

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Findings from the Annual Survey of Schools of Nursing Academic Year 2007-2008

As Recession Hits, Expansion of Educational Capacity Stalls **Insufficient Faculty Is Major Constraint to Expansion of Postlicensure Programs**

Since the 1950s, the NLN has conducted an annual survey of all nursing programs in the United States to gather key statistics, including admissions, enrollments, graduations, student demographics, and numbers of faculty. The 2009 annual survey was administered from May to September 2009 to obtain 2007-2008 data.

The 2009 annual survey contains a number of new topics critical to addressing data gaps related to the nursing education workforce and nursing education capacity. New student-related topics are discussed below; an analysis of issues related to faculty will be available later this spring. Recent additions include:

- Unused educational capacity
- Constraints on expanding admissions
- Improved instructional staffing counts
- Faculty vacancies and recruitment
- Impact of faculty shortage on educational capacity

To supplement this synopsis, a comprehensive set of tables and figures is available in a variety of easy-to-use electronic formats at the NLN DataView™ website (www.nln.org/research/slides). In addition, the entire Nursing Data Review is available, at no cost, in pdf format at NLN DataView.

It is also important to note that this current analysis of the survey uses two different methodologies for estimating key summary statistics. (See Sidebar, “About the Methodology,” for details.) As noted in the sidebar, a more detailed discussion of estimation techniques is available online.

Key Statistics Reflect Slowing Growth In a surprising turnaround, annual admissions to prelicensure nursing programs fell in 2008 for the first time in at least six years. Since 2003, nursing program admissions consistently moved upward, achieving an overall increase of over 36 percent during the period. However, in 2008, new admissions were down by almost 2 percent across all prelicensure program types.

Overall enrollments in prelicensure nursing programs were flat in 2008 for the first time in six years. Consistent with admissions trends over the period, growth in enrollments in baccalaureate programs edged just slightly higher in 2008, increasing by 2 percent, after a notable decline in 2007. By contrast, enrollments in ADN programs dove into negative territory, falling by 0.7 percent, after experiencing a dramatic 12 percent spike between 2005 and 2006.

Sidebar. About the Methodology

Previous NLN Annual Surveys of Schools of Nursing estimated key statistics using historical imputation — a technique that increases the number of data points available for analysis by imputing missing data from historical records. These historically imputed population estimates will continue to be available to allow trending of new data against earlier statistics that were generated using that technique.

In the 2009 survey key statistics were also generated using historical imputation combined with poststratification sample weighting. Poststratification weighting adjusts sample statistics to more accurately represent the distribution of the population with respect

to key characteristics. This refinement improves the precision of the data by eliminating bias caused by dissimilarities between responding schools and the full universe of nursing education programs. In addition, it allows us to accurately weight reported data — which are typically available for approximately 85 percent of the population — to full population levels. As a result of poststratification weighting, 2009 estimates will be larger than previous estimates produced via historical imputation alone. A more detailed discussion of these estimation techniques is available at www.nln.org/research/slides/pdf/Appendix_Methodology_0708.pdf.

Prelicensure graduations did increase significantly in 2008, a lagging effect of the upsurge in admissions between 2003 and 2005. Overall nationwide graduations rose almost 12 percent over the prior year, with all three program types experiencing growth on the order of approximately 12 percent.

Growth of Nursing Programs Declines Expansion in the number of prelicensure RN programs ground to a near halt between 2007 and 2008, with the nation adding only 15 additional programs, a less than 1 percent increase. This minute increment constitutes a considerable slowdown in expansion, coming on the heels of almost 10 percent growth in the number of programs in 2006, and a smaller but still notable increase of almost 4 percent in 2007.

The pause in expansion did not affect associate degree programs, which experienced a steady growth rate of 2.3 percent in both 2007 and 2008. The number of baccalaureate programs, however, decreased by two over the same period, and the number of diploma programs dropped by six, from 75 to just 69.

High Levels of Unmet Demand for Admissions Persist In 2008, the number of applications to prelicensure nursing programs was nearly identical to the prior year, possibly signaling the end of a six-year growth trend. Although the number of applications has oscillated in the past, since 2003 the total volume of applications has trended strongly upward, rising a total of 57 percent. This uptick in applications is consistent with national trends: applications to four-year undergraduate institutions have increased in recent years as admissions have become more competitive and electronic forms have simplified the application process.

Despite the fact that applications did not grow significantly in 2008, there were still strong indications of sizable unmet demand for access to nursing education at this point in time. Nearly one quarter (23.4 percent) of US nursing programs of all types reported receiving more qualified applications than could be accepted in 2008. Among prelicensure programs, there was considerably more unmet demand for admissions; more than 119,000 qualified applications — or 39 percent of all qualified applications — were turned away from prelicensure programs in 2008. Moreover, more than one in three prelicensure programs (35 percent) had more qualified applications than openings.

Just over one half of all diploma programs turned away qualified applications, as did 42 percent of associate degree programs. Among prelicensure program types, BSN programs experienced the least unmet demand for admissions, with slightly under one quarter unable to accommodate all qualified applications. (See Figure 1.)

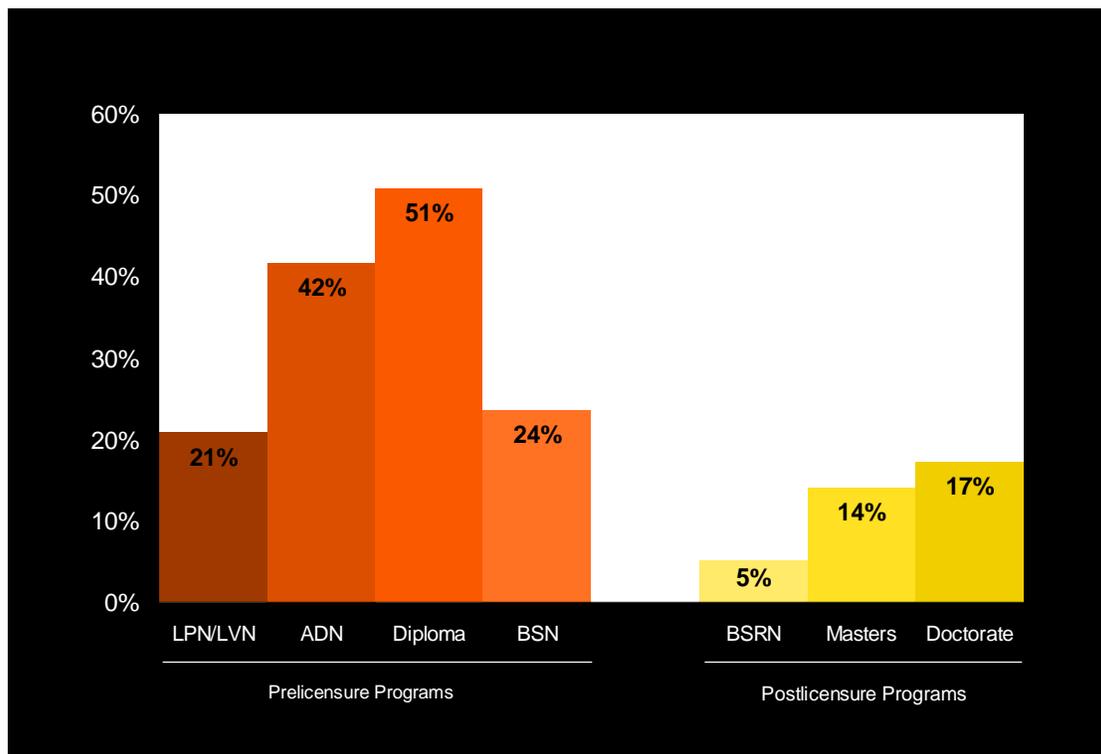


Figure 1. Percentage of Programs That Turned Away Qualified Applicants by Program Type, Fall 2008

Admissions Are Highly Competitive Selectivity and yield rates — key indicators of the competitiveness of college admissions — also continued to reflect a tight market for prelicensure nursing education. Selectivity rates (also known as acceptance rates) were down by a percentage point in 2008 to 49 percent, indicating that 49 percent of applications to prelicensure nursing programs resulted in an offer of admission.

The percentage of prelicensure programs that are “highly selective,” a designation earned by those programs that accept fewer than half of all applicants, remained very high, with 62 percent of ADN programs and 60 percent of diploma programs falling into that category. Although baccalaureate programs have become slightly more selective over the past three years, they remain much less selective than their counterparts, with under two thirds (39 percent) considered highly selective in 2008.

Yield rates — the percentage of accepted applicants who go on to enroll — are another benchmark of the level of demand for entrance into programs and the competitiveness of admissions in a given year. Among US four-year colleges, yield rates have decreased slightly over the past six years to just over 45 percent in 2007 (Hoover, 2009). Yield rates of prelicensure nursing programs, by contrast, were 91 percent at their peak in 2005, indicating that an astonishing nine out of 10 accepted applicants to nursing programs went on to enroll. Although, consistent with national trends, yield rates of basic nursing programs did drop between 2005 and 2006, they have rebounded substantially, rising to 86 percent in 2008.

Faculty Vacancies and Lack of Clinical Placements Limit Growth Schools that did not accept all qualified applicants were asked to identify the primary obstacle to expanding admissions in 2008. While shortages of faculty, clinical placements, and classroom space were all reported to impede the expansion of admissions, postlicensure programs were much more likely to cite a shortage of faculty, whereas prelicensure programs reported that lack of clinical placement settings were the biggest impediment to admitting more students. Specifically, almost two thirds (64 percent) of doctoral programs and one half of RN-BSN and master’s programs identified insufficient faculty as the major constraint to expansion, in contrast to just one third of prelicensure programs. ADN programs were much more likely than their counterparts to report a lack of clinical placements to be the main impediment to adding more admissions, as did 40 percent of LPN programs and 34 percent of BSN programs. (See Figure 2.)

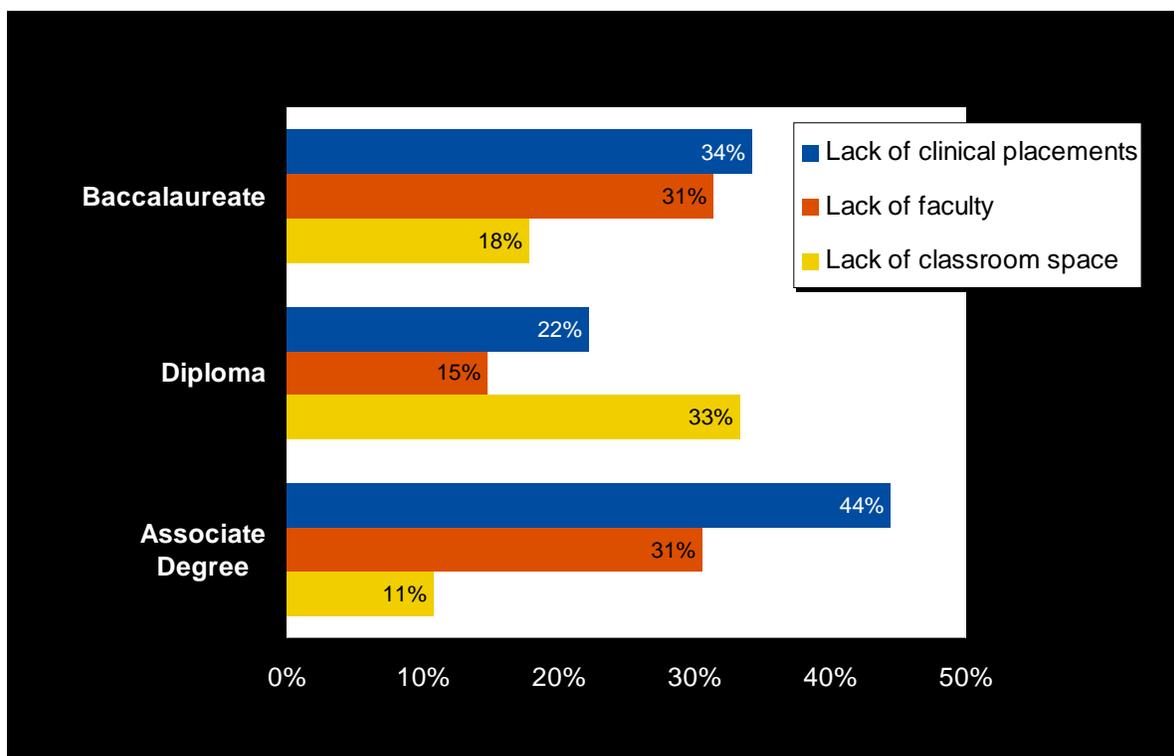


Figure 2. Main Obstacle to Expanding Admissions by Program Type, Fall 2008

How Increased Faculty Staffing Would Impact Admissions Capacity In addition to their actual annual admissions, for the first time this year schools were asked to also report the potential number of students that could hypothetically be admitted if all faculty and instructional vacancies were filled. In response to this question, 44 percent of all programs reported that full staffing would allow their program to increase admissions beyond actual 2007-2008 levels. Postlicensure programs were much more likely than prelicensure programs to report that filling faculty vacancies would positively impact admissions capacity. Almost three quarters of RN-BSN programs, over two thirds of master’s programs, and over half of doctoral programs projected that filling all faculty vacancies would positively impact admissions. By contrast, only 41 percent of prelicensure RN and only 29 percent of LPN/LVN programs anticipated that full staffing would allow their programs to expand admissions beyond actual 2007-2008 levels. (See Figure 3.)

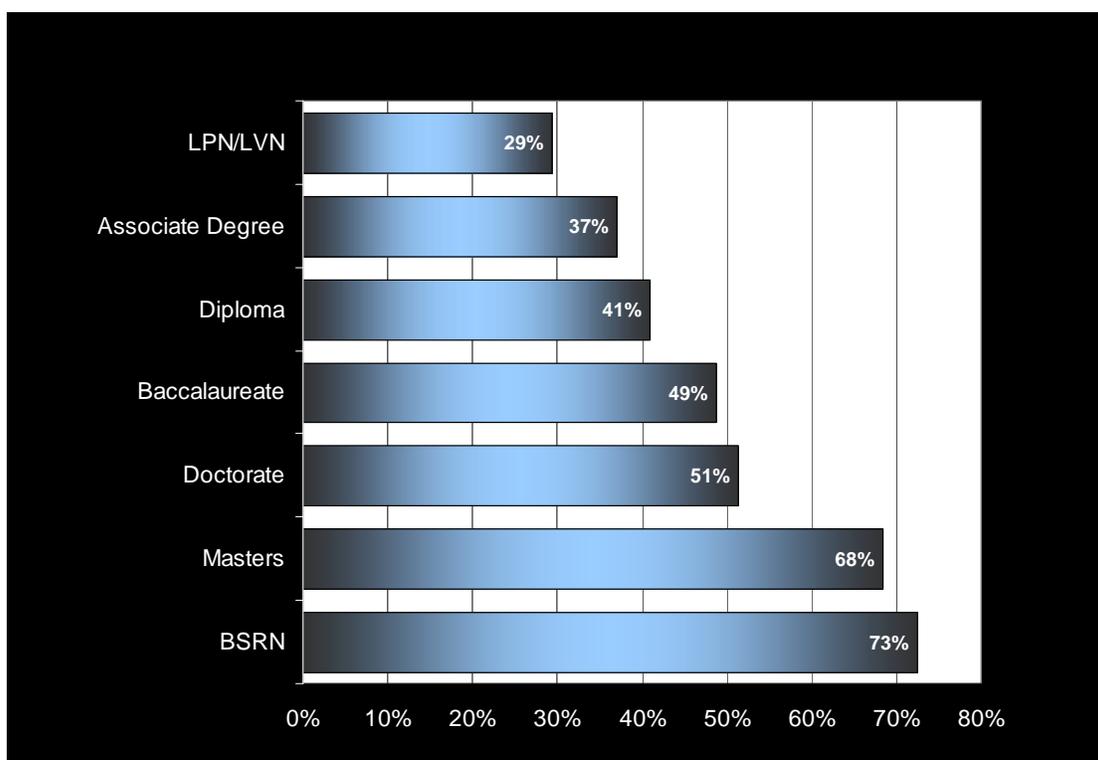


Figure 3. Percentage of Programs Projecting an Increase in Student Admissions Under Conditions of Full Instructional Staffing by Program Type, 2008

Those programs that did expect full staffing to increase their admissions capacity projected being able to admit, on average, 27 students more than they admitted in 2007-2008. There was significant variation in the projected impact of filling out staffing rosters across program types. RN-BS programs anticipated the largest potential gain (31 additional annual admissions), and master’s, LPN, and BSN programs reported similar potential increases (about 29 admissions per program). But ADN programs, most likely constrained by limited clinical placements, anticipated that full staffing would bring about smaller increases of 25 students per year. Doctoral and diploma programs projected the lowest expected benefit of only 17 and 14 additional admissions, respectively.

Some Seats Still Go Unfilled While the majority of the nation’s nursing programs were filled to capacity in 2007-2008, some still began the school year with empty seats. Just under one in 10 US nursing programs (9.8 percent), and 12 percent of prelicensure programs, reported unfilled vacancies for new student admissions. Of those schools with unfilled spots, 44 percent attributed the vacancy rate to a lack of qualified students, whereas 19 percent stated that “lack of affordability” or “high cost of education” was the main obstacle to student recruitment. Only tiny fractions — 3 and 4 percent, respectively — indicated that a limited student recruitment territory or lack of student interest were the key obstacles to filling spots.

Despite the reduced growth, the distribution of prelicensure nursing programs by type and region has held remarkably steady over the past six years. Both region and program type shares have varied by less than a single percentage point from year to year throughout this period, in which associate degree and baccalaureate programs have constituted approximately 58 and 38 percent of programs, respectively. Nationally, diploma programs have comprised about 4 percent of programs.

On a regional basis, slightly over one third of the nation's prelicensure nursing programs have continued to be located in the South; just over a quarter in the Midwest; and about one fifth in the Northeast. The smallest concentration of programs remains in the West, where just under 18 percent of programs were located in 2008.

This dataset was made possible as a result of the generous support of all those nursing colleagues who contribute data each year to the NLN's Annual Survey of Schools of Nursing. The NLN is extremely grateful to all those who contributed their time and energy to make this effort a success.

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Reference Hoover, H. (2009, October 20). The state of college admissions: Full of uncertainty. *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com/article/The-State-of-College/48877/>