



NEW CAREERS IN NURSING

Scholar Alumni: Options in the Early Career Years

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RESEARCH REPORT

New Careers in Nursing Scholar Alumni: Options in the Early Career Years

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The New Careers in Nursing (NCIN) Alumni Survey was designed to advance knowledge in the field of nursing education by looking at post-degree experiences of NCIN scholarship recipients, such as employment and graduate degree attainment. The NCIN Alumni Study also focused on the reflections of NCIN scholars who have graduated and moved into the field, on their satisfaction with various aspects of NCIN and their academic programs, and on how these programmatic aspects have influenced their postdegree experiences.

Keywords nursing; accelerated students; alumni; educational debt; scholarships; mentoring; leadership; work experience

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Arriving at one goal is the starting point to another.

— John Dewey

In spring 2008, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) Human Capital Team developed a fast-track program to jump-start nursing careers for a select group of individuals—college graduates who are interested in changing fields or careers. The New Careers in Nursing (NCIN) scholarship program supports nonnursing college graduates enrolled in accelerated bachelor of science in nursing (ABSN) or accelerated master's of science in nursing (AMSN) programs. The NCIN scholarship program was designed to

- help alleviate the national nursing shortage,
- increase the diversity of the nursing workforce,
- expand capacity in baccalaureate and graduate nursing programs, and
- enhance the pipeline of potential nurse faculty (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2013, para. 2).

Through grants to schools of nursing, NCIN provides \$10,000 scholarships that can be used to pay tuition, academic fees, and living expenses. The NCIN program focuses on serving students from groups underrepresented in nursing or from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.¹ As of August 2013, 3,117 students from 125 schools of nursing are slated to receive, or have received, \$31,170,000 in scholarship support (see Appendix A). The program is up and running with a 95% persistence rate.²

Spring 2013, approximately 5 years into the program, seemed the right time to connect with NCIN scholar alumni—the experts on the NCIN experience. The period in which these individuals received their NCIN scholarships spanned as early as 2008 until 2011. These new nurses are taking various routes to construct their professional lives. The NCIN Alumni Survey examines postdegree experiences, such as employment and enrollment in graduate degree programs. It also looks at alumni reflections on NCIN and on their nursing degree programs, with a focus on how these programmatic aspects have influenced their postdegree experiences. Additionally, alumni satisfaction with various experiences and aspirations for the future are considered.

The New Careers in Nursing Alumni Survey

Work and education are two of the usual suspects in alumni surveys. The NCIN program emphasizes mentoring and leadership development experiences to support scholars' success in the classroom and the field. Owing to some unique

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challenges second-degree students face in financing their degrees (e.g., federal aid eligibility restrictions and program costs), questions about educational debt are also incorporated into the NCIN Alumni Survey. Finally, we asked alumni to reflect on whether it was all worth it in the end.

Guiding Questions

Six guiding questions about alumni NCIN scholars' experiences and reflections informed the study design:

1. What are their work experiences?
2. What are their post-NCIN educational experiences?
3. What are their mentoring experiences?
4. What are their leadership experiences?
5. How have they financed their degrees, and what are their experiences with loan repayment?
6. What are their reflections on the NCIN experience?

The NCIN Alumni Survey was administered online to NCIN alumni who graduated prior to September 2012 (see Appendix B). This design precludes direct comparisons between NCIN alumni and other accelerated program graduates at the same or at nongrant schools of nursing. Alumni who completed the survey received a \$5 gift certificate as a token of appreciation. A response rate of 31% was achieved. Five hundred eighteen eligible alumni participated in the study—444 (86%) ABSN program graduates and 74 (14%) AMSN graduates. This distribution reflects the structure of NCIN: 80% of funds were designated to support ABSN scholars and 20% were offered to master's-level students.

When measured up to other alumni surveys, NCIN alumni responded to the survey at a slightly higher rate, and compared with the response rates of surveys administered online, the NCIN Alumni Survey response rate is higher than most.³ Nevertheless, a 31% response rate suggests that caution be used when generalizing the findings as there could be some selection bias in survey responses based on the respondent profile.

Alumni from more recent NCIN funding cohorts (e.g., cohorts 2011 and 2010) were more likely to respond to the NCIN Alumni Survey than those from earlier cohorts (e.g., cohorts 2009 and 2008; 43% vs. 27%). At the school level, alumni from schools located in the northeast region were more likely to respond than those from other regions (36% vs. less than 31%).

In most instances, graduates at both degree levels shared similar insights and experiences. Differences that arose are highlighted throughout the report. In addition, we have made efforts to benchmark our data with findings from nationally representative surveys, such as the Health Resources and Services Administration's (HRSA, 2010) National Sample Survey of registered nurses (RNs) and Kovner and Brewer's (2012a, 2012b) longitudinal Newly Licensed RN Surveys as part of the RN Work Project.

New Careers in Nursing Alumni Profile

Personal Circumstances

Before delving into NCIN alumni experiences, it is useful to know a little bit more about who these graduates are? The eligibility requirements of the NCIN scholarship tell us that the accelerated, second-degree nursing students selected as NCIN scholars represent diversity in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. We also know that those selected as NCIN scholars have already successfully completed at least one postsecondary degree. The demographic characteristics and personal circumstances of NCIN Alumni Survey respondents reinforced expectations that these graduates are diverse and academically capable.

New Careers in Nursing Alumni Bring Great Diversity to the Nursing Profession

Respondents to the NCIN Alumni Survey include a high proportion of male nurses as compared with the profession overall. Specifically, 38% of respondent NCIN alumni are male. National statistics indicate that 11% of undergraduate and 10% of master's-level nursing students are male (Fang, Li, Arrietti, & Bednash, 2014). As of 2010, only 9% of those working as nurses in the United States were male (Health Resources and Services Administration, 2013).

Respondents also demonstrate racial and ethnic diversity (see Figure 1). Although three-quarters (75%) of those working as nurses nationally identify as White, fewer than half of NCIN Alumni Survey respondents (41%) do (Health

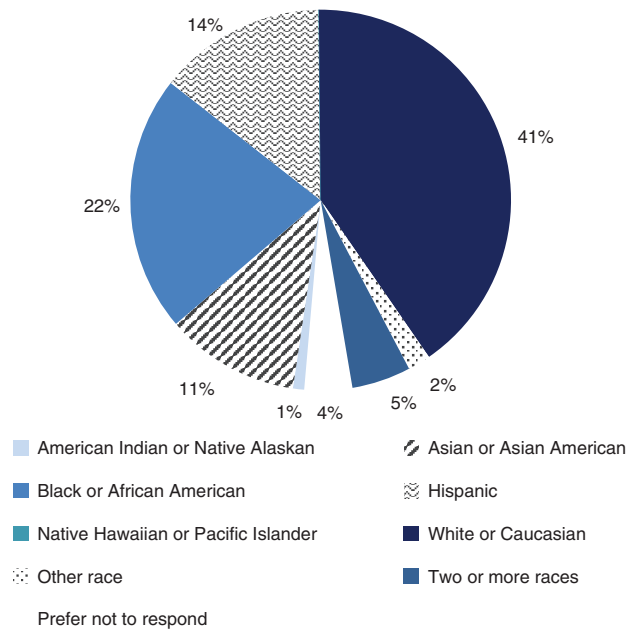


Figure 1 Alumni profile: race/ethnicity. Percentages may not sum to 100% because of rounding. From *The New Careers in Nursing Alumni Survey* by Educational Testing Service, 2014, Princeton, NJ: Author.

Resources and Services Administration, 2013). Almost a quarter (22%) of NCIN Alumni Survey respondents identified as Black or African American, compared with just 10% of RNs nationwide. NCIN alumni respondents are also more likely to be Hispanic/Latino (14%) or Asian/Asian American (11%) than those in the nursing workforce overall (5% and 8%, respectively).

Respondents to the NCIN Alumni Survey were relatively young nontraditional students, with just more than one-quarter (28%) reporting that they are aged 35 years or older (see Figure 2). The majority (65%) are between the ages of 25 and 34 years. For reference, almost three-quarters of individuals working as nurses in 2010 (74%) were older than 35 years, and about half (49%) were older than 45 years (Health Resources and Services Administration, 2013). This suggests

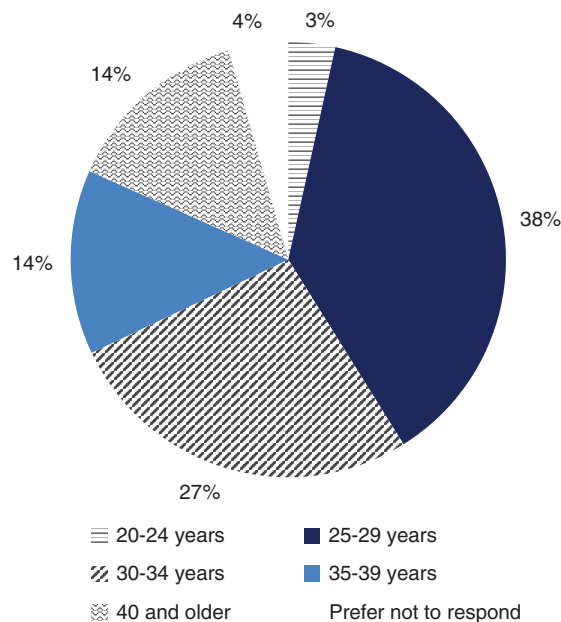


Figure 2 Alumni profile: Age. Percentages may not sum to 100% because of rounding. *New Careers in Nursing Alumni Survey* by Educational Testing Service, 2014, Princeton, NJ: Author.

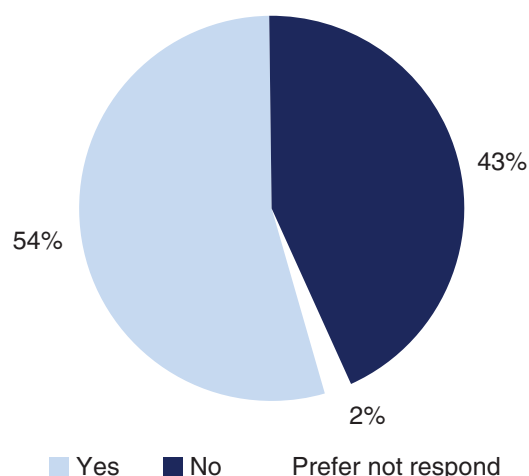


Figure 3 Alumni profile: Either parent has earned a 4-year college degree. Percentages may not sum to 100% because of rounding. From *New Careers in Nursing Alumni Survey* by Educational Testing Service, 2014, Princeton, NJ: Author.

that NCIN is helping to prepare new nurses who have some career and life experience as well as potential for long-term contributions to the profession.

New Careers in Nursing Alumni Have Achieved Much, Both Before and After Having Completed Their Accelerated Nursing Degrees

The personal circumstances of respondent NCIN alumni also reflect their accomplishments. In addition to *multiple* baccalaureate degrees (in nursing and prior nonnursing fields), 29% of NCIN Alumni Survey respondents reported earning advanced degrees over the course of their careers since graduating from high school. Their degrees range from nursing to law, business, and social work. NCIN scholars have achieved this high level of educational attainment despite the fact that many come from disadvantaged backgrounds; more than 4 out of 10 respondent alumni (43%) reported once qualifying as first-generation college students (i.e., neither of their parents earned a 4-year college degree; see Figure 3). The high proportion of alumni scholars who were the first in their families to attend college suggests that NCIN has been successful in identifying and supporting students who may have experienced multiple forms of disadvantage⁴ in pursuing their professional goals.

The strong educational attainment of NCIN alumni corresponds with similarly strong earnings in the workforce (see Figure 4). Approximately half of survey respondents (48%) report that they are now earning \$50,000–75,000 per year from their primary positions. A few (2%) earn \$100,000 or more annually.

NCIN alumni respondents' reported earnings in the workforce suggest that employers are willing to pay a premium for their skills. Although the most common salary range for NCIN alumni (\$50,000–74,999) is consistent with the median annual wage for registered nurses (\$64,690) nationally, the alumni surveyed are still early in their careers as compared with the RN workforce overall (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). This is consistent with Brewer et al.'s (2009) finding that second-degree nurses tend to earn higher salaries than their traditionally prepared counterparts, perhaps because of professional experience in prior nonnursing fields.

New Careers in Nursing Alumni Have Family Obligations That May Influence Their Career and Educational Trajectories

NCIN alumni bring great diversity and potential for academic and professional success to the field of nursing. Many of them also have family commitments that require their time and care, however. In the first years out of their accelerated programs, almost half of NCIN alumni (47%) reported being married or in a domestic partnership, and 30% reported having children living at home with them (see Figure 5).

This may translate into less flexibility to work long or irregular hours, less time to balance work and school, and less mobility to pursue professional positions or further education. Although most alumni respondents (65%) reported

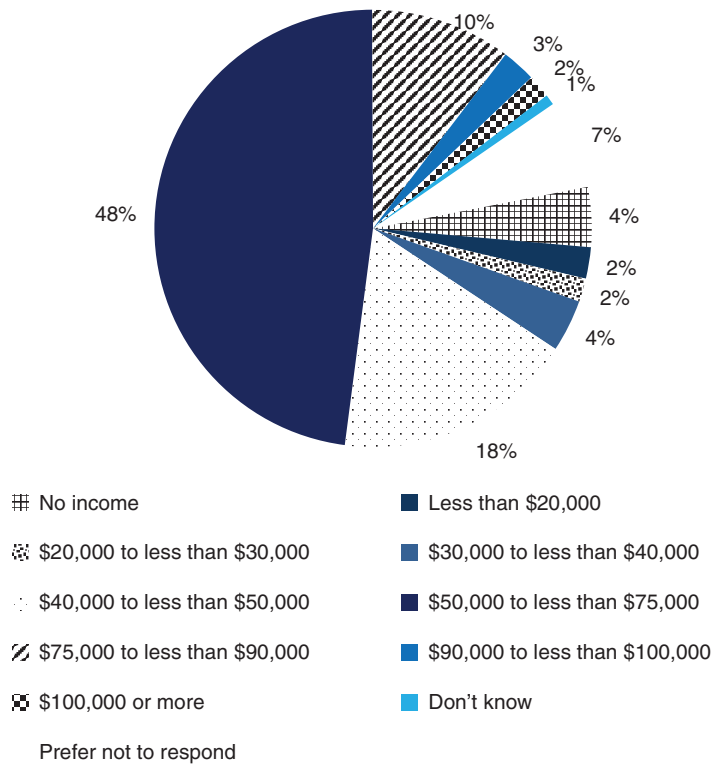


Figure 4 Alumni profile: Annual income. Percentages may not sum to 100% because of rounding. From New Careers in Nursing Alumni Survey by Educational Testing Service, 2014, Princeton, NJ: Author.

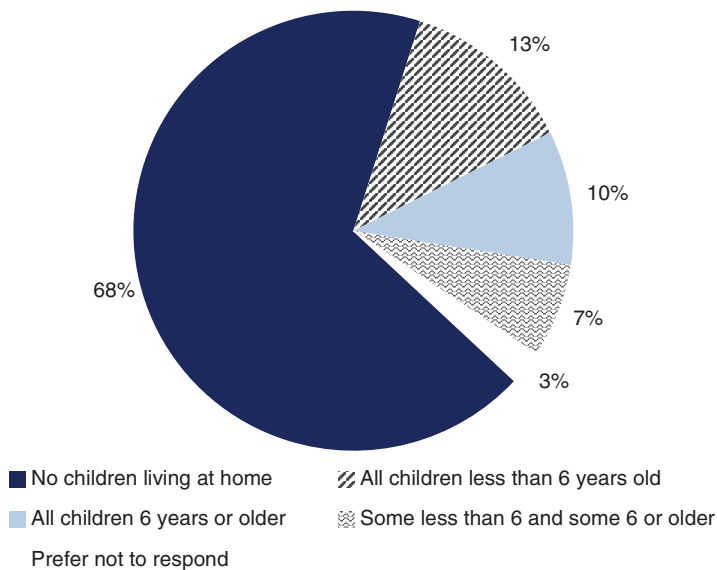


Figure 5 Alumni profile: Children living at home. Percentages may not sum to 100% because of rounding. From New Careers in Nursing Alumni Survey by Educational Testing Service, 2014, Princeton, NJ: Author.

that they could relocate for career or educational opportunities in nursing, those who had children living at home were significantly less likely to say that this was a feasible option for them (43% vs. 24%).

Overall, this profile reinforces the lived experiences of those who are educating and mentoring NCIN scholars: These diverse new nurses bring multifaceted personal circumstances along with a solid record of accomplishments to the profession.

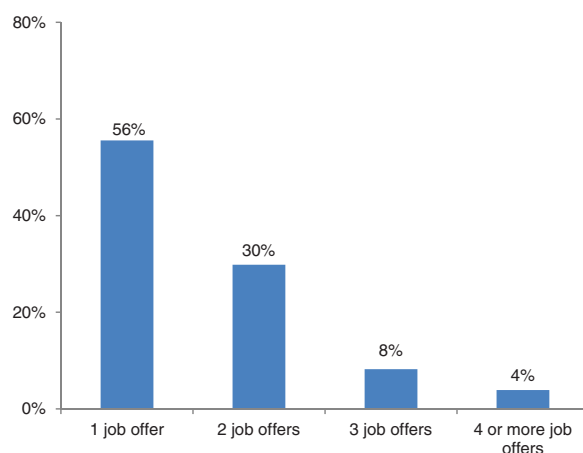


Figure 6 Number of job offers for first nursing position among alumni who have worked since graduation ($n = 490$). Percentages may not sum to 100% because of rounding and the omission of some response categories. From *New Careers in Nursing Alumni Survey* by Educational Testing Service, 2014, Princeton, NJ: Author.

Workforce Participation

Message 1: New Careers in Nursing Alumni Have Strong Participation in the Nursing Workforce

A key finding of the NCIN Alumni Survey is that almost all respondent alumni (95%) reported having been engaged in the workforce since graduating from their accelerated nursing degree programs. About three out of five of NCIN alumni respondents (59%) reported accepting a position within 3 months of graduation. The median distance between alumni degree program and first position was 21 miles for ABSN graduates and just 8 miles for master's-level alumni, with great variation at the upper levels of the distribution (range, 0–3,992 miles).⁵

Most respondents to the NCIN Alumni Survey who have worked since graduation (56%) reported receiving only one job offer for their first nursing positions. Another 30% of NCIN alumni reported receiving two offers for their first positions. A few NCIN Alumni Survey respondents (4%) received four or more offers for their first nursing positions, up to seven job offers (see Figure 6).

We also asked alumni whether they had located any professional nursing positions through contacts from NCIN or their accelerated nursing degree programs.⁶ Just one-fifth of respondents (20%) reported that they had done so.

Finally, about one-fifth (18%) of alumni respondents reported holding not one but two jobs. Survey respondents reported holding second jobs in the field of nursing (12% had a second job that requires a nursing license) or in another, nonnursing field (6%). This exceeds the 12% dual-employment rate among newly licensed nurses overall (Kovner & Brewer, 2012a).

Position Exodus, Profession Retention

Among respondents who have accepted a position since graduation, 38% have left their first nursing positions. Although this departure rate may seem high, it is important to note that the first cohorts of NCIN graduates had been in the field for more than 3 years when the survey was fielded. In this context, the first-position departure rate of NCIN alumni is consistent with Kovner and Brewer's (2012a) finding that 41% of newly licensed nurses planned to leave their first job within 3 years. Similarly, the 2008 National Sample Survey of RNs indicated that 30% of all nurses had recently changed positions or planned to do so within 3 years (Health Resources and Services Administration, 2010).

Most alumni who have moved on from their first nursing positions reported accepting another nursing position (88%). This reinforces Kovner and Brewer's (2012a) finding that new nurses leave their first jobs—but not the profession. By linking data about NCIN alumni respondents' employment status, first positions, and current positions (see Figure 7), we determined that

- 90% of alumni reported working in nursing⁷
- 3% reported working outside the field (perhaps in a role that combines their nursing and nonnursing skill sets)
- 7% reported not currently working (with 4% not working because they have remained in or returned to school,

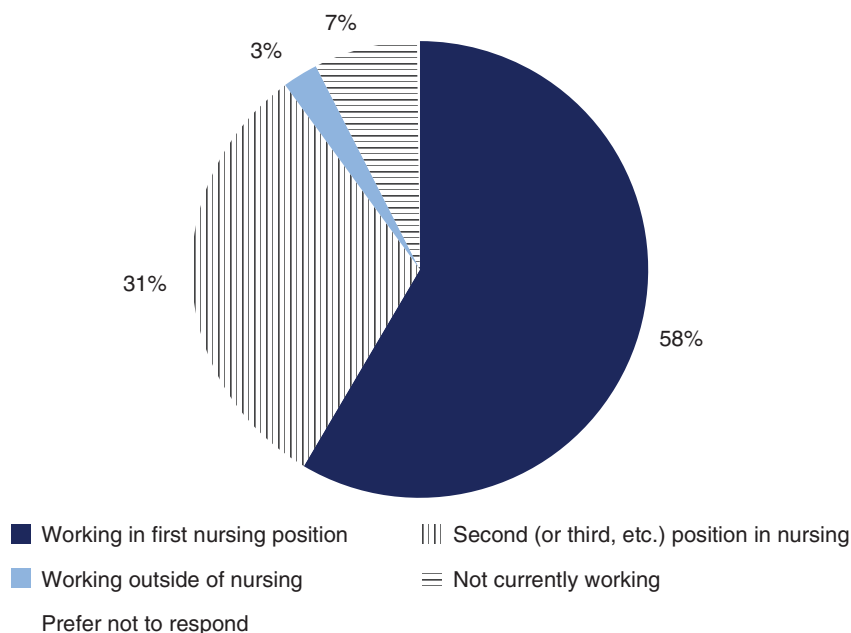


Figure 7 Work experiences: Professional positions since graduation. Percentages may not sum to 100% because of rounding. From New Careers in Nursing Alumni Survey by Educational Testing Service, 2014, Princeton, NJ: Author.

These figures yield a grand total rate of 93% current participation in post-NCIN career and educational experiences. The proportion of NCIN alumni respondents working in nursing (90%) exceeds the benchmark established by the most recent National Sample Survey of RNs, which found that 85% of all nurses were employed in nursing in 2008 (Health Resources and Services Administration, 2010).

Work Settings: Primarily in Hospitals

Most of NCIN alumni respondents’ reported first positions (81%) involved inpatient care in hospitals (see Figure 8). Among alumni who are in their second (or third, etc.) nursing positions, inpatient hospital care made up the largest share of current position work settings, but at a lower rate (67%). This is consistent with Kovner and Brewer’s (2012a) finding that 85% of newly licensed nurses work in hospitals 18 months after graduation. After a few years, the rate of hospital employment among new nurses dropped to 71% in the newly licensed RN sample, suggesting that NCIN alumni are about on par with other early career nurses.

The National Sample Survey of RNs pegged the rate of employment in hospitals among nurses at 62% in 2008, up from 56% in 2004 (Health Resources and Services Administration, 2010). This change may reflect increased employment opportunities in hospitals as well as a greater likelihood that new entrants to the profession will start out in hospitals.

The most popular work units for NCIN alumni respondents’ first positions were reported as general/specialty (33%), intensive care bed units (21%), and step-down, transitional bed units (10%; see Figure 9). Among the group of alumni respondents who have changed positions, their current positions show greater variation, with 21% reporting working in intensive care units, 17% in general/specialty units, and 17% in other areas.

This increase in the variety of work units mirrors findings regarding work settings of NCIN alumni, suggesting that early career nurses’ options may expand after the first few years in the nursing workforce.

Job Changes and Motivations: The Good and the Bad

Alumni respondents who have changed positions reported a range of factors that motivated this decision. The top-ranked reason for job changes among NCIN alumni respondents was reported as gaining experience in another clinical area (38%; see Figure 10). The desire for a different work setting in a general or clinical specialty area in particular was also a key theme in the open responses of alumni who were currently seeking positions (44%).

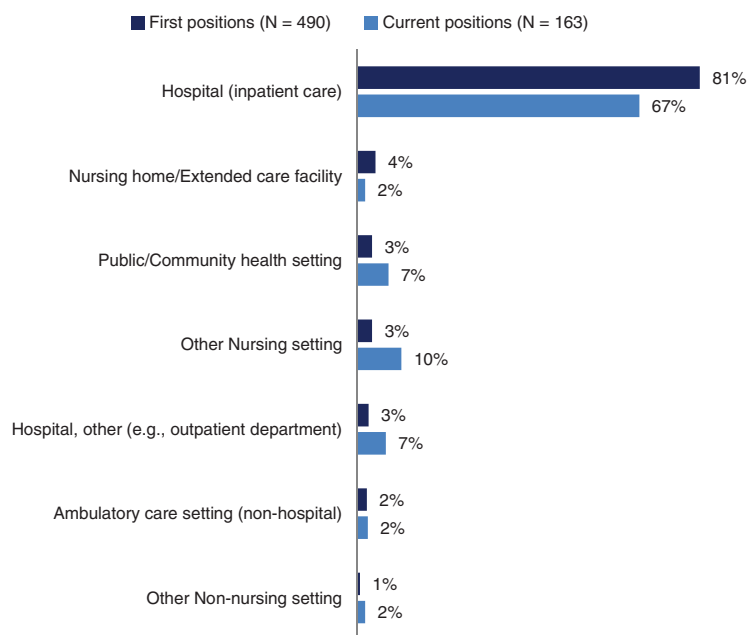


Figure 8 Work settings: First ($n = 490$) versus current ($n = 163$) positions. Percentages may not sum to 100% because of rounding and the omission of some response categories. From *New Careers in Nursing Alumni Survey* by Educational Testing Service, 2014, Princeton, NJ: Author.

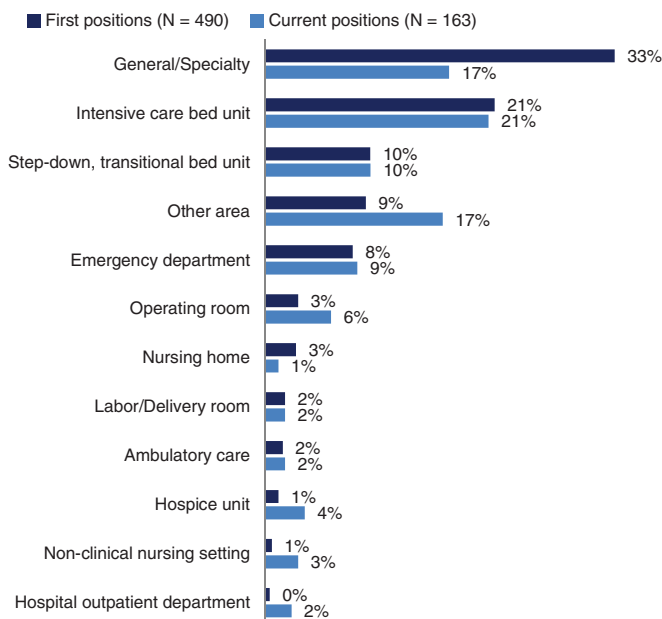


Figure 9 Work units: First ($n = 490$) versus current ($n = 163$) positions. Percentages may not sum to 100% because of rounding and the omission of some response categories. From *New Careers in Nursing Alumni Survey* by Educational Testing Service, 2014, Princeton, NJ: Author.

Two NCIN alumni respondents explained:

As a new graduate, I want to work in an area that is fast-paced. I work in rehab and there is only so much that I am exposed to, so I want to have more experience to improve my skills.

I currently work on a medical–surgical unit and I would like to move into a different specialty such as mother–baby or nursing education.



Figure 10 Top reasons New Careers in Nursing alumni left their first nursing positions ($n = 186$). This was a select-all-that-apply question, so percentages sum to greater than 100%. From *New Careers in Nursing Alumni Survey* by Educational Testing Service, 2014, Princeton, NJ: Author.

Taken together, these results suggest that finding the right niche in the field of nursing is a strong motivator for NCIN alumni. Kovner and Brewer (2012a) also found that wanting experience in another clinical area is a top professional reason that newly licensed RNs leave their first jobs.

Similar to what has been found in other studies, the employment transitions of NCIN alumni have also been influenced by less than optimal work situations. NCIN alumni respondents' second most common response regarding why they left their first positions was poor management (26%). One-fifth of respondents (20%) selected lack of mentor support, and a similar proportion (18%) said that stress at work influenced their decisions to change positions. Among the open-ended comments of those seeking a position, working conditions such as quality of the environment, salary/benefits, and full-time schedules figured prominently in open responses (29%):

I currently have a med – surg position which has too many patients (6) of too high acuities, with too little training given. Every night is a potential nightmare. Now [I am] seeking to move to acute rehab unit, which, from my limited experience, is much more satisfying.

I am searching for a new job closer to my house, straight days, and a management team that actually values their employees.

These comments echo Kovner and Brewer's (2012a) finding that the other two top professional reasons that new nurses leave their first nursing positions are poor management and stressful work.

High Satisfaction

Despite some negative early experiences in the nursing workforce, most NCIN alumni indicated high satisfaction with their first positions—and their careers overall. In particular, 79% of respondents said that, if they could decide all over again, they would definitely or probably choose the same first nursing position. Although some of these positions may not be the best long-term fit, this finding suggests that most first positions have provided a satisfactory entry point into the profession. A similar proportion of all nurses (81%) were satisfied with their positions in 2008, suggesting that NCIN alumni respondents are ahead of the curve when it comes to finding their niches in nursing (Health Resources and Services Administration, 2010).

Satisfaction with the nursing profession was even higher, reflecting the commitment of NCIN alumni to the field and their patients (see Figure 11). Almost all alumni respondents who were currently working in nursing (94%) agreed or

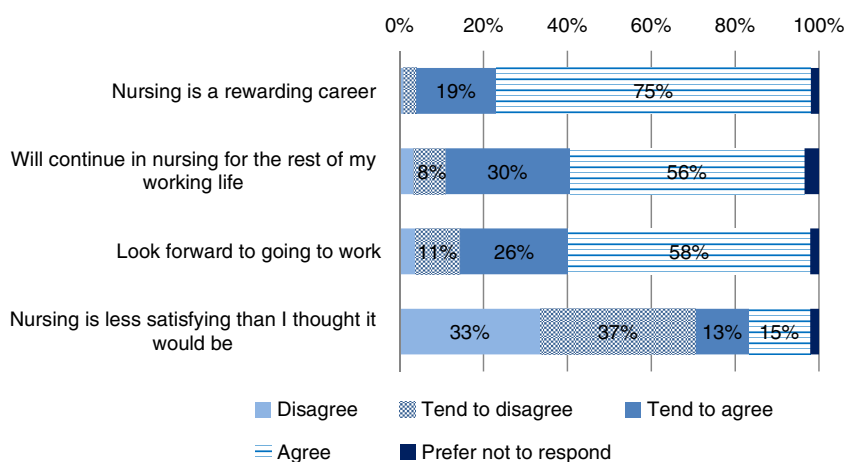


Figure 11 Career satisfaction of New Careers in Nursing alumni currently working in nursing ($n = 466$). Percentages may not sum to 100% because of rounding. From New Careers in Nursing Alumni Survey by Educational Testing Service, 2014, Princeton, NJ; Author.

tended to agree that nursing is a rewarding career, and most agreed that they intend to “continue in nursing for the rest of my working life” (86%). A similar proportion (84%) agreed that they look forward to going to work. Finally, the majority of survey respondents (70%) *disagreed* that “nursing is less satisfying than I thought it would be.” Taken as a whole, these findings confirm that NCIN has helped to prepare committed new nurses who will make contributions to the profession for years to come.

Career Aspirations: Practitioner, Faculty, or Both?

Finally, we asked NCIN Alumni Survey respondents to rate their agreement with various career aspirations to explore the different paths these new nurses hope to take as they progress through their careers. Advanced practice nurse (APRN) was the top career aspiration among NCIN alumni, with 75% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that they aspired to become an APRN (see Figure 12). The second most popular career aspirations, endorsed by half (50%) of alumni respondents, were public health or international nurse and nursing faculty member. Careers in clinical research and health care policy were less popular (36%⁸ and 32%, respectively).

Although the high proportions of alumni selecting each option may reflect a lack of clarity in career goals, it is just as likely that NCIN alumni aspire to engage with multiple professional roles over the course of their careers—serving as practitioners and educators, perhaps at the same time. Designing this question as a series of related items rather than a single choice enabled alumni to entertain multiple career paths in their responses.

Post–New Careers in Nursing Educational Experiences

Accelerated students most likely exit their nursing degree programs with one of three frames of mind on furthering their educations: keep on going while I am in the groove; let me take a breather; or this is the end. Now that these new nurses are in the field, their educational activities and plans may reinforce the interest in graduate degrees that they reported on their entry surveys⁹ (95% intended to pursue a graduate degree, $n = 509$ completed both surveys). While alumni respondents reported broad interest in graduate degrees, the desire to gain practical experience and financial considerations may encourage alumni to delay graduate study.

Message 2: Interest Exists for Graduate Education, but Finances and Timing May Be Competing Priorities

Overall, the answer to whether NCIN alumni are interested in furthering their educations is a resounding yes. Most alumni respondents (83%) reported planning to earn a graduate degree at some point during their nursing careers (see Figure 13). The most popular advanced degree in nursing among alumni was the DNP degree, with 37% of respondents citing the

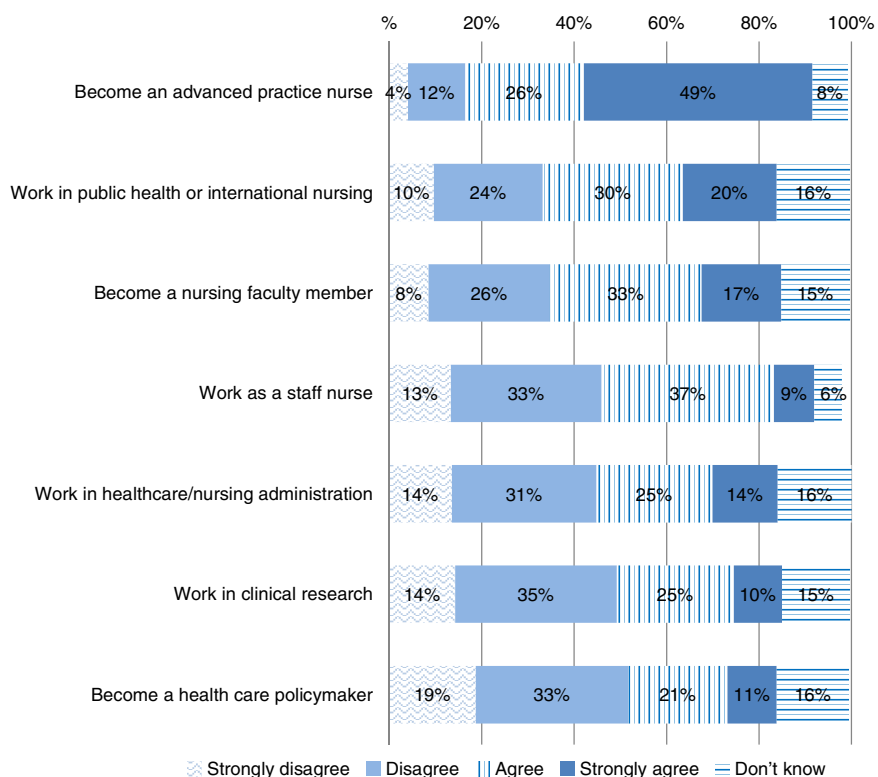


Figure 12 Career aspirations of New Careers in Nursing alumni source: New Careers in Nursing Alumni Survey. Percentages may not sum to 100% because of rounding. From New Careers in Nursing Alumni Survey by Educational Testing Service, 2014, Princeton, NJ: Author.

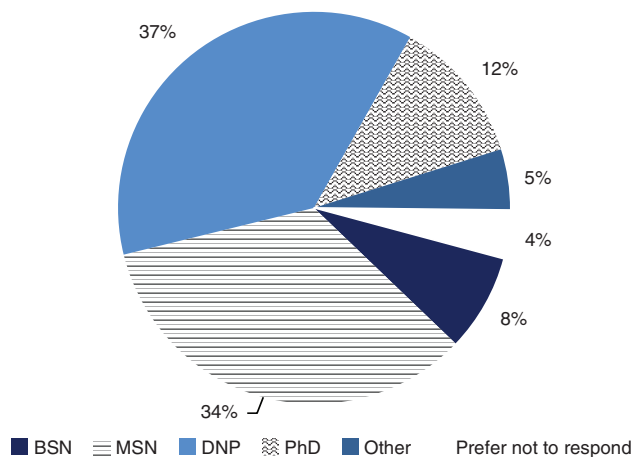


Figure 13 Educational plans: Highest degrees alumni plan to earn in nursing. Percentages may not sum to 100% because of rounding. From New Careers in Nursing Alumni Survey by Educational Testing Service, 2014, Princeton, NJ: Author.

DNP as the highest degree they planned to earn in nursing. One-third of alumni (34%) plan to obtain their MSN degree, and 12% have plans to earn a PhD in nursing. On top of this, a few alumni (6%) selected other, including graduate degrees in nonnursing fields.

Almost One Third of New Careers in Nursing Alumni Have Enrolled in Graduate Degree Programs

Among respondents to the NCIN Alumni Survey, a substantial proportion (28%) reported having already moved on to graduate degree programs. Some NCIN alumni are pursuing their advanced degrees on a full-time study schedule

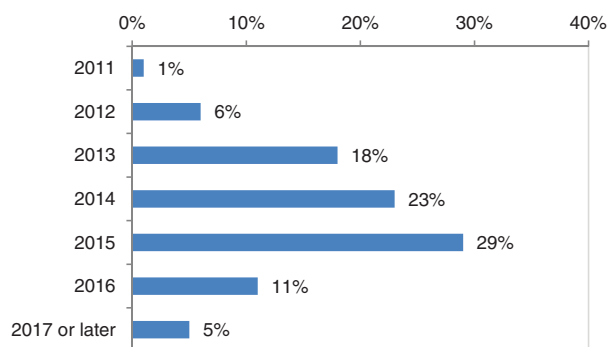


Figure 14 Educational enrollment: Actual and expected graduation dates of currently enrolled alumni ($n = 146$). Percentages may not sum to 100% because of rounding and the omission of some response categories. From *New Careers in Nursing Alumni Survey* by Educational Testing Service, 2014, Princeton, NJ: Author.

(18%)¹⁰, whereas others have chosen to work toward their degrees part-time (11%). Their rate of participation in advanced educational experiences exceeds that of baccalaureate-level new nurses overall. Kovner and Brewer (2012b) found that just 10% of RNs with bachelor’s degrees enrolled in educational programs within two and a half years of attaining licensure. Overall, about 13% of all RNs held an advanced degree (master’s or doctorate) in 2008 (Health Resources and Services Administration, 2010).

Expected time frames to complete degrees among alumni who are currently enrolled suggest that the impact of these advanced degrees will be seen in the next few years (see Figure 14). The majority (52%) of respondent alumni who reported enrolling in graduate degree programs expected to graduate in 2014 or 2015. One-quarter (25%) completed their graduate programs by the end of 2013.

Graduate Degrees That Emphasize Advanced Clinical Skills Are More Popular Than Research-Focused Degrees

At this early stage of their educational and professional lives, most alumni reported enrolling in master’s degrees or post-master’s preparation programs for certification as APRNs (82%; see Figure 15). As might be expected, master’s and post-master’s programs in nursing make up the majority of post-NCIN educational experiences (79%). NCIN alumni are also pursuing doctorates, however, with 11% of enrolled alumni reporting working toward the DNP degree and 3% toward earning their PhDs. While the smaller proportion of alumni currently pursuing research-focused degrees may imply less

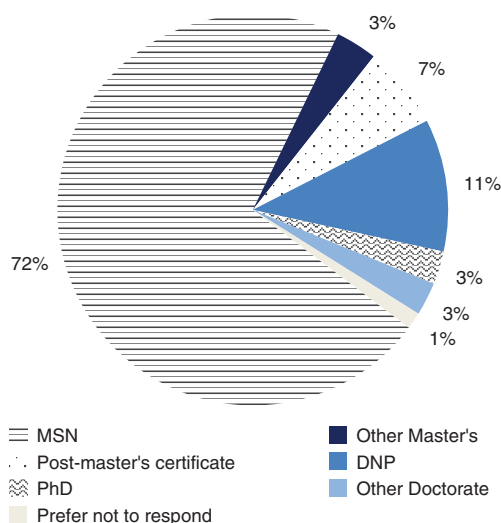


Figure 15 Educational enrollment: Graduate degrees pursued by currently enrolled alumni ($n = 146$). Percentages may not sum to 100% because of rounding. From *New Careers in Nursing Alumni Survey* by Educational Testing Service, 2014, Princeton, NJ: Author.

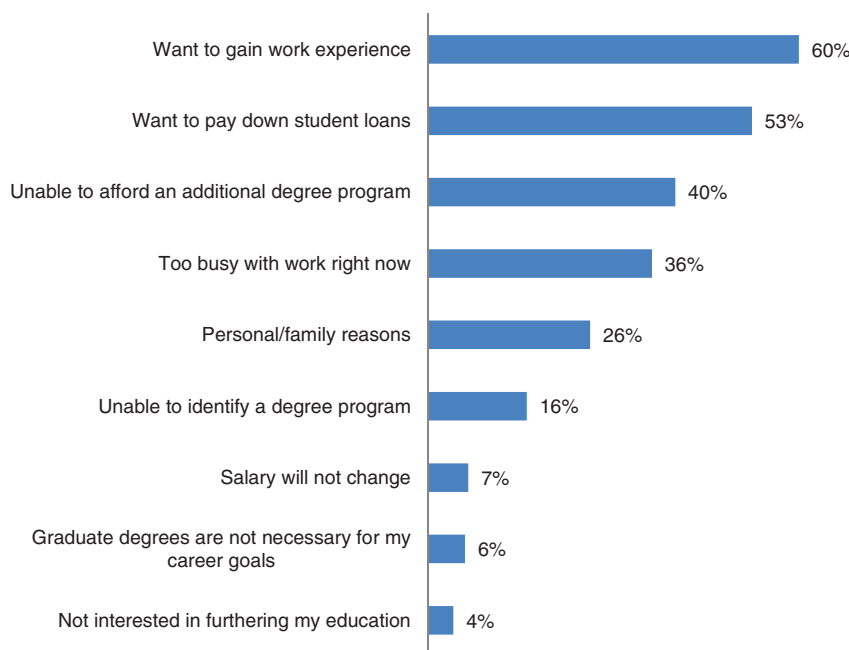


Figure 16 Key reasons alumni delay graduate education among alumni not currently enrolled ($n = 369$). This was a select-all-that-apply question, so percentages sum to greater than 100%. From *New Careers in Nursing Alumni Survey* by Educational Testing Service, 2014, Princeton, NJ: Author.

interest in primarily academic careers, it may also reflect a slower progression toward the PhD among alumni who are still building clinical skills and refining their scholarly interests.

A similar proportion of NCIN Alumni Survey respondents (31%) reported pursuing or having earned at least one national nursing specialty certification, reinforcing the value placed on advanced clinical skills. Alumni of master's-level accelerated programs reported a significantly higher rate of having pursued or earned a national specialty or nurse practitioner certification (53% as compared to 27% of ABSN alumni), likely because of advanced educational requirements for many popular certifications. The most commonly cited certifications among alumni were Family Nurse Practitioner (FNP), Critical Care RN (CCRN), and Certified Registered Nurse Anesthetist (CRNA). Overall, 17% of alumni respondents reported earning or working toward certification as a nurse practitioner.

Work and Finances Are the Primary Barriers to Graduate Degrees

The NCIN Alumni Survey included a follow-up question to determine why respondents delay enrollment in graduate degree programs. Responses indicated that, among those who have not yet pursued a graduate degree, interest is not a constraining factor (see Figure 16). Although a few (16%) alumni respondents reported difficulty identifying a particular graduate program, only 6% said that graduate degrees are not necessary for their career goals. An even smaller proportion (4%) reported that they were “not interested in furthering my education” as one of the reasons they had not yet pursued a graduate degree. AMSN-level alumni were more likely than their bachelor's-level peers to report that (additional) graduate degrees were not necessary for their career goals (17% vs. 4%) and that they were not interested in furthering their educations (9% vs. 3%).

Work and finances, however, are pervasive barriers to NCIN alumni's pursuit of graduate education. The most common reason for delaying graduate education, endorsed by 60% of respondents, was the desire to gain work experience before returning to school. In addition, more than one-third of respondents (36%) selected the option “too busy with work right now.” ABSN alumni endorsed these reasons for delaying graduate education at significantly higher rates than master's-level alumni (64% as compared with 39% of AMSN alumni, and 39% vs. 22% of AMSN alumni, respectively). Our findings suggest that financial needs and/or employment may make it difficult for NCIN alumni to return to school during their early career years.

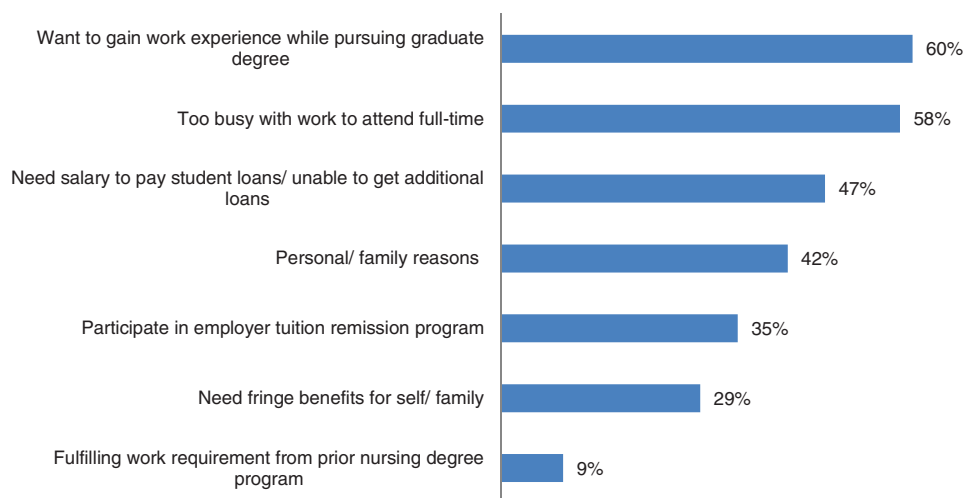


Figure 17 Key reasons alumni enroll part-time in graduate education among those currently enrolled part-time ($n = 55$). This was a select-all-that-apply question, so percentages sum to greater than 100%. From *New Careers in Nursing Alumni Survey* by Educational Testing Service, 2014, Princeton, NJ: Author.

This inference is supported by the other two top reasons reported for delaying graduate education: wanting to pay down student loans before returning to school (53%) and being unable to afford a degree program right now (40%). ABSN alumni were significantly more likely than those at the master's level to say that they wanted to pay down their loans before returning to school (57% vs. 30% of AMSN alumni), which is interesting given their relatively smaller debt burdens (detailed in the “Educational Debt” section of this report). Master's-level graduates, conversely, were significantly more likely to say that they had not pursued a graduate degree because their salaries would not change (17% as compared with 5% of ABSN alumni), highlighting the challenge of incentivizing doctoral-level education for master's-level practitioners.

Part-Time Graduate Study Helps New Careers in Nursing Alumni Respondents Balance Educational Endeavors With Work and Finances

Findings regarding part-time graduate study reinforce the barriers identified for alumni who have not yet returned to school. Among those reporting pursuing a graduate degree part-time, the most popular reason for doing so was to gain work experience while pursuing their degrees (60%). A similar proportion (58%) of part-time graduate students said they were too busy with work to attend their programs full-time (see Figure 17).

Finances also came into play, with almost half of part-time graduate students (47%) reporting that paying student loans and/or not being able to obtain additional loans prevented them from attending a graduate program full-time. Continuing with paid work while in school also creates financial opportunities in the forms of employer tuition remission and benefits such as health insurance (35% and 29% of alumni enrolled part-time reported using these resources, respectively). While these financial supports make graduate study more accessible for NCIN alumni, the trade-off is a reduced pace of educational attainment.

Educational Debt

Message 3: Education Is a Worthy Investment, but Debt Lingers Like a Haunting Refrain

Although educational debt figures prominently in the barriers to graduate degree enrollment, the scope and breadth of the debt NCIN alumni respondents carry warrant closer examination. Our findings suggest that, although growing educational debt is a concern for all students, it weighs particularly heavily on NCIN Alumni Survey respondents. Despite the price tag, however, respondents felt their accelerated nursing education was a worthy investment in their new careers as nurses.

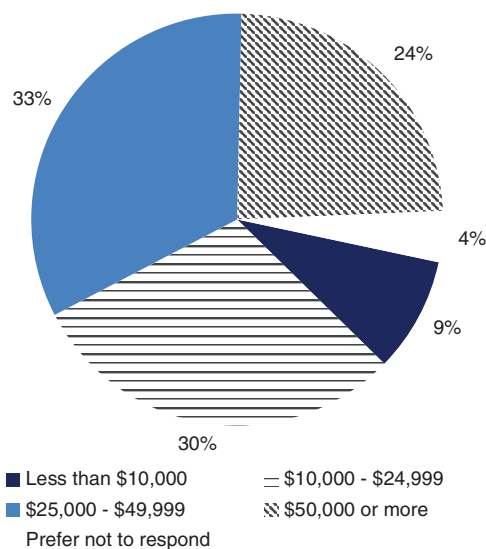


Figure 18 Educational debt: Loan amounts for accelerated nursing degrees among alumni who borrowed ($n = 464$). Percentages may not sum to 100% because of rounding. From *New Careers in Nursing Alumni Survey* by Educational Testing Service, 2014, Princeton, NJ; Author.

Even With the \$10,000 New Careers in Nursing Scholarship, the Majority of Alumni Respondents Took on Loans to Pay for Their Accelerated Degree Programs

Although a \$10,000 scholarship is generous, our findings show that it is not sufficient to prevent NCIN scholars from acquiring or adding to their educational debt. Most alumni respondents (90%) reported taking out federal and/or private student loans to help pay for their accelerated nursing degree programs.

Among those who reported taking out loans to help finance their accelerated nursing programs, 58%¹¹ borrowed \$25,000 or more, and one-quarter (24%) borrowed at least \$50,000 (see Figure 18). As alluded to earlier, AMSN-level alumni respondents who reported borrowing to finance their nursing education had significantly higher debt burdens; one-half (51%) borrowed \$50,000 or more, compared to just one-fifth (21%) of bachelor's-level graduates who borrowed this much. The average national debt burden for undergraduate students with loans was \$29,400 in 2012 — similar to the level of debt ABSN alumni accrued for their accelerated degree programs (Reed & Cochrane, 2013). According to data from the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, the average loan amount for graduate and first professional degrees was \$18,500 for the 2007–2008 school year (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Combined with average undergraduate debt (\$48,100), this figure is similar to the loan amounts that master's-level NCIN alumni reported taking out for their accelerated nursing degrees.

Most NCIN alumni who reported borrowing (71%) deemed their accelerated nursing educations worthy investments in their new careers as nurses, despite the costs. Another 20% of alumni respondents indicated that they were unsure, perhaps reflecting some ambivalence about the relative costs of specific programs.

Lifetime Postsecondary Educational Debt (Total Student Loan Debt) Is Even Higher

Although second-degree students bring strengths associated with prior educational attainment and professional experiences to their accelerated nursing degree programs, they also bring substantial preexisting debt. When loans from previous education are included, the cumulative debt of NCIN alumni represents a major hurdle to continuing education in the field of nursing.

Almost all NCIN alumni respondents (95%) report some level of debt for all degrees they have pursued (see Figure 19). Almost half (47%) of all respondent alumni have borrowed \$50,000 or more over the course of their postsecondary educations. Fifteen percent of these alumni are carrying a total student loan debt burden of \$100,000 or more. AMSN-level alumni respondents were more likely to hold cumulative student debt topping \$100,000 (30% as compared with 14% of ABSN alumni).

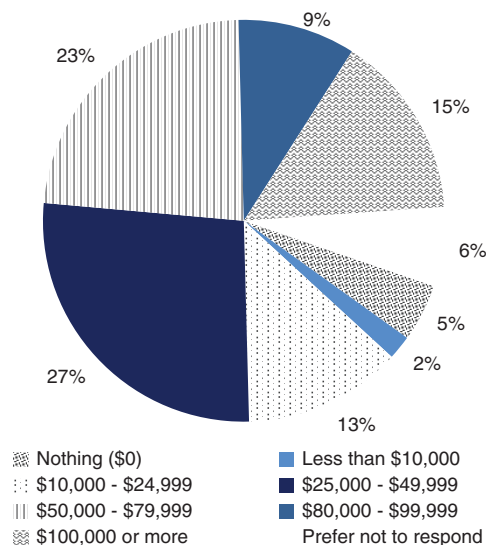


Figure 19 Educational debt: Alumni borrowing for all degree programs. Percentages may not sum to 100% because of rounding. From New Careers in Nursing Alumni Survey by Educational Testing Service, 2014, Princeton, NJ: Author.

Loan Repayment Is Prevalent Among Alumni—but Use of Formal Support Programs Is Not

Considering the high levels of debt reported by some NCIN alumni, the finding that the majority of those with any educational debt (83%, $n = 494$) are repaying their student loans is excellent news. In 2010, the 3-year cohort default rate on student loans reached 15% (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). The ability of NCIN alumni to meet their financial commitments may be a reflection of graduates' success in the nursing workforce.

The amount of monthly student loan payments reported among those in repayment varied widely, perhaps reflecting the many unique paths—educational and otherwise—that scholars have taken to become nurses. About half of alumni monthly loan repayments (51%) fell in the \$200–399 or \$400–599 ranges (see Figure 20). At the upper end of the distribution, 12% of NCIN alumni respondents report paying \$1,000 or more toward their student loan debt each month—an amount that, for some, may rival housing costs. As might be expected, master's-level graduates were significantly more likely to pay \$1,000 or more each month toward their cumulative educational debt (26% vs. 10% of ABSN alumni). At the lower end of the monthly loan payment range, a similar proportion of alumni (12%) pay less than \$200 per month on their student loans. Alumni who earned baccalaureate-level nursing degrees were more likely to pay less than \$200 per month on their student loans (14% as compared with 4% of AMSN graduates).

The high reported rate of educational loan repayment among alumni respondents is impressive in light of the fact that the majority are repaying their loans independently, without assistance from formal support or repayment programs. Just 14% of NCIN alumni who reported having help financing their accelerated degree programs have participated in programs that include a work requirement. Private health care organizations or employers were the primary sponsors of these programs.

Leadership Experiences

Message 4: New Careers in Nursing Alumni Have Participated in Numerous Leadership Experiences, Both During and After Completing Their Accelerated Degree Programs

NCIN's goals are not just to increase the number and diversity of new nurses, but also to provide the experiences and supports that will aid this new generation of nurses in becoming leaders in the profession. This has the potential to figuratively and literally transform the face of nursing. Again, the results of this research suggest that NCIN has been successful in identifying talented students from underrepresented backgrounds, engaging them in various leadership development experiences, and producing alumni who quickly assume professional leadership roles. Our respondents concur; 79% of NCIN alumni respondents rated NCIN and their nursing degree programs as effective or very effective in preparing them to take on leadership roles in the nursing profession.

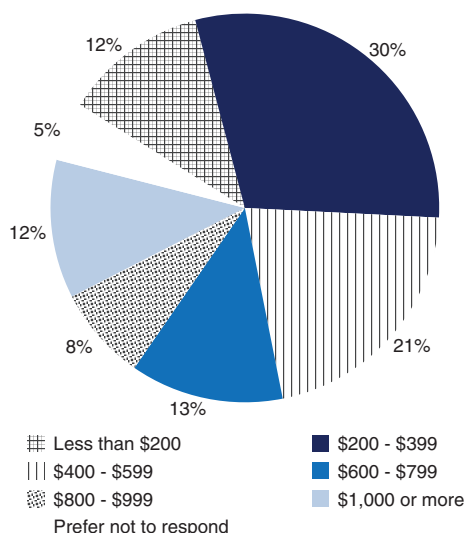


Figure 20 Educational debt: Monthly loan payment amounts for alumni currently in repayment ($n = 408$). Percentages may not sum to 100% because of rounding. From *New Careers in Nursing Alumni Survey* by Educational Testing Service, 2014, Princeton, NJ: Author.

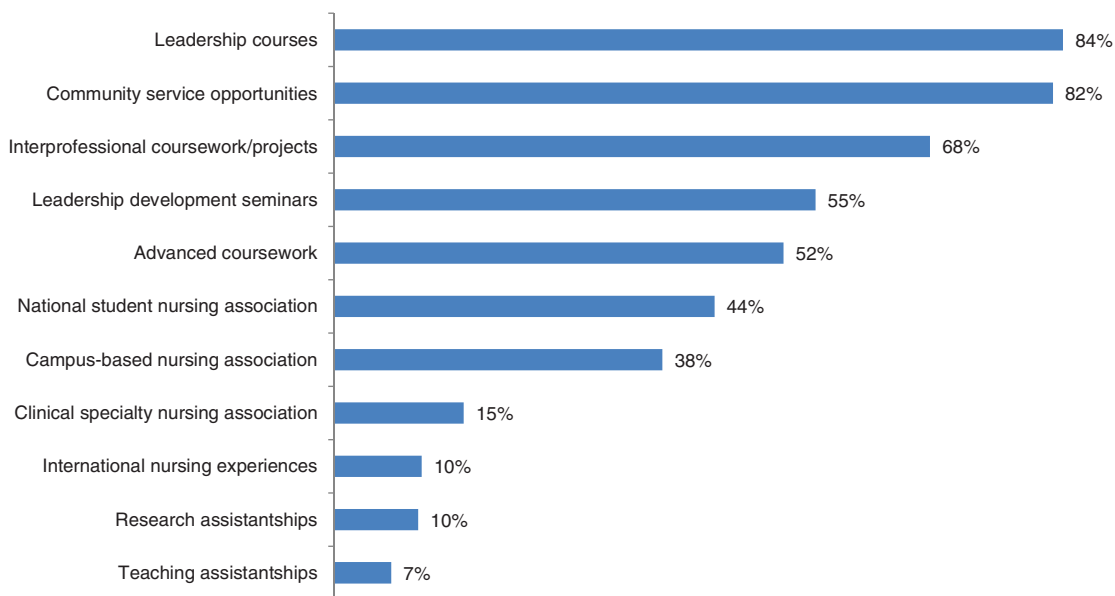


Figure 21 Leadership development: Alumni participation in activities during their accelerated programs. This was a series of related items, so percentages sum to greater than 100%. From *New Careers in Nursing Alumni Survey* by Educational Testing Service, 2014, Princeton, NJ: Author.

Alumni Respondents Were Actively Engaged in Leadership Development During Their Accelerated Nursing Degree Programs

Most NCIN Alumni Survey respondents reported participating in leadership courses (84%) and community service opportunities (82%) over the course of their nursing degree programs (see Figure 21). A majority of NCIN alumni also reported engaging with interprofessional coursework or projects (68%) and advanced coursework (52%). Participation in student nursing associations, either at the national or campus level, was slightly less common (44% and 38%, respectively)—which is not surprising in light of students’ tight schedules during their accelerated programs. International nursing experiences and research or teaching assistantships were relatively rare, with 10% or fewer NCIN alumni respondents reporting these activities.

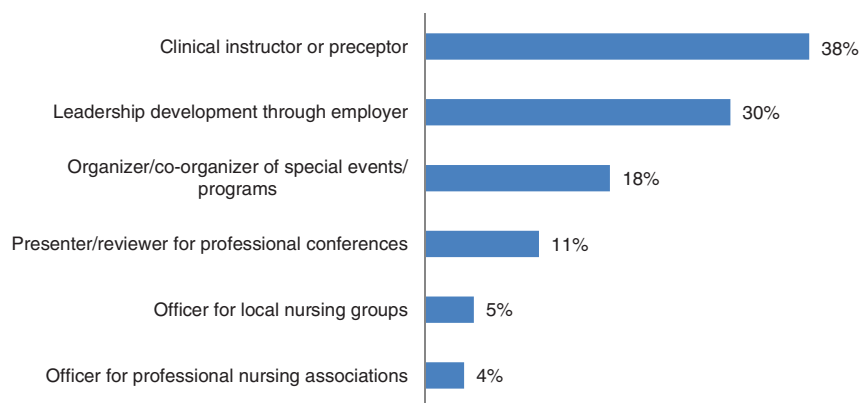


Figure 22 Leadership development: Professional leadership roles of New Careers in Nursing alumni. This was a series of related items, so percentages sum to greater than 100%. From New Careers in Nursing Alumni Survey by Educational Testing Service, 2014, Princeton, NJ: Author.

Unsurprisingly, master's-level accelerated nursing students were more likely to report having participated in advanced coursework during their degree programs than their bachelor's-level peers (71% as compared with 50% of ABSN alumni). Alumni of AMSN programs were also significantly more likely to report participating in campus-based nursing associations (55% vs. 36% of ABSN alumni), clinical specialty nursing associations (31% vs. 13% of ABSN alumni), and teaching assistantships (18% vs. 5% of ABSN graduates).

Since Moving Into the Field, New Careers in Nursing Alumni Have Progressed Into Professional Leadership Roles

Many alumni reported moving on from their nursing degree programs to take on leadership roles in the nursing profession. More than one-third of alumni respondents (38%) reported serving as a clinical instructor or preceptor for student nurses, quickly contributing to the educations of the next generation of new nurses (see Figure 22). In addition, almost one-third of NCIN alumni respondents (30%) are continuing to develop their leadership skills through formal experiences offered by their employers. Some NCIN alumni respondents have organized or co-organized special events or programs for nurses (18%) or presented or reviewed presentations for professional conferences (11%). A few alumni reported serving as officers for local nursing groups or professional associations (5% and 4%, respectively).

Though engagement with professional leadership roles is less prevalent than participation in program-based leadership development, the roles endorsed reflect the high levels of responsibility NCIN alumni reported being prepared to assume. It is also important to note that many alumni respondents who have recently graduated may be focusing on gaining experience at this early stage of their nursing careers.

Mentoring Experiences

Message 5: Alumni Are Positive About Their Mentoring Experiences and Have Started to Give Back

Mentoring has grown into a central component of the NCIN program's emphasis on retaining diverse students and developing leaders in the nursing profession. The majority of NCIN Alumni Survey respondents (58%) reported that they had had an individual whom they considered a mentor during their accelerated degree programs. Alumni of baccalaureate-level accelerated nursing programs were more likely to say that their mentors were assigned through NCIN (40% vs. 21% of AMSN alumni).

Although 58% may seem a modest participation rate for a key program element, it is necessary to remember that graduates from the first few cohorts may not have had access to structured mentoring programs. Program data collected over the course of the NCIN evaluation confirms that technical assistance from the national program office and lessons learned during program implementation have increased and strengthened opportunities for mentoring.

Among New Careers in Nursing Alumni Who Had a Mentor During Their Accelerated Degree Programs, Satisfaction Is High

NCIN alumni who had mentors reported high satisfaction overall, with the majority of respondents reporting that they are mostly or completely satisfied with various roles their mentors fulfilled for them. Alumni respondents with mentors were satisfied with their mentors’ support, inspiration, and encouragement (89%) and with the listening ear or counsel their mentors provided (89%; see Figure 23). Mentor assistance in setting career and professional goals ranked third, with 82% satisfaction. A similar proportion of respondents (80%) felt satisfied with mentor encouragement and support to pursue advanced degrees. Alumni respondents were slightly less likely to be satisfied with mentor support after graduation; 71% of alumni respondents were mostly or completely satisfied with this aspect of their mentoring relationship.

New Careers in Nursing Alumni Have Gone on to Serve as Mentors to Subsequent Accelerated Students for a Variety of Reasons That Reflect Their Dedication to Nursing

Perhaps even more encouraging than NCIN alumni’s satisfaction with their mentors is the speed with which they have started giving back, serving as mentors to subsequent accelerated students. Thirty-nine percent of NCIN alumni respondents report mentoring students who have followed them. These early career professionals seem to have wholeheartedly embraced the value of mentoring to support new nurses like themselves.

When asked why they mentor others, more than one-half (61%) of respondent alumni who have become mentors cited reasons such as helping others (in general), sharing their personal experiences, and passing on advice gained from others:

I think that I benefited a great deal from having other folks to help guide me and provide me with advice that I otherwise would not have gotten in this program — I wanted to pay it forward to help students coming in feel better prepared for what to expect.

Wanting to give back and to participate in shaping and inspiring those coming behind. To create change and motivate a positive culture in the nursing profession.



Figure 23 Satisfaction with mentoring roles among alumni with mentors (*n* = 298). This was a series of related items, so percentages sum to greater than 100%. From New Careers in Nursing Alumni Survey by Educational Testing Service, 2014, Princeton, NJ: Author.

Previous mentoring experiences were another motivating factor for NCIN alumni who have gone on to become mentors themselves. More than one-quarter (29%) of NCIN alumni who reported serving as mentors attribute their decision to prior mentoring experiences—negative and positive.

Being a mentor to the incoming class of students was important to me. I would have benefited from having someone to come to for advice.

Going from a totally fresh nurse with wet ink on the license to a competent member of the health care team takes a tremendous amount of support from others. Reflecting on my experiences, there is no way I would have lasted as long as I did without other nurses and mentors pulling me along. I'd like to provide that same experience to others who were as frightened as me to enter the nursing world.

Overall, NCIN Alumni Survey respondents' comments reflect a personal commitment to paying forward, passing on, and creating opportunities for the nursing students who will follow them into the profession. As the NCIN program's online and regional networks grow, broader and more varied mentoring connections may form across and within institutions.

Reflections on New Careers in Nursing and Nursing Degree Programs

The NCIN Alumni Survey also asked respondents to reflect on the experiences they had while enrolled. Their responses provide a unique perspective on the strengths and opportunities for growth in NCIN programming across schools of nursing that have participated—a perspective contextualized by the hindsight of having moved on into the profession. At the same time, it is important to bear in mind that these perspectives refer to both NCIN and academic programming as they existed during funding years 1–4 (2008–2012).

On a related note, several questions about alumni experiences refer to both NCIN and institutional programming. Consultation with nurse educators implementing NCIN and pilot interviews with graduates suggested that NCIN scholars from earlier funding rounds may have difficulty distinguishing NCIN activities from other co-curricular programming at their schools of nursing. Although the precise source of programs and services may not have stuck in alumni memories, their recollections of the impact are resoundingly positive.

Message 6: Alumni Remember New Careers in Nursing and Their Accelerated Programs Fondly and Are Eager for More Experiences

Most alumni respondents (89%) said that, if they had to do it over again, they would still enter an accelerated nursing degree program. Their overwhelming willingness to face the rigors of accelerated education all over again is a testament to the value of their programs and to their satisfaction with the outcome—becoming a nurse.

New Careers in Nursing Alumni Respondents Feel Satisfied and Well Prepared for the Profession

Overall, NCIN alumni rated various aspects of their accelerated nursing educations highly. Most respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with the preparation they had received for their nursing careers (81%) and the quantity of clinical experiences (81%). The quality of clinical experiences was also high, with 78% of NCIN alumni respondents reporting being satisfied or very satisfied with this aspect of their nursing degree programs. Three-quarters of alumni (75%) respondents were satisfied with overall faculty–student relations.

Alumni also rated their preparation for the profession highly. Most alumni respondents (86%) agreed or strongly agreed that their accelerated programs prepared them to engage in evidence-based practice (see Figure 24). Respondents also agreed that their nursing programs gave them a strong base to build advanced clinical skills (81%) and that their programs provided rigorous nursing content knowledge (80%). Almost three-quarters (73%) agreed or strongly agreed that their accelerated nursing programs inspired them to want to help educate future nurses, suggesting that NCIN and accelerated programs are successfully encouraging new nurses to consider joining the faculty ranks.

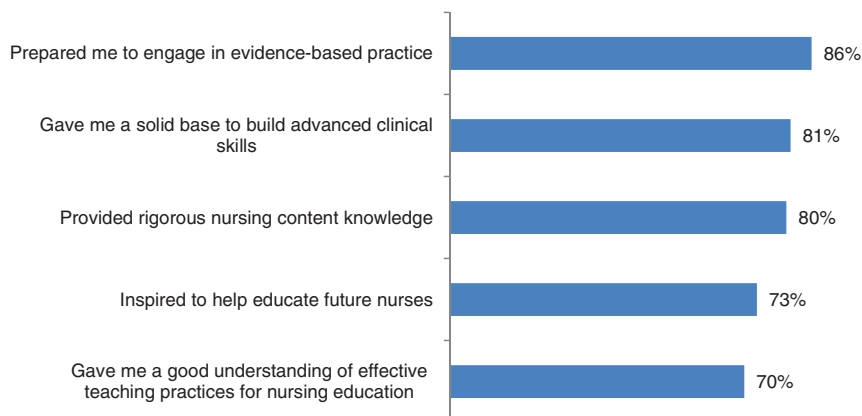


Figure 24 Program preparation: Alumni who agree or strongly agree with statements. This was a series of related items, so percentages sum to greater than 100%. From *New Careers in Nursing Alumni Survey* by Educational Testing Service, 2014, Princeton, NJ: Author.

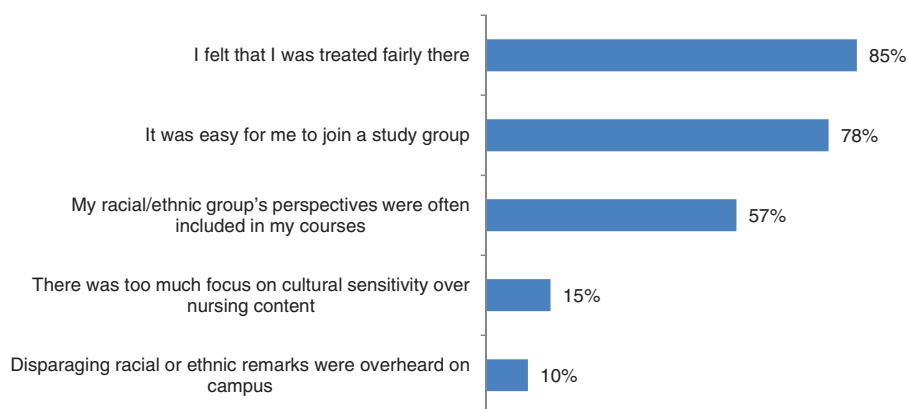


Figure 25 Campus climate: Alumni who agree or strongly agree with statements. This was a series of related items, so percentages sum to greater than 100%. From *New Careers in Nursing Alumni Survey* by Educational Testing Service, 2014, Princeton, NJ: Author.

New Careers in Nursing Alumni Recall a Welcoming Campus Climate at Their Accelerated Programs

Influencing the culture of schools of nursing is a relatively recent addition to the ambitious goals of the NCIN program. The reflections of respondent alumni suggest that, overall, a welcoming and inclusive campus climate is a strength of participating programs. Very few NCIN alumni (10%) agreed that disparaging racial or ethnic remarks were overheard on campus (see Figure 25). Similarly, only 15% agreed that there is too much focus on cultural sensitivity over nursing content, reflecting a high value placed on cultural aspects of nursing education. Anecdotally, one pilot survey participant commented, “Cultural sensitivity *is* nursing content.”

NCIN alumni respondents also agreed or strongly agreed that they were treated fairly at the schools of nursing they attended (85%) and that it was easy for them to join a study group (78%). Findings regarding multicultural perspectives in the curriculum were more mixed, with 57% of alumni respondents agreeing that their racial/ethnic groups’ perspectives were often included in their courses.

Finances Figure Prominently in Alumni Perceptions of the Most Beneficial Aspects of New Careers in Nursing

Focusing in on the NCIN program specifically, we asked alumni to select its two most beneficial aspects from a list of key program components, including financial assistance, mentoring, leadership development, professional development, and networking opportunities. Unsurprisingly, the financial support provided by NCIN scholarships was extremely popular among respondents, with 86% choosing financial assistance as one of the top two programmatic aspects—more

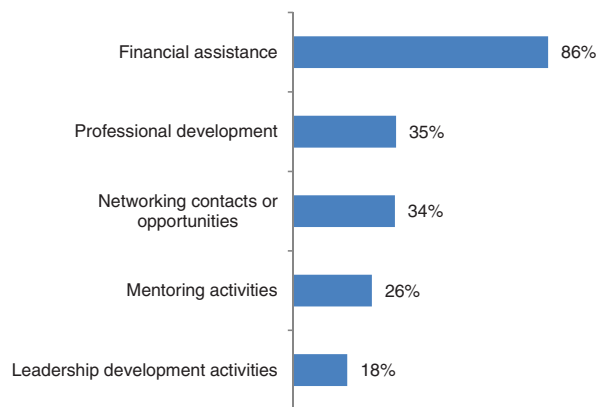


Figure 26 Alumni reflections: Two most beneficial aspects of New Careers in Nursing. This was a select-two-choices question. Percentages may sum to 200% because of rounding. From *New Careers in Nursing Alumni Survey* by Educational Testing Service, 2013, Princeton, NJ: Author.

than the proportion that selected the second- and third-place options combined (see Figure 26). These were professional development (35%) and networking opportunities (34%), reinforcing the value of such supports in navigating the early stages of their nursing careers.

Interestingly, mentoring and leadership development activities were less popular with respondent alumni (26% and 18%, respectively). Relatively lower rankings of the benefits of mentoring and leadership development may reflect experiences of alumni who participated in early iterations of these programs.

There Is Strong Interest in More Services Related to Employment and Graduate Education

In addition to reflections on their accelerated programs and NCIN, the NCIN Alumni Survey probed for opportunities to extend supports and services to alumni. In particular, we wanted to know how likely alumni would be to use services and supports to advance their careers and pursue graduate study. Alumni insights regarding services and supports may help inform new programming efforts by schools, foundations, health care organizations, and other stakeholders.

Respondents to the NCIN Alumni Survey showed strong interest in a variety of services to advance their careers (see Figure 27). The most popular options were continuing education courses or workshops (81%) and career advice catered toward second-degree nurses' unique interdisciplinary skills (81%). Ranking third was résumé advice or critiques (78%), followed by training in salary negotiation (74%). The majority of respondents were also interested in opportunities to network with other alumni. Specifically, almost three-quarters of alumni (73%) respondents would be likely to take advantage of an alumni job board or Listserv, and two-thirds (67%) would participate in alumni networking events.

The most-desired service to support alumni in pursuing advanced degrees was information or advice on financing graduate study (81%), emphasizing the need to promote and disseminate strategies to increase the affordability of graduate education (see Figure 28). Almost three-quarters of alumni respondents (73%) would like advice or critiques on graduate school admissions essays, and just over two-thirds (68%) said they would be likely to use services to help them select a graduate program that is right for them. A similar proportion of NCIN alumni (63%) would take advantage of assistance navigating the graduate school application process.

ABSN alumni respondents disproportionately drove these results. Graduates of baccalaureate-level programs were more likely to say they would use services to help them finance a graduate degree (83% as compared with 75% of AMSN alumni respondents), navigate the graduate school application process (66% vs. 51% of AMSN alumni), get advice or critiques on admissions essays (76% vs. 62% of AMSN alumni), and prepare for the GRE (67% as compared with 45% of AMSN alumni). This finding may reflect the higher interest in pursuing graduate study reported by ABSN alumni respondents or, similarly, AMSN alumni respondents' recent attainment of a graduate degree at the master's level.

Additional Efforts to Highlight the New Careers in Nursing Mission and Brand May Be Beneficial

An opportunity for NCIN to continue improving may come in the form of greater visibility. About two-thirds (65%) of NCIN alumni respondents reported that they have not spoken with prospective employers or graduate faculty about

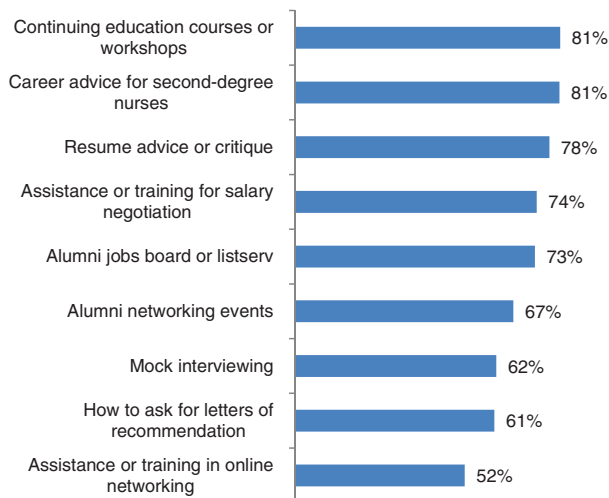


Figure 27 Alumni likelihood of using services to advance their careers. This was a series of related items, so percentages sum to greater than 100%. From *New Careers in Nursing Alumni Survey* by Educational Testing Service, 2014, Princeton, NJ: Author.

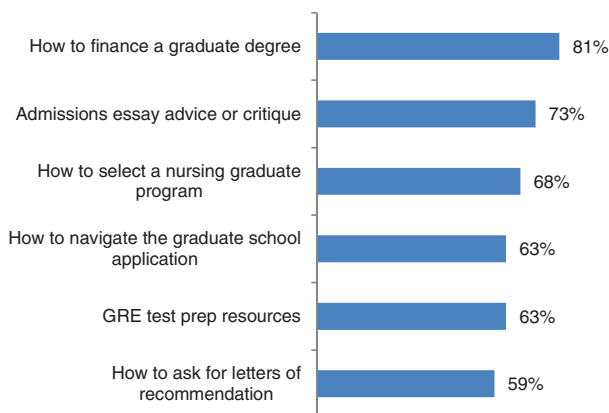


Figure 28 Alumni likelihood of using services to pursue graduate studies. This was a series of related items, so percentages sum to greater than 100%. From *New Careers in Nursing Alumni Survey* by Educational Testing Service, 2014, Princeton, NJ: Author.

NCIN. Among alumni respondents who have, 59% reported that stakeholders had some level of knowledge about NCIN. A smaller proportion of employers or graduate school faculty, however, was reported to be knowledgeable about the goals and programmatic aspects of NCIN (18%). Enhanced visibility may boost opportunities for partnerships and promote the qualities that make NCIN alumni unique assets to a workplace or graduate program.

The good news is that, among employers and graduate school representatives who are familiar with NCIN, perceptions are overwhelmingly positive. Respondent alumni reported that 80% of prospective employers or graduate school faculty viewed NCIN positively or very positively — and none (0%) viewed the program negatively.

Alumni Suggestions for New Careers in Nursing

Message 7: Alumni Experts Suggest Offering Guidance for Accelerated Programs, Mentoring, and Assistance Finding Employment

Finally, a single, open-ended question was designed to solicit suggestions to improve NCIN. Alumni respondents’ suggestions centered around four themes: programming, NCIN involvement, employment opportunities, and finances.

One-third of alumni respondents’ comments (34%) offered suggestions to improve co-curricular programs associated with NCIN — especially mentoring programs, which have evolved substantially since the development of two editions of the Mentoring Toolkit, in 2011 and 2012:

Make mentoring a priority. Leadership is important, but I think most good mentors are good leaders. People define the two separately, but I think they are inseparable. Stressing mentorship will stress the importance of giving back, as well as building networks.

Mentors [should] be more involved with students and have the time to invest in helping aspiring nurses reach their educational goals.

More focus on mentoring continuing postgraduation.

These suggestions reinforce the importance of mentoring initiatives in helping to guide NCIN scholars and alumni through professional and academic challenges and opportunities that arise as they develop their nursing careers.

NCIN involvement (28%) focused on increased support at the national level to help grantees implement the program. This theme may capture the variation of NCIN student experiences between schools of nursing, with some alumni respondents reporting that opportunities to connect directly with RWJF and the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN), who serves as the National Program Office for NCIN, would have improved their experience. The NCIN involvement category also included suggestions to promote NCIN more actively to employers, prospective students, and the general public:

The NCIN program is excellent. Maybe closer oversight at the individual schools [and] a conference specifically for NCIN scholar from each region would be a nice networking event. . . . How we can continue to be involved with NCIN — that's my biggest area of interest. How to continue being involved and connecting with NCIN postgraduation.

Play a more active role with the students and mentor. Give further advice on how to make the most out of your nursing career and ensure placement with their first job.

A related set of suggestions (22%) focused on assistance securing employment. This included direct assistance identifying preferred positions as well as promoting opportunities for networking:

[I suggest] more assistance helping to secure a job after graduation. The job market is not good at the moment, and it took me over a year until I finally received a job offer.

I'm in [a doctoral] program and think networking, mentoring, and job connections are the most important things to me. As an RN, it's easier to find jobs and get trained on the job for four months versus an NP [nurse practitioner] who is not trained that long and is expected to be a full practitioner when finished. Having networks that you can trust when you are new is very important.

The only thing I could think of would be an NCIN Alumni networking site/board, Listserv, and/or conferences.

It is not surprising that employment is important to these new nurses, who are looking for their niches in the nursing profession while managing high levels of educational debt in a weak economy. As the comments suggest, however, access to networks can make the difference between struggling alone to find a good fit and being able to rely on trusted peers and mentors for support. NCIN's national program office, AACN, has already built the infrastructure for this network—the Scholars Network.¹²

The remainder of alumni respondents' suggestions to improve NCIN (16%) centered on finances, including continued financial support for graduate study, an increased number of schools and students benefiting from the NCIN program, and funding on a recurring rather than one-time basis. The most common suggestion regarding finances was to increase opportunities for support of graduate degrees in nursing.

Discussion

The prior sections detailed the early postdegree experiences and reflections reported by NCIN scholars who graduated between 2009 and September 2012. Now it is time to sort out what the results mean and consider how the past can inform the future.

What Do the Results Tell Us?

Results from the NCIN Alumni Survey paint an encouraging picture of this group of new nurses. Although NCIN alumni are a subset of accelerated, second-degree nursing program graduates—and a small portion of new nurses overall—these findings represent an important step forward in developing the nascent research base on the experiences and outcomes of accelerated nursing program alumni. Overall, our findings indicate that respondents are making important contributions to the supply, diversity, and leadership potential of the nursing workforce—thanks in great part to the support of RWJF and NCIN programming efforts. Four major take-away messages for nursing leaders and policy makers follow.

Take-Away 1: New Careers in Nursing Is Accomplishing Its Objectives

Taken as a whole, the NCIN Alumni Survey findings suggest that the NCIN scholarship program has been successful both in targeting talented, diverse second-degree nursing students and in preparing them for professional success. NCIN Alumni Survey respondents report more diverse demographic characteristics than either nursing students overall or the nursing workforce. They also come to their accelerated degree programs with solid records of academic achievement, having previously attained baccalaureate degrees and, in some cases, advanced degrees in human services, law, and other fields. Most NCIN Alumni Survey respondents felt well prepared for various postgraduate experiences by their nursing degree programs and by NCIN.

Take-Away 2: Alumni Are Employed and on the Move Within the Profession

Almost all alumni respondents reported having engaged with the nursing workforce since graduation, and some have already transitioned into new positions. Among those who have moved into their second (or third) nursing positions, the opportunity to learn about new clinical areas is a key motivator. Our findings suggest that alumni's professional options expand after the first few years in the nursing workforce and will likely continue to do so as these new nurses gain experience and advanced skills. NCIN alumni state they are satisfied with their nursing careers and plan to contribute to the field for years to come.

Take-Away 3: Greater Investments and New Partnerships May Expedite Progress Toward Graduate Degrees

Our findings suggest that the desire to gain professional experience and limited financial resources delays alumni enrollment in advanced degree programs. Though work experience is a critical aspect of professional learning in an applied discipline such as nursing, there may be opportunities to reduce delays and encourage diverse, early career nurses to enter the nursing faculty pipeline. Although the number of doctoral students in nursing has increased substantially over the past decade, the demographic profile of doctoral candidates in nursing favors women in their mid- to late 40s—a potential challenge for diversity as well as the longevity of faculty careers (Cohen, 2011; Smith & Delmore, 2007).

Greater investments may help to support alumni to progress through the educational pipeline more quickly. In particular, partnerships with health care organizations and providers may provide opportunities and incentives to develop programs that combine academic with professional experiences. This approach has the potential to facilitate structured work experiences while making formal advanced education more financially accessible. Recent conversations about the adequacy of stipends for doctoral students may also lead to promising strategies to minimize financial barriers to graduate education in nursing (e.g., Patel, 2014).

Take-Away 4: Networks May Create Even More Opportunities for Alumni Advancement

NCIN has great potential to connect scholars and alumni with each other and with health care organizations and stakeholders. This potential is already being tapped by the Scholars Network, which provides a forum to connect with other alumni at regional conferences as well as an online social network, and the Doctoral Advancement Network (DAN) project, designed to connect scholars and alumni with faculty mentors who can help them identify advanced educational experiences and shepherd them through the application and enrollment process. Although few early graduates seem to have used networks to advance their careers, creating and promoting new opportunities will help address their suggestions. Enhanced networking may promote a greater array of options for early career nursing positions, helping

alumni find opportunities to develop their nursing skills and move into desired specialty areas more quickly. Networks may also identify strategies to expedite enrollment and completion of graduate degrees.

Varied Connections Can Support Alumni Throughout Their Nursing Careers

Development of the nursing profession has been a priority area for the RWJF. This vision takes a broad view of nursing careers rather than a limited or one-shot approach. Connections between NCIN alumni and networks of nurse leaders and policy makers are vital to support the development of the next generation of health care influencers:

The Foundation is committed to expanding the number of nurses, building their leadership capacity, sharpening their skills and the skills of their educators, and building awareness of the urgent need to address the projected nursing shortage. (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2014, p. 3)

This path holds great promise for workforce success, educational advancement, increased opportunities for mentoring, and engaged leadership among early career and more established nurses (see Figure 29). As early career professionals, NCIN alumni are already becoming invaluable resources to the subsequent cohorts of accelerated students who are following their footsteps into the nursing profession. At the same time, alumni may benefit from support and guidance from various leaders in the nursing profession as they construct their own careers.

Connection 1: Peer and Near-Peer Role Models—the New Careers in Nursing Scholars Network and Beyond

Our findings suggest that many early NCIN scholar graduates are not familiar with their NCIN-affiliated peers from other participating schools of nursing. In 2012, AACN helped to address this gap by convening a motivated group of NCIN scholars and alumni to create the Scholars Network. An exclusive online community supports social networking while regional conferences provide face-to-face networking opportunities. The Scholars Network represents one potential vehicle for the types of networking and professional development opportunities that alumni respondents requested in their suggestions to improve NCIN. This resource may also facilitate peer and near-peer mentoring among NCIN scholars and alumni, nurturing connections that will help graduates continue to advance the nursing profession and their own careers.

Other stakeholders, such as health care organizations and schools of nursing, may also be interested in leveraging opportunities for their employees and graduates to network with near-peer colleagues and alumni. These connections have the potential not only to build a strong and broad network of professional peers, but also to expedite the entry of new nurses following educational or life (e.g., relocation or parenthood) transitions.

Connection 2: Scholars, Leaders, and Influencers—Reducing Six Degrees of Separation

More than 3,000 students are slated to receive or have received scholarship support from RWJF as well as programmatic support from AACN. In addition to the connections with each other that they share as NCIN scholars and alumni, these new nurses would benefit from connections to educational organizations, professional associations, health care providers,



Figure 29 Goals for New Careers in Nursing program alumni.

and other stakeholders. Creating opportunities for scholars and alumni to engage with these networks may support workforce development, professional leadership opportunities, and access to advanced mentors and graduate education.

Workforce Development

Relationships with local employers for first or second positions may be forged during NCIN scholars' accelerated degree programs. On a longer timeline, however, alumni may benefit from professional development that connects them with specialized opportunities to pursue their clinical and scholarly interests across the United States (and, perhaps, beyond our borders). Being able to access the networks of health care providers and organizations may help alumni take advantage of new and varied opportunities to contribute to the health of their patients and communities. Alumni may also benefit from more geographically diverse connections to employment and professional development when relocating to a new community.

Leadership Opportunities

Opportunities for leadership in the nursing profession abound; they exist in hospital units as well as administrative offices and professional associations. Certainly challenges to the profession or gaps in services and resources are also opportunities for NCIN alumni to lead the charge for new solutions. Opportunities to connect with professional associations may help motivated alumni take the next step between aspiration and action. These connections may engage alumni with leadership and professional development opportunities. NCIN alumni may in turn become a source of talent for organizations to tap in succession planning.

Mentoring Relationships

Alumni suggestions to improve NCIN programs underscored the value these graduates place on mentoring. Though alumni respondents report satisfaction with mentor support postgraduation, it is also likely that mentoring relationships established during their accelerated programs will diminish over time. New students will take graduates' places in the classroom and clinic, while alumni's growing expertise and evolving interests may call for new mentors to guide them forward in their careers. The goal moving forward will be developing strategies to support alumni in identifying and connecting with potential mentors in these advanced roles.

Faculty and leaders in graduate education, for example, may be effective mentors for the many alumni who want support pursuing a doctoral degree in nursing. Mentors from professional associations and health care organizations and providers may help alumni explore different aspects of nursing, from health policy to executive administration to public health. Continuing to support the progression of these talented new nurses is likely to yield ever-greater returns for the profession as a whole as well as for individual students and alumni.

Graduate Programs

Advanced skills and education — as well as the ethos of continuous improvement — are central aspects of NCIN's goals for the nursing profession. Our results revealed that many alumni share these goals as well. Assistance selecting a graduate program and writing a stellar admissions essay, as well as strategies for financing graduate education, can help steer NCIN alumni toward graduate study. Connections with educational organizations and professional associations may enable NCIN scholars — current students and alumni — to take this next step in their careers. Such efforts will also benefit graduate schools in search of strong candidates for their programs.

Conclusion

The NCIN Alumni Survey results support the program's success in accomplishing its objectives — and then some. NCIN has identified and developed a cadre of diverse and well-prepared new nurses for the profession. NCIN alumni have high rates of employment in the nursing workforce and are moving forward in their careers. Alumni want to advance their education but may benefit from additional support for financial and work-related priorities. Finally, networking — both with their counterparts across the country and with prospective mentors or employers — is a promising strategy to continue building on the NCIN program's success and the accomplishments of its alumni.

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Notes

- 1 The eligibility requirements for the NCIN program include membership in a group that is underrepresented in nursing or a disadvantaged background (e.g., economically disadvantaged), U.S. citizenship or permanent residency, a baccalaureate degree in a nonnursing discipline, and acceptance into an entry-level accelerated nursing degree program for nonnursing college graduates.
- 2 Persistence rate includes NCIN Scholars who have graduated, who are enrolled, or who are delayed in their progression (e.g., decelerated to traditionally paced option) but still in the nursing program.
- 3 We examined the literature regarding response rates. Saunders and Stivason (2010) reviewed response rates to alumni surveys and reported a national average response rate of 10% to 20%, deeming the 28% response rate among accounting graduates in their study excellent. Using a Web-based survey format may also be associated with lower response rates. A meta-analysis of response rates to 45 surveys administered via telephone, direct mail, and online pegged the average rate for Web surveys at 6% to 15% (Lozar Manfreda, Bosnjak, Berzelak, Haas, & Vehovar, 2008).
- 4 Example of disadvantage range from students who may have come from underserved or rural areas, had a situation involving family members that affected their educational outcomes, or whose family may have received state and federal assistance owing to socioeconomic circumstances.
- 5 Distance between NCIN alumni's school and first nursing employer was calculated based on the ZIP codes of each. ZIP codes are linked with the latitude and longitude coordinates of the earth to approximate the distance between the two locations in miles.
- 6 Owing to feedback from program liaisons and pilot participants, several questions asking alumni to reflect back on their experiences do not require respondents to distinguish the specific source or affiliation of activities and individuals.
- 7 The two categories representing alumni working in nursing individually round down to 58% and 31%, respectively, but round up to 90% when combined.
- 8 The two categories representing aspiration to work in clinical research individually round down to 25% and 10%, respectively, but round up to 36% when combined.
- 9 AACN conducts three surveys with NCIN Scholars while they are completing their accelerated nursing programs: an entry survey, a mid-program survey, and an exit or postgraduate survey of their plans and experiences.
- 10 The two categories representing full- and part-time graduate study round up to 18% and 11%, respectively, but round down to 28% when combined.
- 11 The two categories representing \$25,000–49,999 and \$50,000 or more individually round down to 33% and 24%, respectively, but round up to 58% when combined.
- 12 See <http://ncinscholarsnetwork.org/>
- 13 In Carnegie basic classification, research universities are defined as institutions that awarded at least 20 research doctoral degrees during the update year (excluding doctoral-level degrees that qualify recipients for entry into professional practice, such as the JD, MD, PharmD, or DPT). See details in <http://classifications.carnegiefoundation.org/descriptions/basic.php>

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Appendix A

The New Careers in Nursing Schools of Nursing Profile

The NCIN network comprises 125 schools of nursing. Through the efforts of the national program office, the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN), these schools have implemented and refined various strategies and programs to promote student success, from recruitment and supportive transitions into their accelerated nursing programs to mentoring, leadership, and other professional development opportunities. The average number of NCIN scholarships received over the 6-year grant cycle has been 25, with a maximum of 78 and a minimum of 5. The profile of school of nursing grantees is as follows:

- 76% (95) awarded scholarships to ABSN students, 19% (24) awarded scholarships to AMSN students, and 5% (6) awarded scholarships to both ABSN and ABSN students.
- 55% are public universities.
- 52% are research universities according to the Carnegie classifications.¹³
- 34% are in the South, 30% in the Midwest, 22% in the Northeast, and 15% in the West.
- 75% are in cities.
- Four schools of nursing are historically Black colleges or universities (HBCUs); eight are Hispanic serving institutions (HSIs).
- NCIN schools of nursing are in 41 states and the District of Columbia.

Appendix B

Research Methods

The NCIN Alumni Survey was designed by ETS using prior surveys conducted with NCIN scholars and nationally representative surveys of nurses to develop aligned content in each of the survey concept areas. Prior surveys included the NCIN Student Entry, Mid-Program, and Post-Graduate surveys completed during scholars' academic programs. Items taken from national surveys (i.e., Kovner and Brewer's Newly Licensed RN Surveys, the National Sample Survey of Nurses conducted by HRSA, and the National Council for State Boards of Nursing [NCSBN] Program Survey) facilitated comparisons with nurses who have not participated in NCIN. Additional questions specific to the NCIN experience and program goals were developed in collaboration with our partners, content area experts, and pilot respondents. Topline tables of responses to each item can be found in an Excel spreadsheet at http://www.ets.org/Media/Research/RR-15-28_tables.xlsx.

Eligible participants included accelerated, second-degree nursing program graduates who received \$10,000 NCIN scholarships and graduated prior to September 2012. The September cutoff date was selected so that respondents would have at least 6 months of postdegree experiences to report by the time the survey was launched on March 5, 2013. The number of eligible NCIN alumni was estimated at 1,691 individuals representing 97 schools of nursing. The survey was in the field for 3 months, until June 5, 2013. The final sample was 1,682 with 518 respondents, for a 31% response rate.

This NCIN Alumni Study was conducted as a Web survey. A variety of strategies and media were employed to invite all NCIN alumni estimated to be eligible to participate in the survey. Over the course of survey administration, the evaluation team employed more than a dozen strategic contacts. These included regular, personalized e-mail contacts, social media postings, mailed letters and postcards, targeted phone calls, and a message sent on our behalf from NCIN leader Vernell DeWitty, PhD (Wright & Schwager, 2008).

Data Analyses

Quantitative analyses included the development of response rate tables by respondent and institutional characteristics, which facilitated comparisons between respondents and nonrespondents to evaluate the representativeness of the sample of NCIN alumni respondents. Frequencies were run for all questions and formatted into topline tables highlighting the percentages of respondents selecting each response item. Fill-in responses were coded into mutually exclusive categories to facilitate these analyses. Finally, χ^2 tests of difference and Fisher's exact test were used to identify statistically significant differences in response patterns by degree level (ABSN and AMSN).

The NCIN Alumni Survey also included three substantive open-response items: (a) What is the main reason that you are seeking a nursing position? (b) What are the experiences that influenced you to become a mentor? and (c) What suggestions do you have to improve the NCIN program? These responses were thematically coded in several iterations using a two-tiered structure. Initial categories were developed based on prior research, program goals, and emerging patterns in the data and then explored for coverage and proportion of responses in each category. The primary coder reviewed the final schema with the principal investigator before training and supervising a second, independent coder. The coders completed three iterations of coding for each question to achieve 90% or greater agreement.

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