

Employment Trends and the Impact of the Pandemic on 2020 New Graduates' Pre-Graduation Learning Experiences and Job Search in the First 6 Months

Veronica Feeg, Diane J. Mancino, and Camilita Rahat Goberdhan

Across the United States in the early spring months of 2020 in March, April, and May, nursing schools were profoundly disrupted by a raging pandemic that forced closures of all education and businesses and non-essential workers to 'lock down' to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. This included halting all academic and clinical education experiences that challenged schools with how to move forward with students in the pipeline – many of them on the eve of their graduation into careers as healthcare workers. When hospitals halted the clinical experiences for students by necessity, nursing programs were forced to quickly adapt to redesign learning in the best possible ways to continue the production of critically needed healthcare workers who were becoming overwhelmed by the unprecedented surges of critically ill COVID-19 patients in the corridors. The U.S. economy felt the impact that lasted for many months with record unemployment and serious food and housing crises for hard-hit families. The new graduates of 2020 faced an unusual job market as they looked for their first nursing positions with a different set of simulation and virtual clinical pre-graduation experiences to launch them into their careers.

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 years. The 2019 pre-pandemic results showed some troubling signs that suggested a pattern that followed the overall U.S. economy (Feeg & Mancino, 2020). The relevance of these findings



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and the multi-year trends since 2009 are important in identifying a baseline upon which the impact of the year 2020 – 'Year of Coronavirus' – unleashed a landscape of workforce sea changes yet to be fully resolved. The Annual NSNA New Graduate Survey snapshot in time remains relevant to an understanding of new graduate experiences in the context of previous years. What were the trends in new graduate employment for the class of 2020 during COVID-19 relative to previous years, and did the students' final experiences with altered education affect their personal preparedness to work in health care at the time?

Background: Impact of the 'Lock-Down' on NSNA Students

When the pandemic hit, nursing schools everywhere were told with short notice to close campuses and change the delivery of education to remote and simulation learning. At the time, results from a published survey conducted by the NSNA about the students' experiences demonstrated that the alternative learning activities during the social distancing period were greatly impacted. From the responses, which included complete data on most items from 1,885 nursing students who were current members of NSNA, student pre-graduation work was

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clearly different than the past: 75% of the students reported their academic activities have been moved to online formats, and 31% described a variety of “other” modes including:

- Class and clinical simulations.
- Virtual clinicals.
- Case studies.
- Waiting for online courses or clinicals.
- Delayed indefinitely.

In response to how clinical experiences were being implemented for the spring 2020 semester prior to and following the COVID-19 pandemic, students reported a different learning experience than ever before (Feeg & Mancino, 2020). The NSNA Annual New Graduate Survey of the 2020 graduating class sought to answer the question of whether or not this unusual finale to nursing students’ education had an impact on their job search and confidence in their ability to practice in their new jobs.

New Nurses: 2020 Graduates

Consecutive data collection of new RN graduates from the NSNA survey reported over the past years provides insight into the RN workforce and trends in nursing education. The class of 2020 was a unique cohort whose employment searches added insights relative to the past 10 years and the economic health of the country described in previous years (Feeg & Mancino, 2019). Over the first years of the survey, new graduates found success demonstrated as a continuous upward movement or stable evidence of new graduates finding jobs and employment opportunities in all areas of the country. In 2019, the trend changed: down overall from 2018 (89%) to 87% in 2019, with a slightly downward trend all but the Central region of the country (see Figure 1).

The NSNA Annual New Graduate Survey was sent via SurveyMonkey® to the list of nursing students from the membership list of the NSNA indicating spring 2020 was their graduation date. The questions varied to focus on current job search success, past educational experiences, future plans, and personal reflections on the new graduates’ confidence in their practice as they enter the job market.

The results about employment for the class of 2020 confirmed the job market in the pandemic was different than prior years, with continuing similar patterns by regions (see Figure 1) (Feeg et al., 2021). Overall, employment of new graduates in 2020 was down to 85%

Figure 1.
Employment Trends by Regions of the Country (2009-2020)

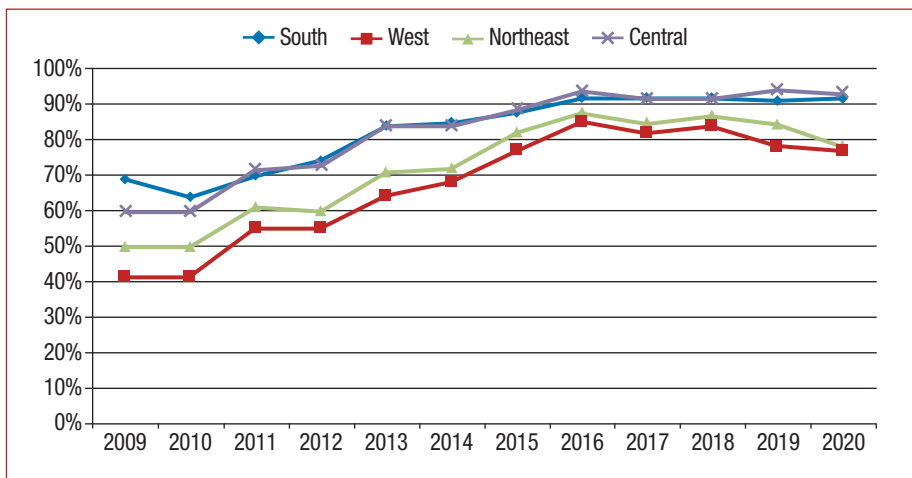
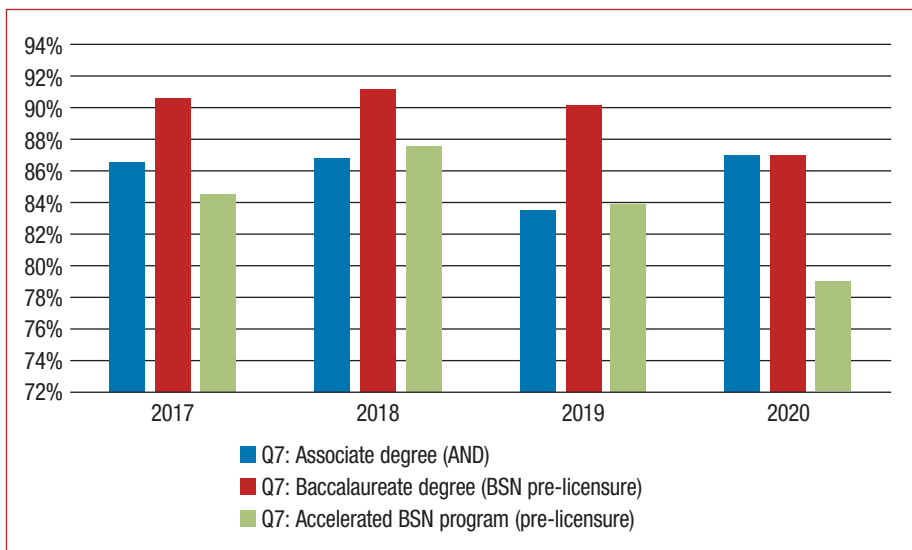


Figure 2.
Employment Trends by Types of Educational Programs (2017-2020)



from 2019 (87%) and 2018 (89%), declining by two percent each year over the past 3 years. Employment trends across the country have demonstrated the regional aspects of the job market with this year lower than last year in all regions but the South. The lowest employment was experienced in the West (77%) and the Northeast (79%), reflecting the areas hit hardest by the surges of COVID-19 in-patient admissions.

Employment by types of programs continued to vary over the past years. This year, new graduates employed from Associate Degree programs (87.4%) were minimally higher than BSN programs (86.8%); while both were higher than Accelerated Baccalaureate graduates (79%), which marked a significant

change from the past years. Associate Degree programs increased by three percent and Accelerated Baccalaureate graduates decreased by three percent (see Figure 2).

Employment trends by types of schools also continued to vary over the past years. This year, rates of employment for new graduates from public schools (88%) were more than private and proprietary (for-profit) schools (each 82%) (see Figure 3). There were also regional differences of employment by types of schools with all types (public, private, for-profit) highest in the Central region than other areas of the country (see Figure 4).

Over the past years, the survey asked the same questions about how new graduates reported the job market.

Figure 3.
Employment Trends by Types of Schools (2017-2020)

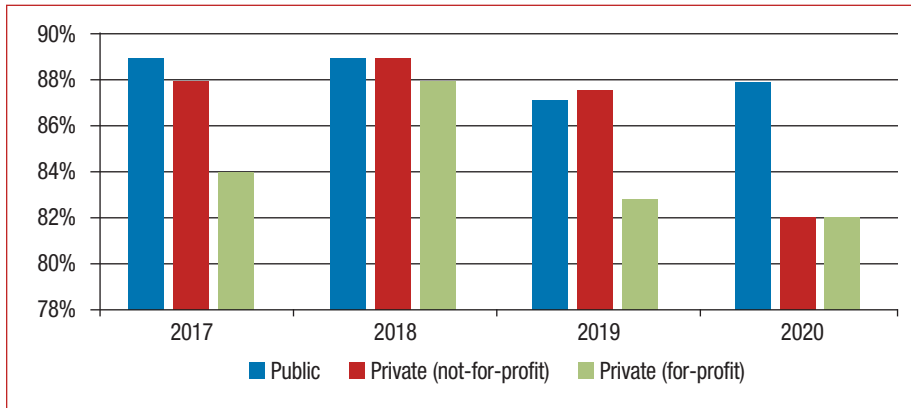


Figure 4.
Regional Employment Rates by Types of Schools

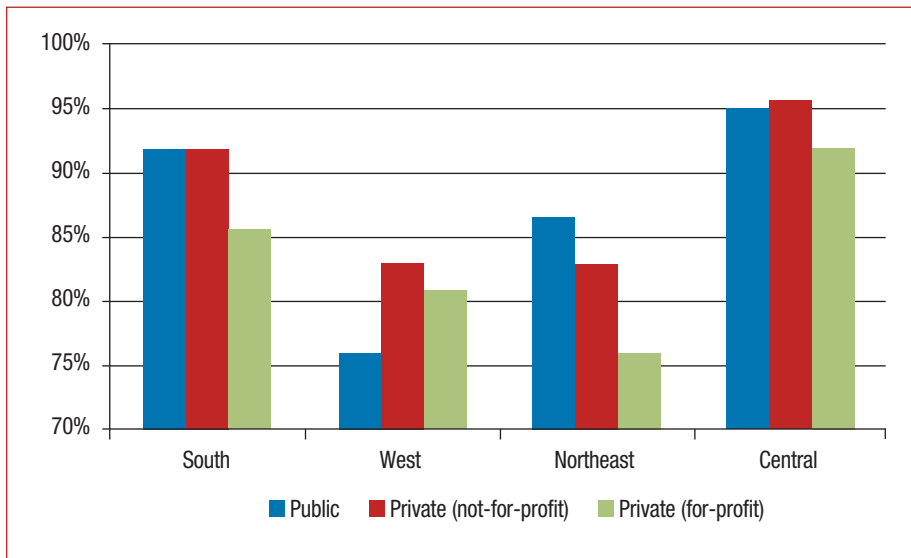
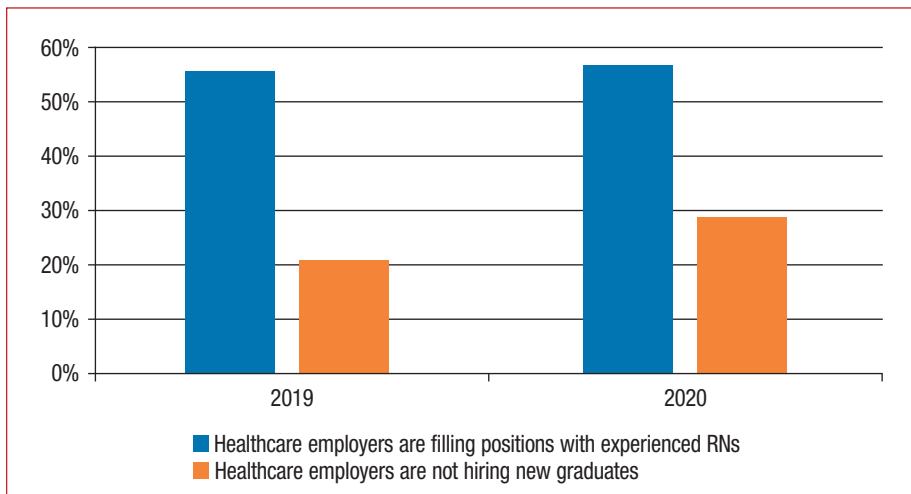


Figure 5.
New Graduates' Perceptions of Healthcare Employers' Preferences



Their perceptions of employers' preferences indicated a change in their beliefs since 2019 that employers were filling positions with experienced RNs (up one percent) and are not hiring new graduates (up eight percent) (see Figure 5). Additional questions about hiring 'bad news' for new graduates confirmed a major change in hiring freezes (48%), discontinuation of new grad orientation (18%) and residency programs (12%), hospitals closing departments (33%), and – surprisingly – RNs being laid off (24%) (see Figure 6).

The Impact of Changed Pre-Graduation Clinical Experiences

With the impact of the early days of the pandemic being felt nationally, there were different approaches in how schools adjusted to accommodating the students' clinical requirements. According to the survey, new graduates reported canceled or pivoting to online clinical experiences often at the end of their senior year. More than 90% of respondents reported more than 50% of their clinicals were canceled. To examine how the abrupt changes affected graduating students' self-report of confidence in their search for employment, the self-reported confidence related to their discontinued clinicals (> 50%) versus those with more than half in-person clinicals. The survey included a visual analog scale asking, "How confident do you or did you feel in your ability to practice? (0 to 100)." The results confirmed there was a significant mean score difference in confidence for new graduates with discontinued clinicals (> 50%) versus unchanged (regular) clinicals (> 50%) (62.2 vs 68.9, $p < 0.01$) (see Table 1). To further examine the amount of online clinicals differences, students were asked, "Please estimate how much of your clinical education was online in the Spring 2020 semester as a result of COVID-19. Choose the one best answer that fits your experience." There was a significant difference in the reported mean scores by the estimate of online clinicals (no online; very few online; moderate amount online; significant amount of online; all clinicals online) ($F = 5.98, p < 0.001$) (see Figure 7).

Discussion

The unique situation experienced by the class of 2020 nurse graduates has no historical parallels. Employers were overwhelmed with the management of COVID-19 patients, closure of units, RN layoffs due to restrictions on admissions

Figure 6.
New Graduate Perceptions of the RN Job Market in 2020

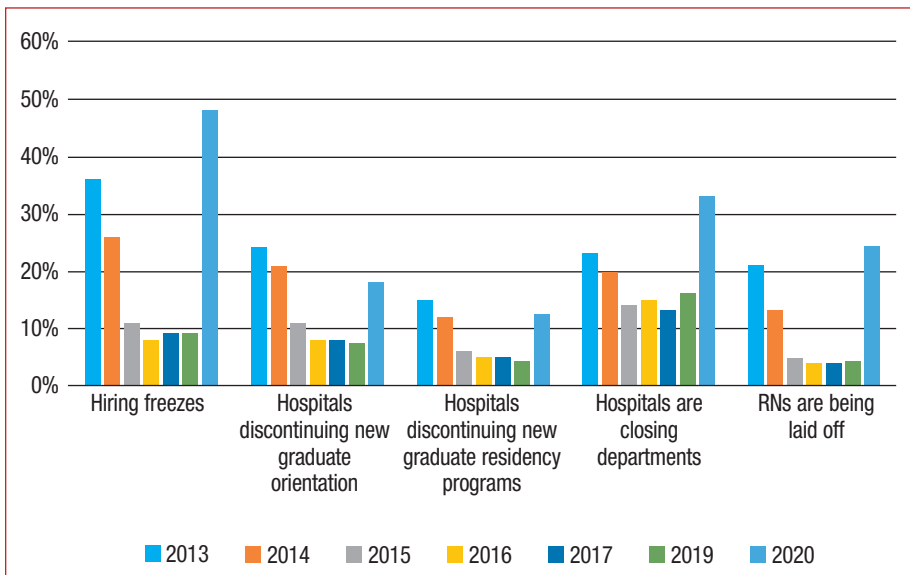


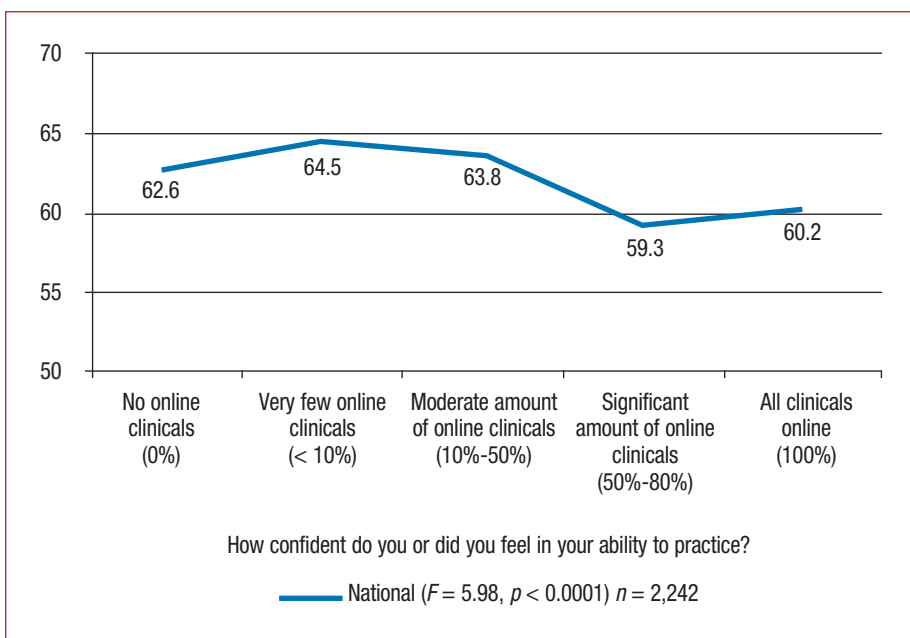
Table 1.
Mean Score Comparisons Reported Confidence to Practice by Clinicals Discontinued

“How confident do you or did you feel in your ability to practice?” (0 to 100)

	<i>n</i> = YES (percent)	Mean Confidence (SD)
Discontinued Clinicals > 50%	<i>n</i> = 1,825 (91%)	62.2 (23)
Regular Clinicals > 50%	<i>n</i> = 190 (9%)	68.9 (69)
	t-test (df)	-3.80 (2,013)

Figure 7.
Confidence to Practice by Estimate Amount of Clinicals Online

“How confident do you or did you feel in your ability to practice?” (0 to 100)



of non-COVID-19 patients, and nursing staff grappling with a myriad of issues surrounding patient care that were out of their control. Just when things seemed to be settling down, COVID-19 variants – especially the Delta variant – are rapidly spreading. The current surge (which changes day-to-day) is prevalent in states and countries where vaccination rates are low, with higher incidence emerging in younger people.

One major shift seen in the nursing workforce is the rise in demand for travel/agency nurses. With an influx of travelers in ICUs, word quickly spread that compensation was much higher for travelers. Many staff nurses who had the flexibility took the leap and hit the road. This is a trend worth watching as the shortage of nurses continues to grow.

It comes as no surprise the self-reported confidence levels of new graduates with limited opportunities for direct patient care was impacted by COVID-19 restrictions. Employers should recognize the need to provide accommodations for new graduates with additional simulation and patient contact during orientation. An increase in residencies, extended orientations, and lengthened preceptorships will help ease the new graduate RN transition to the workforce.

As we finalized this report for release in *DEAN's Notes*, rules and regulations surrounding vaccine requirements, masking, and social distancing are changing daily. Lessons learned from the experience of two surges in the United States will help inform our preparation for future surges. As the most trusted profession, nurses – new and seasoned – play an important role in educating the public to get vaccinated. As nursing students and nurse faculty plan to return to college and university campuses this fall, administrators face hard decisions surrounding vaccination requirements. While many colleges and universities may not mandate vaccination, many clinical sites will require students to be vaccinated. How this is resolved remains to be seen.

The 2021 NSNA Annual New Graduate Survey will be launched in mid-September. The NSNA/Molloy College research team is eager to see how the employment rate for the class is 2021 differs from previous years. One early sign of a nursing shortage is the emergence of sign-on bonuses, which is now prevalent in many states in the South. Another sign is the re-surfacing of discussions related to nurse importation.

For those of us who have been through nursing shortages before, it

seems that we remain stymied when it comes to addressing the complexities that surround nursing student recruitment, adequate faculty and clinical placements, impediments to graduation, and nurse retention. Keeping our finger on the pulse of new graduate employment data can give us some insights into the immediate future – if not a vision of what might be on the horizon – to prepare ourselves of what’s to come. **DN**

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The convenience sample of nursing students who are members of the NSNA and indicated that Spring 2020 was their graduation date were sent the survey via SurveyMonkey® yielding responses from $n = 4,199$ total that were filtered by “graduation Winter/Spring/Summer 2019 and Spring/Summer 2020” ($n = 4,019$) and cleaned to include employment responses ($n = 3,895$). Using an estimated date of survey returned between October and December 2020, the data represent approximately 4 months to 1 year post-graduation. Percentages are rounded to the nearest percent.

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