risk for unemployment. The virus is now surging in many states and hospitals are becoming overwhelmed with COVID-19 patients. Hiring and onboarding new graduates during a crisis may not be feasible especially when experienced nurses are preferred.

Will we once again have an oversupply of new graduates (as we did during the Great Recession) who will not be hired because of lack of experience and insufficient hospital resources? Reports are emerging of nurse layoffs, furloughs, and hiring and wage freezes (Gooch, 2020). Hospitals are accumulating large debt resulting from the pandemic. Without relief from the federal government, hospitals are in danger of default and insolvency. Losses from the suspension of non-emergency procedures will be difficult to recoup as the virus continues to surge in many places. Indeed, the ripple effect will impact all segments of healthcare delivery and population health in general.

As for student loans, it will behoove Congress to grant student loan relief once again. Unemployment and underemployment will make student loan repayment difficult for many new graduates. Additionally, students who could not graduate on time will most likely require more loans and thus increase their loan burden. Will they have time and resources to advance their education to the next degree? This too will be examined as we query the class of 2020.

As we watch these trends unfold, college administrators need to keep the student perspective foremost in decision making. As the fall semester approaches, academic institutions are faced with many difficult decisions. The safety of students and faculty must guide decision making – not politics. Nursing education leaders and faculty are urged to advocate for their students as we all face a very challenging future. **DN**

The convenience sample of nursing students who are members of the NSNA and indicated that Spring 2019 was their graduation date were sent the survey via SurveyMonkey® yielding responses from $n = 4,740$ (23% surveys opened/10% all surveys sent to multiple emails from database members) that were cleaned to include employment responses filtered by "graduation Winter/Spring/Summer 2018 and Spring/Summer 2019" ($n = 4,536$). Using an estimated date of survey returned between October and December 2019, the data represent approximately 4 months to 1-year post graduation. Percentages are rounded to the nearest percent.

References

Feeg, V., & Mancino, D.J. (2019). Loan debt for new graduates in nursing: How employment post graduation and student loan debt are affected over time. *DEAN's Notes, 41*(1), 1-5.

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National Council of State Boards of Nursing (NCSBN). (2020). *Practice-academic partnerships FAQs.* https://www.ncsbn.org/14573.htm

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We are excited to be offering the 38th NSNA MidYear Conference on a virtual platform this upcoming fall which will allow us to gather together across the nation. The event will be held from October 29-31, 2020. Our theme for the conference is: The Challenge of Change. MidYear Conference provides faculty workshops earning affordable continuing education units and offers students exposure to nursing specialty areas and career and leadership development workshops. The conference includes an affordable NCLEX-RN review. Additionally, we have many exciting educational sessions, panels, and an exhibit hall filled with networking opportunities.

You can find more information about the MidYear Conference by visiting www.nsnamidyear.org

Stay tuned as we continue to provide informative and stimulating educational programs this Fall!