



NEW CAREERS IN NURSING

Scholar Alumni: Options in the Early Career Years

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Executive Summary

The New Careers in Nursing (NCIN) program is a scholarship program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation that supports non-nursing degree college graduates enrolled in baccalaureate or master's nursing programs. The American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) serves as the national program office for the program. The NCIN Alumni Survey explored the post-degree experiences and reflections of NCIN Scholar alumni. About a third (31%) of NCIN Scholars who graduated from accelerated baccalaureate (ABSN) or master's (AMSN) nursing programs prior to September 2012 responded to an NCIN Alumni Survey. It should be noted that selection bias may be an issue with a low response rate. Although the respondent sample may not be representative of the whole NCIN alumni population, respondent alumni's self-reported answers provide insights into their early work experiences, continuing education, student loan debt, leadership experiences, mentoring experiences, and program reflections. These experts' insights on the NCIN experience highlight the program's success in identifying and preparing a diverse group of second-degree nurses who are already making important contributions to the field — and are poised to accomplish even more.

Early Work Experiences

NCIN alumni have strong participation in the nursing workforce, with almost all self-report survey respondents (95%) reporting having held positions as nurses since graduation. While over a third of respondent alumni (38%) have left their first nursing positions in the up to three years since they graduated, most job changers (88%) have remained in the nursing profession. The most commonly reported reason alumni were *not* working in nursing was that they had remained in or returned to school (4% of all respondents). NCIN alumni work primarily in hospitals (81%), although the rate of hospital employment was lower among alumni who had moved on to their second (or third) professional positions (67%). Respondents reported being motivated to change jobs by opportunities to gain experience in another clinical area (38%) and by poor management in some positions (26%). NCIN alumni reported being satisfied with their careers in nursing (94%) and aspire to be advanced practice nurses (75%), faculty members (50%), and public health/international nurses (50%).

Continuing Their Educations

NCIN Alumni Survey respondents are interested in pursuing advanced degrees, but employment opportunities and finances may be competing priorities. Most alumni (83%) reported that they plan to earn a graduate degree, and almost a third (28%) have already enrolled in a program. Among currently enrolled alumni, graduate degrees that emphasize advanced clinical skills, such as the Master of Science in Nursing (MSN) (72%) and Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) (11%) degrees, are more popular than the research-focused Ph.D. (3%). For those who have not yet returned to school, a lack of interest or necessity for their career goals was not an inhibiting factor — instead, wanting work experience (61%) and concerns about affordability (40%) discouraged early-career NCIN Alumni Survey respondents from returning to school. Similarly, work experience (60%) and financial limitations (47%) were the top reasons alumni reported choosing to attend graduate programs on a part-time basis.



Bachelor's-level NCIN Alumni Survey respondents were significantly more likely to say that they wanted to gain work experience before returning to school (64% versus 41% of AMSN alumni) or were too busy with work to pursue a graduate degree (39% as compared with 24% of AMSN alumni). Graduates of accelerated master's programs, on the other hand, were more likely to report that graduate degrees were not necessary for their career goals (18% versus 4% of ABSN alumni), that their salaries would not change (18% versus 5% of ABSN alumni), and that they were not interested in furthering their education (10% as compared with 3% of ABSN alumni). Alumni of accelerated master's programs were also significantly more likely to report having earned a national specialty certification (53% versus 27% of ABSN alumni).

Educational Debt

While most NCIN Alumni Survey respondents (71%) felt the loans that they took for their accelerated nursing degrees were worthy investments, their debt is substantial. Even with the \$10,000 scholarship from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, most alumni (90%) obtained loans to help finance their accelerated nursing programs. The debt accrued for these programs (median reported debt range of \$25,000–\$49,999) was on par with the levels of debt carried by undergraduate students nationally (average debt of \$29,400, Reed & Cochrane, 2013). Master's-level alumni reported borrowing significantly more for their nursing degree programs than did their ABSN counterparts (51% as compared with 21% borrowed \$50,000 or more).

For many alumni, loans to support their accelerated nursing programs were added on top of loans for previous baccalaureate (and possibly graduate) degrees. Almost all NCIN Alumni Survey respondents (95%) reported having some level of cumulative debt associated with their postsecondary educations. About half of all alumni respondents (47%) have borrowed \$50,000 or more in total. Alumni of accelerated master's programs were more likely to have higher levels of cumulative student debt (30% versus 14% of ABSN alumni borrowed \$100,000 or more over the course of their education) and to owe \$1,000 or more per month toward loan repayment (26% versus 10% of ABSN alumni). The good news is that these graduates report repaying their student loans at high rates (83%), reinforcing the value of their investments in a new career as a nurse.

Leadership Experiences

Most alumni respondents (79%) rated NCIN and their nursing programs as effective in preparing them to take on professional leadership roles. Leadership courses (84%) and community service (82%) were reported to be the most popular forms of leadership experiences during respondents' accelerated programs. AMSN program alumni were significantly more likely than their bachelor's-level peers to report participating in advanced coursework (71% versus 50% of ABSN alumni), teaching assistantships (18% versus 5% of ABSN alumni), clinical specialty nursing associations (31% versus 13% of ABSN alumni), and campus-based nursing associations (55% versus 36% of ABSN alumni). Since moving into the field, NCIN alumni respondents reported, they have progressed into professional leadership roles, serving as clinical instructors or preceptors for student nurses (38%) and continuing to develop leadership skills via formal experiences in the workplace (30%). As NCIN alumni transition out of the early stages of their nursing careers, it is likely that opportunities to take on more and higher-level leadership roles will expand.



Mentoring Experiences

NCIN Alumni Survey respondents recall their mentoring experiences fondly and have started to give back. A majority of our respondents (58%) said that they had a mentor as an NCIN Scholar and most of these respondents (89%) reported high levels of satisfaction with the mentoring they received. Almost 4 out of 10 respondents (39%) said that they have paid this support forward by serving as mentors to subsequent cohorts of accelerated students. Alumni respondents who have become mentors reported doing so primarily to help others (in general) or to share good advice and personal lessons learned the hard way (61%). NCIN Alumni Survey respondents also reported being motivated to become mentors by their own experiences with mentoring (29%).

NCIN Reflections

The reflections of NCIN Alumni Survey respondents provide a snapshot of their experiences in the 20/20 hindsight of having graduated and moved into the field. Almost all respondents (89%) reported that, if they had to do it all over again, they would still enter an accelerated nursing degree program. Most survey respondents (81%) felt well-prepared for the nursing profession. In addition, alumni recalled a welcoming climate at their alma maters, with most alumni (85%) feeling that they were treated fairly and few (10%) agreeing that racial or ethnic remarks could be overheard on campus.

Most alumni respondents cited financial support as the most beneficial aspect of NCIN, stressing the need for — and appreciation of — this resource. Most NCIN alumni respondents (81%) also indicated their interest in services to help them advance their careers and pursue a graduate degree. ABSN-level alumni were significantly more likely to report they would use services to pursue graduate studies (e.g., 66% versus 51% of AMSN alumni would use services to navigate the application process, and 67% as compared with 45% of AMSN alumni would use test preparation resources). Alumni also recommended additional efforts to highlight the NCIN mission and brand, and made numerous suggestions to continue to improve NCIN. Chief among these were enhanced programs (34%) — especially mentoring programs — and increased connection with and guidance from the national level (28%).

References

Reed, M., & Cochrane, D. (2013, December). *Student debt and the class of 2012*. Washington, DC: The Institute for College Access and Success.