

New Graduates Employment Trends from the Classes of 2020 to 2022: How COVID-19 Continues to Impact Transition to Practice

It is now over three years since the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic and the nation's nursing workforce began to feel the impact of unprecedented disruption in nursing education and healthcare systems. In some parts of the country, new graduates in 2020 were the first immediate victims of the virus-related closures of schools because they graduated in the Spring of that year and sought jobs. Hospitals and other healthcare institutions operated in crisis mode to meet the needs of sick and dying patients over the years. Many graduating seniors lost their capstone and precepted experiences. When hospitals re-opened closed units, the nurse recruiters and hospital administrators were skeptical of hiring new graduates who lacked experience and hospital educators faced the new problems of preparing inexperienced new hires.

Following years of continuous changes in nursing education, new graduates in the class of 2021, who may have survived changes in their academic experiences, faced a plentiful job market as it recovered from the emergency state of the prior year with new hires and orientation programs to attract graduating seniors. However, as 2022 new graduates entered the market, they may have been the first new cohort having lived through more than two years of the most critical learning experiences in their nursing education when programs were forced to pivot and substitute clinical hours with simulation and virtual learning. Across the United States in the Spring of 2022, nursing students approached the launch of a nursing career and their impending transition to practice (TTP) with a different portfolio of



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altered clinical experiences and a health-care system that was still struggling to make up for having limited opportunities for new graduates in the prior year (Feeg et al., 2021; Feeg et al., 2022).

New nurses graduating with multiple years impacted by COVID-19 were compromised more than previous cohorts when their clinical learning environments in school changed and their opportunities to apply theory and skills in real situations were limited for several years. Understanding these new graduates' first job experience is essential to inform educators, recruiters, and hospital administrators. Monitoring differences across years of these different cohorts of new graduate nurses (NGNs) can provide

insights to understand how they TTP to retain them best and future new graduates in their nursing careers.

A Looming New Nursing Shortage

Reports of critical nursing shortages existed before but accelerated after the pandemic grew in many areas of the United States and globally. A total of 13 million nurses will need to be replaced worldwide within the coming years, according to a March 2023 International Council of Nurses (ICN) report (ICN Policy Brief, 2023). In a study done by Nurse.org, Lyons reported that the shortage may be worse than projected for 42 out of 50 states. However, eight states, including Vermont, Maine, Rhode Island, West Virginia, Alabama, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, and New Hampshire, will have more nurses than they need by 2030 (Lyons, 2023). As new data from the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) Report demonstrate consistent enrollment declines across higher education, there is growing concern about nursing schools turning away thousands of qualified applicants (AACN, 2023), thus limiting the supply in future

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years. More than ever, we need to understand the impact of stresses reported by nurses in what is contributing to unhealthy work environments described in a report by the American Nurses Foundation (ANF) (ANF, 2022) with nurses reporting leaving their jobs (Martin et al., 2023). Moreover, we must be mindful of the stresses described by NGNs as they enter the workforce as seasoned nurses retire. NGNs fear missing important details or doing something wrong in providing patient care. In a study by Smith and colleagues (2021), new nurses identify the need for preceptor support, guidance, teaching, and continued practice of skills.

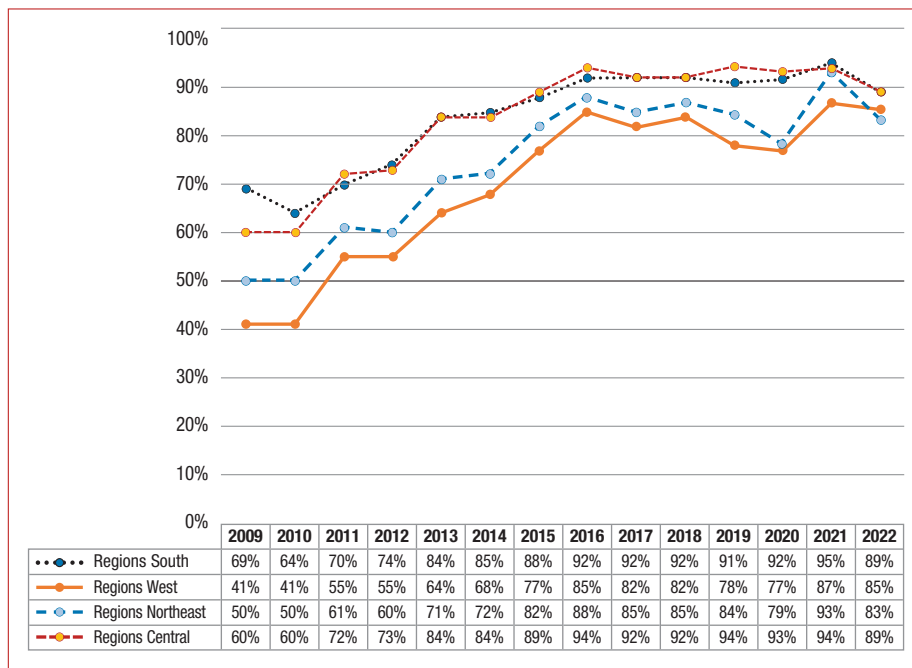
Background – Transition to Practice During, Mid-, and Post-Pandemic Crisis

The period of TTP is a critical time that has been studied for years but introduced new challenges for all pandemic graduates. Since the early days of 2009, the annual survey of the National Student Nurses Association (NSNA) has reported on the growth of registered nurses (RN) employment and associated trends over the previous years. Finding the right first job and then having the right preparation for the complexity of the workplace provides the annual NSNA survey several insights from new graduates related to employment, entering the workforce, and the education that prepared them. Since trends for the ‘pandemic crisis’ 2020 class were an anomaly that was demonstrated in the data of the “Year of the Coronavirus,” published in 2021 (Feeg et al., 2021), the NSNA New Graduate Survey snapshot in time of subsequent years of the Class of 2021 (‘mid-pandemic crisis’) and the recent Class of 2022 (‘post-pandemic crisis’) may offer new insights about the future workforce in nursing. Did the students report different job attainment, a change in confidence in their ability to practice, having a mentor, and satisfaction that their education prepared them well?

The NSNA Annual New Graduate Nurses Survey

The annual NSNA New Graduate Survey was sent to new graduates for the Class of 2022 via SurveyMonkey® to the membership list of nursing students of the NSNA who indicated that Spring 2022 was their graduation date. The web-based surveys invited participants to report their experiences in their job search voluntarily. Responses have varied over the past years to yield samples from usable responses ranging for 2020 (N = 1885),

Figure 1.
New Graduate Employment Trends by Regions: 2009 to 2022



2021 (N = 2691), and 2022 (N = 1115) participants. The questions varied to focus on current job search success, past educational experiences, having a mentor, and new graduates’ confidence in their practice as they enter the job market. Data from the responses for the last three years enable comparisons across three new graduate cohorts to answer the following questions: How well did new graduates find jobs in the 2020, 2021, and 2022 job market? How soon did they get employed and what were the hiring trends? Did they feel their education prepared them for the workplace? Did they have mentors? What factors impacted their confidence to practice in job search and transition to the workplace?

Results

Over the years, consecutive data collection of new RN graduates from the NSNA survey provided insight into the RN workforce and trends in NGN job search and preparation for their role transition from student to nurse. The class of 2022 responses to the survey shed light on this cohort’s TTP relative to past years and the country’s economic health described in previous years (Feeg & Mancino, 2019; Feeg & Mancino, 2020). Trends had bounced back significantly in 2021 with record employment of new graduates but seems to have dropped for the class of 2022, as indicated in Figure 1.

The results about employment for the class of 2022 suggested that although the job market had greatly improved over the previous year to almost record levels for all regions since 2009 until 2020, overall, employment of new graduates in 2022 was down from 92% in 2021 to 89% overall and decreases in all regions except the West (85%). Employment trends across the country seemed to converge. The lowest employment was in the Northeast (83%), dropping 10% from the previous year where the most gains reflected the job recovery from areas hit hardest by the surges of COVID-19 cases in 2020 and including states reported to be oversupplied by 2030 by Lyons (2023). New graduates reported that 53% found jobs in their communities compared to 83% from 2021, and for those who had jobs, 95% were hired within three months.

Employment by types of programs all varied over past years, especially 2022 versus 2021: Associate Degree programs decreased by 5% (86% versus 91%), Baccalaureate programs decreased by 4% (88% versus 93%) and Accelerated programs decreased by 6% (85% versus 91%) (Figure 2).

Reported trends by types of schools for graduates in 2022 also suggested decreases in employment among public, private, and private for-profit schools (Figure 3).

Figure 2.
New Graduate Employment Trends by Types of Educational Programs: 2017 to 2022

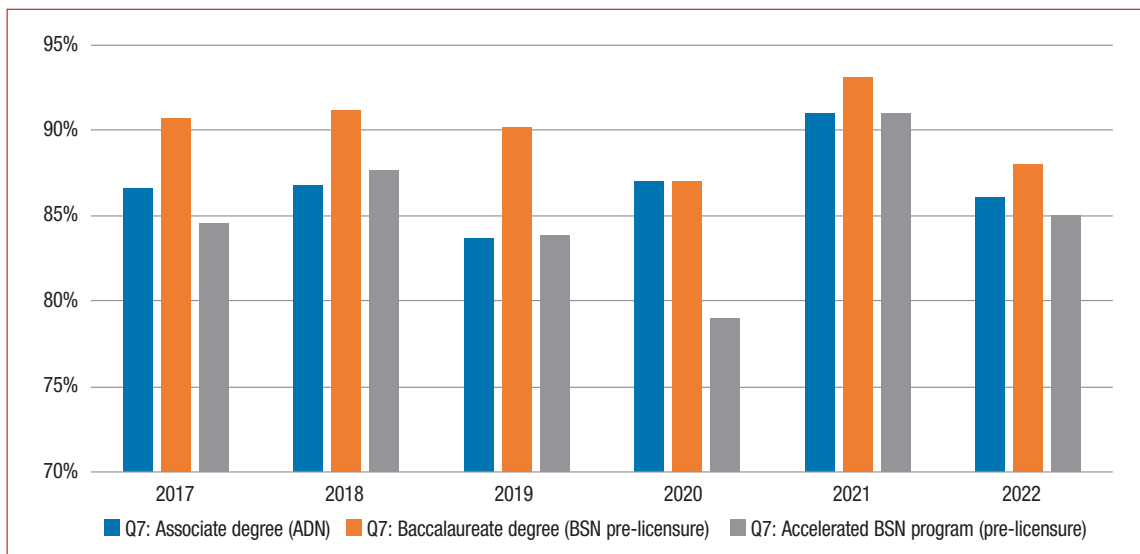
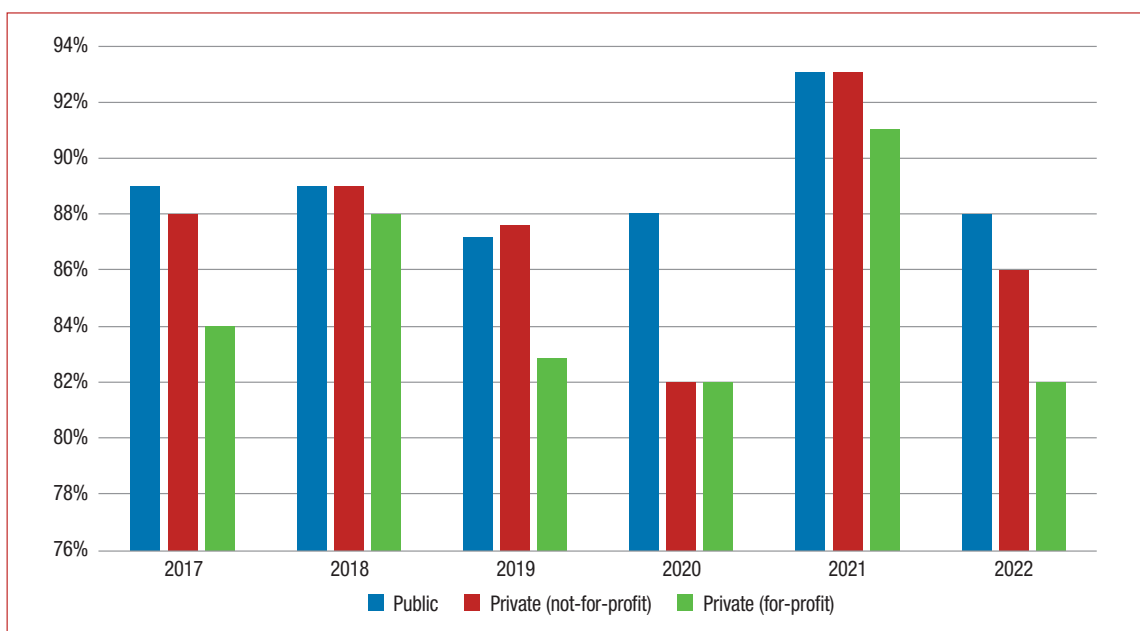


Figure 3.
New Graduate Employment Trends by Types of Schools: 2017 to 2022



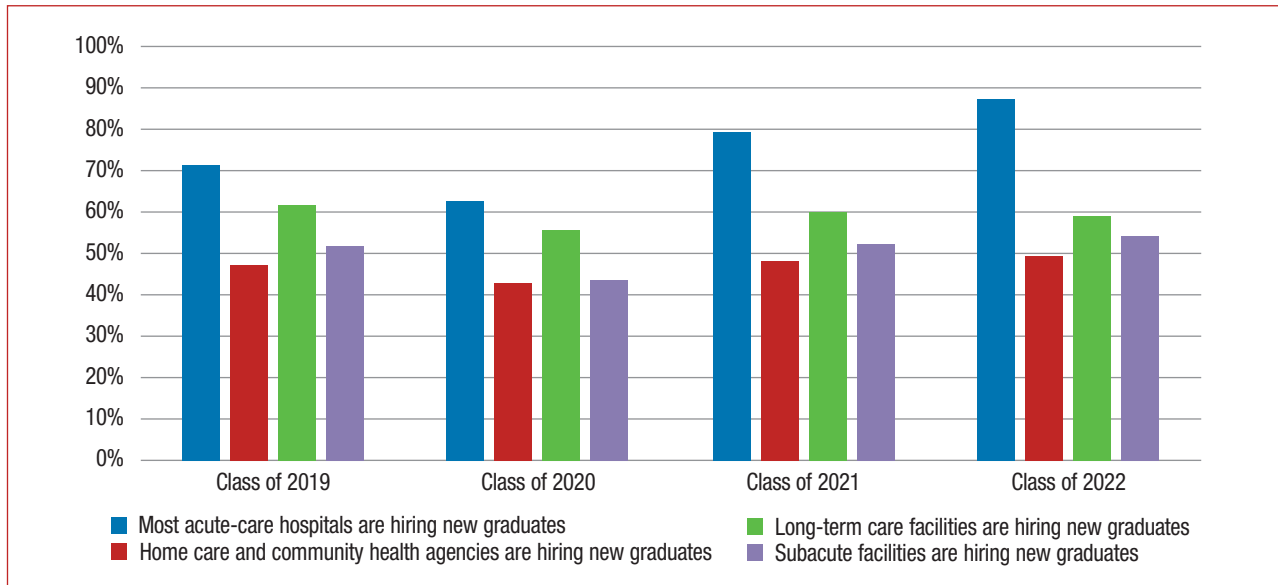
Over the past years, the survey asked the same questions about how new graduates perceived the job market. Hiring trends reported by job seekers confirm perceptions in the shortage literature that acute care hospitals are hiring new graduates, up from 2021 (79%) to the only increase in overall trends at 83%. Home care and community health agencies, long-term care facilities, and sub-acute facilities appeared relatively similar to 2021 and slightly higher than previous years (Figure 4).

The Impact of Changed Pre-Graduation Learning on Transition to Practice Confidence and Stress

The class of 2022 was different than their 2020 and 2021 senior counterparts since the Spring of 2020 saw closures of schools and real patient contact was completely limited for some regions of the country, as reported by Feeg and colleagues (2021). The class of 2020 reported a direct impact of lowered confidence and higher stress related to the amount of

simulation and discontinued clinicals. While the final year of clinical learning was changed in 2020 for all classes, the pivot in nursing schools also produced sustained changes. The 2021 graduates may have also had some limitations on their third-year experiences but had improved by Spring prior to graduation (Feeg et al., 2022). The class of 2022 has felt the impact of an evolving education that affected all three of their most clinically intensive years. NGNs self-reported confidence (1-100) dropped significantly for

Figure 4.
Hiring Trends in Acute Care, Home Care, Long-term, and Subacute Care Facilities
(Graduation Class Comparisons - 2019 to 2022)

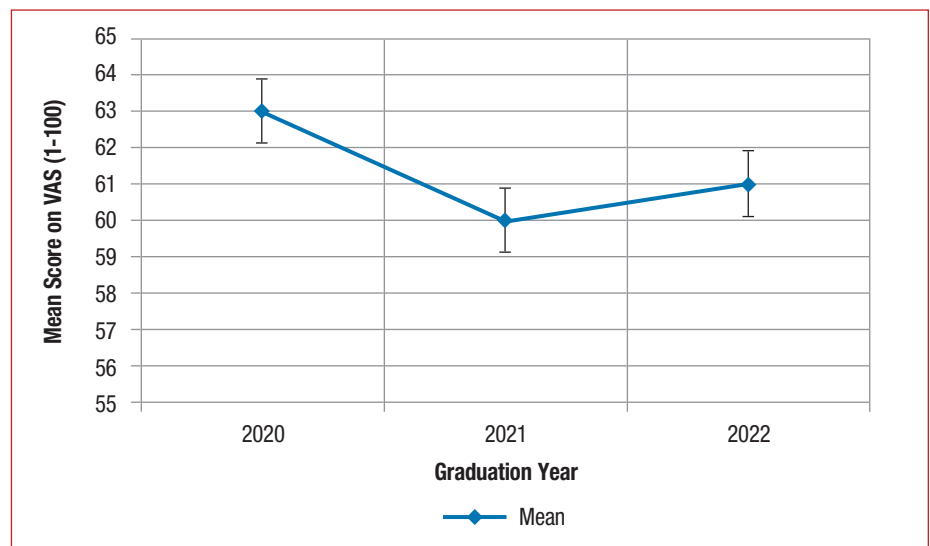


confidence to practice related to their ability to practice in 2021 and 2022 (Figure 5) and related to whether they felt adequately prepared by their nursing education (Figure 6). What is most surprising is that the ‘pandemic’ graduating class of 2020 may have felt the most abrupt change in nursing education related to COVID-19 closures in March and April compared to the ‘mid-pandemic crisis’ (class of 2021) and ‘post-pandemic crisis’ (class of 2022), but their confidence score yielded the highest (mean = 63) and the highest percentage who felt they were ‘adequately prepared’ (67%).

One area of concern in 2020 and 2021 was the response that less than 1 out of 3 NGNs reported having a mentor (Feeg et al., 2022). The graduates of 2022 reported an increase of 13% to the question of having a mentor (Figure 7) and examining their responses to self-reported confidence, having a mentor significantly impacted their confidence to practice for all three years (Figure 8), especially for the ‘Pandemic Class of 2020.’ Once again, it is clear that all new graduates benefit from the trusted advice and counseling of a mentor, as described by Vance (2022).

One positive finding that may offer constructive advice from the data is the comparison question, “Do you consider your work or practice environment to be healthy and/or positive?” Less than 28% of NGNs from the class of 2022 responded “No,” and 72% responded “Yes.” This

Figure 5.
How Confident Do You or Did You Feel in Your Ability to Practice When Looking for a Job?



same survey item was answered in the ANF 2022 survey of nurses in the United States and less than half (42%) responded “Yes.” Our recent graduates in 2022 brought a collective optimism to the job and let us hope that those three out of four who responded positively to the question retain that new attitude in the workplace.

Discussion

The pandemic years have left profound changes in many aspects of work life for every industry in the United

States, and the educational pipeline of new nurses that supply the healthcare system was deeply affected. How the new graduates found employment over the past three years and transitioned into the role of professional nursing appears to have differed in their job search, first employment, and assimilation into the nursing workforce. Although it is difficult to explain why they reported decreases in getting jobs when there is other evidence that there is a nursing shortage, it seems that their first months’ post-graduation was challenging on several levels,

Figure 6.
Did Your Education Adequately Prepare You for the Job? (% Yes)

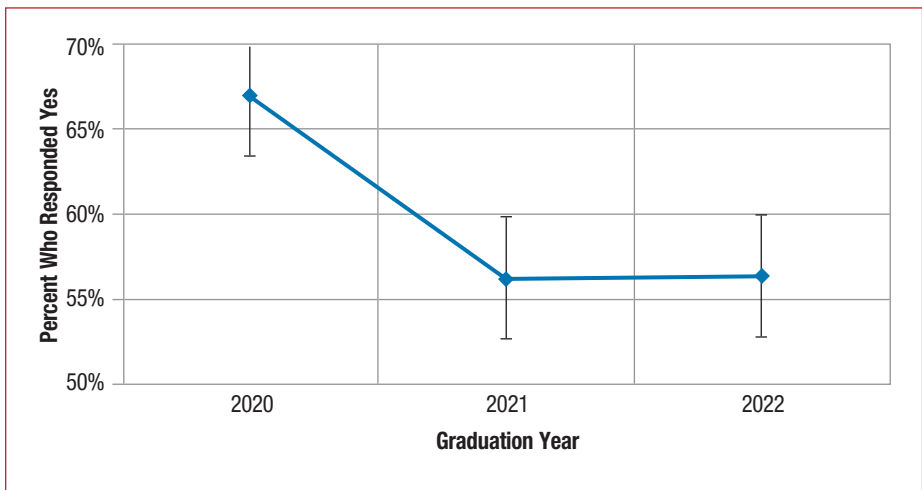


Figure 7.
Do You Have a Mentor? (% Yes)

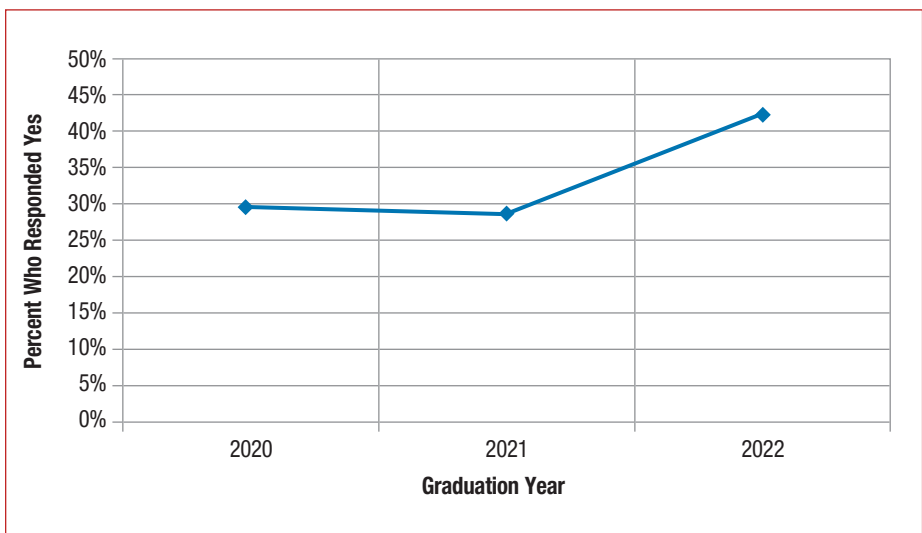
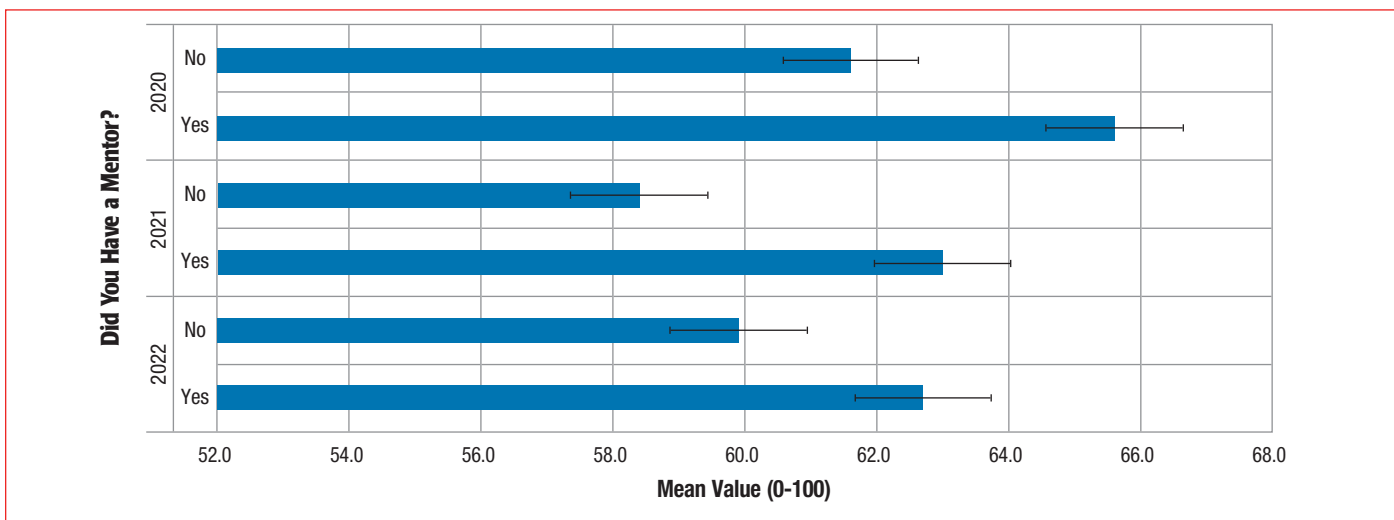


Figure 8.
How Confident Do You or Did You Feel in Your Ability to Practice When Looking for a Job? (Having a Mentor - Yes/No)



including their level of confidence in their ability to practice and their feelings of adequacy from their nursing education. Nonetheless, contrary to reports of nurses' perception of the work environment, many new graduates felt that their practice environments were "healthy and/or positive." They were also more likely to have mentors, perhaps a critical lynchpin to successful TTP.

According to a recent survey about Generation Z students graduating college and beginning careers, Gayeski (2023) reported that nearly half of business leaders say they are unprepared to enter the workforce. They state that work ethic and communication skills are at the top of the reasons for their unpreparedness and 94% admitted that they even avoided hiring recent grads. They attributed their lack of preparedness to "culture" (62%). Half of the business leaders in the survey said that the unpreparedness is due to parents, 46% said educators, and 48% said the COVID-19 pandemic.

Although the new nursing graduates of 2022 are not necessarily Generation Z by age, as many of the new graduates surveyed over the years by NSNA were not typically college-aged students, they did spend most of their clinical learning experiences during the years of COVID-19 when communication was impacted in all aspects of their education. While the new graduates in 2022 may have eventually all found employment, their personal feelings of adequacy and confidence to practice were negatively affected in the months of transitioning into their new roles. On the positive side, the

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percentage of new nurses who had mentors increased and their optimism in the practice environments was more positive than other nurses. This is good news if we can recognize the importance of promoting mentorships and cultivating healthy environments to guide the new nurses in their inevitable TTP with an understanding of how they were prepared for the workforce. According to the survey by Gayeski (2023), "the trick for smart organizations will be to understand the styles and values of the incoming cohort . . . Leaders . . . will find no shortage of smart young professionals who can bring important new perspectives on how to efficiently accomplish goals and create environments that are conducive to the growth of both employees and the bottom line." (p.1). **DN**

Author's Note: Each year, a convenience sample of nursing students who are members of the NSNA and indicated their graduation date (Spring, year) were sent the survey via SurveyMonkey®. This secondary analysis and cohort comparison of the grad-

uates (2020 [N = 1885], 2021 [N = 2691], and 2022 [N = 1115]) of cleaned data were used to compare participants' job search, experiences in the first job, and confidence to practice related to their educational experiences as they transition into their new roles. Surveys are distributed between October and December such that the respondents represent approximately four months to one-year post graduation. Percentages are rounded to the nearest percent.

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