Costs and Other Aspects of Nursing Education Models: A Multifactorial Comparison of For-Profit and Public/Nonprofit Training Programs

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by

Qnity Institute

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About Qnity Institute

The Qnity Institute is the research and data division of Qnity, Inc., an education and consulting firm serving the beauty, wellness, and other service-based industries. Established to address the lack of reliable data on compensation, financial literacy, performance and career outcomes, the Institute produces credible, actionable insights through independent research and collaboration with academic and industry partners. Building on Qnity's fifteen-year history of studies and projects, the Institute advances economic empowerment by providing high-quality data to help businesses and professionals make informed decisions, improve financial performance, and elevate careers in professional beauty, wellness and other trades.

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The CECU Research Foundation prioritizes the funding of credible research into school outcomes and how proprietary career colleges fare in comparison to peer institutions in other sectors of higher education. The CECU Research Foundation is a 501(c)3 affiliate of Career Education Colleges and Universities (CECU), the national association representing proprietary career schools. Studies funded by the CECU Research Foundation are executed independently and without bias from CECU or the Foundation in order to provide an accurate evaluation of the different sectors of higher education.

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Introduction

Degrees and certificates from 2-year public/private nonprofit and for-profit institutions in allied health fields are among the most in-demand programs available. Data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reflect high demand for training. Because of high turnover rates in the nursing field following the pandemic and an aging population, nursing is expected to remain a high-growth field, and workforce training programs in allied health fields, including nursing, will continue to thrive.

What factors, including the cost to taxpayers, differentiate 2-year for-profit institutions from public/private nonprofit colleges in nursing programs? This study explores key metrics related to the cost to society of nursing programs by comparing nursing degree and certificate programs at 2-year for-profit institutions with those conferred by 2-year public/private nonprofit programs.[1]

Using a mixed-methods approach, the research team built a cost-benefit model using historical administrative data from IPEDS and the College Scorecard to tease out differences between public/private nonprofits and the for-profits, not at the institutional level but at the program level, which is a new approach to analyze a commonly used data set like IPEDS. It is important to recognize that the Scorecard data have limitations: large amounts of missingness in key variables forced us to use only a sample of the institutions granting the target credentials in our analysis.

We then interviewed a set of administrators, deans, faculty, and career services experts to update the analysis and explore current challenges and barriers confronted by the two types of nursing programs. Finally, we collected primary data from a set of graduates from nursing/allied health programs to capture and analyze student perspectives on their educational experiences.[2]

Studying the impact of students who start nursing degree programs but do not graduate ("non-completers") is a difficult task and mostly beyond the scope of the current study. The reasons they drop out are understudied. Non-completers from public school programs have used local taxpayer resources that are lost, while non-completers from for-profit programs have student loans outstanding that federal taxpayers have subsidized and may not be repaid. Taxpayers and society are shortchanged when students start but do not graduate with degrees. There is some

[1] Generally, there are three types of colleges: public, for-profit, and private nonprofit institutions. In this report, we have tried to simplify our taxonomy by combining "public" and "private nonprofit" institutions into "public/private nonprofits" to compare them with "for-profit" colleges. The cost-benefit section of our analysis compares 2-year public and for-profit nursing school programs, which is also the comparison made in most of the academic literature because the private nonprofit sector for associate's degrees and certificates is extremely small. The interview summary section of the report focuses on interviews with experts from 2-year public/private nonprofit programs and for-profit programs. For our survey of students, we broadened eligibility to include 4-year programs to ensure we were able to obtain a robust set of responses.

[2] Throughout this study, we use Practical Nurse (PN) and Registered Nurse (RN) to refer to the two degrees available from colleges with two-year programs. Occasionally we refer to LPN/LVN equivalent titles because the literature, measure, or scale we refer to employ them. We also may refer to RN-ADN/BSN as being equivalent to RN for similar reasons, with the understanding that the BSN is a 4-year degree program.

evidence that for-profit career programs, in general, graduate their students at a higher rate than public colleges. If this were true for nursing programs, then an analysis of the true taxpayer costs of each program model should account for the sunk cost of investment by local taxpayers, in the case of public programs, and a discount applied to the sunk cost of un-repaid federal student loans, in the case of for-profit programs.

The report concludes with a discussion of the findings from all three of these approaches to the cost to society, including students and taxpayers, and points to future research that could improve the number and quality of nurses demanded by the burgeoning allied health field.

Key Findings

Cost-Benefit Model

Cost to Taxpayers

Analyzing IPEDS and Scorecard data at the program level for students trained in Registered Nurse (RN) and Practical Nurse (PN) programs, we find the total cost to taxpayers (federal, state, and local) to be lower at for-profit than at public programs.

Cost to Students

Because tuition is much higher, on average, at the for-profit colleges, for both RN and PN credentials, studying at a for-profit institution costs more to students than studying at a public college.

Benefits: Median Earnings One Year After Credential Completion

- RN programs: Median earnings for RN program completers are similar at the two institution types.

- PN programs: Median earnings for graduates of for-profit PN programs are sometimes higher than for graduates of public/private nonprofit institutions, though there is more variation in median earnings across the for-profit programs than the public/private nonprofit programs.

Interviews

Interviews with faculty, deans, and career services officers at both program models provided valuable detail about how the two models operate, while also illuminating important differences that impact the economics of their programs. Some of the distinctions included:

Cost of equipment: Lab equipment is costly. For example, a single high-fidelity simulation mannequin can cost $100,000. The two program models finance the high cost of lab equipment differently. Interviewees reported that it is common for public community colleges to use state and local grant funding to pay for lab equipment, but private for-profit and not-for-profit administrators often have to use outsource management programs (OPMs) like Orbis Education and Risepoint to help set up and maintain labs. One dean at a not-for-profit program said that their contract with an OPM to set up, operate, maintain, and update their simulation lab soaks up 70% of their tuition income.

"Pay-to-Play": In some areas of the country, according to some of the experts we interviewed, public/private nonprofits like community colleges and universities cannot keep up with demand for nursing training, accept and admit the best students, and offer the lowest tuition. These areas are most likely in urban settings with growing population bases. The for-profit institutions are able to offer training for a lucrative nursing career at a higher but still-manageable tuition level to students who may not have the highest GPA or who do not want to remain on a waiting list for another semester.

Waiting lists: While data on program waiting lists is hard to find, a few interviewees reported that the general rule of thumb is that where waiting lists do exist, they occur in public/private nonprofit nursing programs in urban, high-growth areas where community colleges and universities cannot respond quickly enough to changes in demand for nursing training or as quickly as their for-profit counterparts.

Student Survey

With the help of a survey panel vendor, we conducted a cross-sectional, web-based survey of recent students and completers of nursing and allied-health programs to describe (1) demographic and educational backgrounds, (2) institutional and academic experiences, (3) competency development and self-efficacy, and (4) early-career outcomes. We obtained survey responses from 216 participants, including 100 responses from graduates of for-profit colleges and 100 responses from public/private nonprofit colleges.

Differences Between Operating Models

- The debt profile diverges for these operating models: for-profit graduates concentrate in the $25–50k band (≈38%) while public/private nonprofit graduates more often report $0 (≈35%).
- "Worth the cost" is higher among public/private nonprofit respondents (≈75% vs. 67%).
- Time to first job >6 months is more common in public/private nonprofit respondents (≈8% vs. 2%).
- For-profit respondents more frequently endorse self-efficacy items related to resourcefulness and handling unexpected events.
- Public/private nonprofit respondents show slightly higher shares reporting discrimination (exploratory) and slightly higher workforce preparation.

Similarities Across Operating Models

- Very high job placement (≥97%) and high rates of working in related roles.
- Strong ratings for instruction quality (≈89%), faculty responsiveness (≈83%), and advising (≈62%).
- High competency levels in clinical skills (≈92%), professionalism/work ethic (≈94%), teamwork (≈88%), and communication (≈89%).
- Sense of belonging is broadly positive (≈74%).

Overall Comparison

Both operating models deliver strong employment outcomes and high satisfaction with instructional quality. Public/private nonprofit programs tend to offer a lower debt burden and stronger value perceptions, while for-profit programs show advantages on selected self-efficacy indicators and current related employment. Differences on some climate items are exploratory and should be interpreted with care given multiple-comparison adjustments.

Literature Review

For-Profit Colleges and Public Colleges

Public two-year colleges are typically open-access institutions with multiple missions. They award terminal degrees such as certificates and associate's degrees. Some students also enroll with the goal of completing general requirements before transferring to a four-year institution. In 2020, for-profit two-year institutions enrolled 178,874 students, compared to more than 4.7 million enrolled in public two-year institutions. For-profit colleges also enroll a larger proportion of females, minority students, and students over the age of 25 than community colleges (Deming, et al., 2012), (Rosenbaum, et al., 2006), (Cellini, 2025).

For-profit institutions tend to hire adjuncts to teach their classes and open in office buildings or shopping centers in order to avoid the costs and bureaucracy associated with faculty and facilities faced by other types of institutions. They may also develop curricular materials centrally so that courses and programs can be easily replicated in new locations (Bailey, et al., 2001), (Breneman, et al., 2006). In contrast, in the public sector, courses may be taught by a mix of tenure-track and contingent faculty, and new programs often have to go through a lengthy approval process with the state's higher education governance structure (Rosenbaum, et al., 2006). It is possible that the presence of tenured faculty makes it difficult to change existing programs if faculty are not willing to be flexible in what they teach. The bureaucratic processes involved in developing new programs may make colleges in the public sector less responsive than for-profit colleges to shifts in the demands of the local economy.

Some scholars have questioned why students enroll in for-profit colleges when community colleges offer similar programs and cost less. While public colleges charge students less, for-profit colleges may attract students by offering programs that are more directly tied to local

employment demands than those at community colleges (Breneman, et al., 2006), (Gilpin, et al., 2015). Moreover, students may choose to enroll in for-profit institutions because capacity constraints at community colleges prevent them from accessing the courses that they need or want (Iloh & Tierney, 2014). It has been documented that some for-profit colleges offer flexibility and services not provided by many community colleges (Bailey, et al., 2001), (Breneman, et al., 2006), (Kirp, 2003). In a case study of the University of Phoenix, Breneman (2006) writes that branches of this school offer extensive academic support services, including tutorial services provided online and during the weekend.

Writing about the growth in for-profit business schools between 1970 and 1990, Bañuelos (2016) argues that, in order to capture this potential market for MBAs, for-profit colleges offered programs with characteristics that appealed to sometimes older, experienced workers (Bañuelos, 2016). Tressie Cottom, in her qualitative study of the growth of for-profit colleges, uses her own experience as a recruiter at two different for-profit colleges as well as interview data to argue that, in order to advance at work or gain access to middle-class jobs in the first place, individuals need credentials and the for-profits offer the promise of these credentials (Cottom, 2017).

Finally, because they do not receive the same state subsidies for higher education, which allow community colleges to charge students only a small percentage of the total cost of their education, for-profit institutions charge higher tuitions than public community colleges. Charges for tuition, fees, and room and board for undergraduates at two-year public institutions in the 2022 school year amounted to $11,953, whereas at for-profit institutions in the same year these charges amounted to $24,948 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). In order to pay these higher costs, students make use of federal financial aid, and for-profit colleges receive a disproportionate amount of federal aid dollars. This distribution of federal financial aid dollars has drawn negative attention to for-profit colleges partly because students attending these schools are more likely to default on student loans than those attending community colleges (Deming, et al., 2012). One purpose of our study is to explore in detail the relative costs of nursing programs at these two institution types.

Two studies directly explore the costs and benefits of attending different institution types. (Klor de Alva & Schneider, 2011) use data from the National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey combined with IPEDS to compare the costs and benefits of earning a bachelor's degree at public, for-profit, and private/nonprofit institutions of different selectivity levels. Ultimately, their sample of institutions is defined as those attended by the bachelor's-pursuing students in the NPSAS survey. Though they estimate that there is an economic benefit of earning a bachelor's degree at all institutions, they argue that the costs outweigh the benefits at both the least selective and most selective public institutions in their sample (Klor de Alva & Schneider, 2011). Cellini (2012) compares the costs and benefits of public versus for-profit associate's degree-granting institutions (i.e., mainly two-year institutions). She uses publicly available data (mainly tables in the Digest of Education Statistics derived from IPEDS) to estimate costs and determines that associate's degrees from public two-year colleges cost taxpayers more than those from for-profit colleges, but they cost students significantly less. Given the lack of evidence on the economic return to credentials from different institution types (or available data to use to estimate it herself), she concludes by calculating the returns necessary for students to break even after 30 years (Cellini, 2012).

Student Outcomes at For-Profit, Compared to Public/Private Nonprofit, Institutions

Deming, Goldin, and Katz (2012) use data from the 2004/2009 Beginning Postsecondary Survey and propensity-score matching methods to compare completion rates and employment outcomes for students enrolled in for-profit colleges to observationally similar peers enrolled in community colleges. The authors find that students enrolled in certificate and programs at for-profit colleges are slightly more likely to complete their credentials than students at community colleges, but students at for-profit colleges are more likely to be unemployed six years after entering their programs (Deming, et al., 2012).

Cellini and Chaudhary (2014) use data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (1997 cohort) and individual fixed-effects models to estimate the economic return to associate's degrees from for-profit versus public institutions (Cellini & Chaudhary, 2014). Though these authors are not able to estimate returns at the program level, they can compare returns for enrollees versus completers. For enrollees, they estimate returns of 11% for students at for-profit colleges and 6% for those at public institutions. The estimated returns for completers are 16% for students at for-profits and 20% for those at public colleges. The estimates for enrollees account for the fact that public institutions, on average, have lower completion rates than the for-profits. This explains some of the difference in relative returns. However, using a Chow test, they find that the average returns for enrollees at public, compared to for-profit colleges, are not statistically significantly different.

In order to explore whether students who complete credentials at for-profit institutions experience discrimination in the labor market, two resumés audit studies compare the number of employer call-backs received by applicants submitting fabricated resumes with credentials obtained from for-profit colleges to those obtained from resumes with credentials from public institutions (Deming et al., 2016), (Darolia et al., 2015). Deming and his coauthors (2016) find that, for health-related jobs that do not require a degree, resumés with certificates obtained from for-profit colleges are approximately 57% less likely to receive a call-back than resumés with certificates from public institutions. On the other hand, when the job requires an occupational license, the authors find no statistically significant difference in call-back rates for credentials from for-profit versus public institutions. In their study, Darolia and his colleagues (2015) find some evidence that employers are more likely to call back applicants listing a credential from a public community college than applicants listing a credential from a for-profit college, though these estimates are not statistically significant.

Cost-Benefit Model

Background

In this section, we analyze the costs and benefits of associate's degrees in registered nursing and certificates in practical nursing at for-profit, compared to public, institutions. Costs are divided into costs to taxpayers and costs to students. Our analysis of the relative benefits of these credentials at the two institution types relies primarily on the literature, though we are able to compare the distribution of median earnings for graduates of each of the two credential types, at each of the two institution types. This analysis builds on the previous literature by moving beyond the institution level to examine two high-demand allied health programs.

Contributions of this Research

This is one of few studies that attempt to compare the costs and benefits of completing a credential at a for-profit, versus a public, two-year institution. Other cost-benefit analyses attempting to examine differences across these two institution types have aggregated across programs and credential types (Cellini, 2012) or focused on bachelor's degrees (Klor de Alva & Schneider, 2011). In contrast, we attempt to estimate costs specifically at the program level. The nursing credentials that are the focus of our study differ in several ways from many of the other vocational credentials offered by two-year colleges, and so a comparison of the costs and benefits of these programs may differ from the analysis for the overall institution.

Key Findings

Cost to Taxpayers

When we use IPEDS and College Scorecard data to consider just the cost to taxpayers (not including the costs to students) of the nursing programs at for-profit institutions, compared to public institutions, we find the costs to taxpayers to be higher at public colleges.

Cost to Students

Because tuition is much higher, on average, at the for-profit colleges, for both RN and PN credentials, studying at a for-profit institution costs students more than studying at a public college. Tuition is lower at public nonprofits because of the state and local appropriations they receive as part of community college and other public higher education systems that offset the high cost of offering nursing programs.

Figure 1 summarizes the cost to taxpayers as well as the costs to students. See Table 2 and the associated discussion for additional details on the components of the costs summarized here.

Figure 1. Cost summary

Benefits: Median Earnings One Year After Credential Completion

Median earnings one year after graduation for students completing associate's degrees in registered nursing are similar at the two institution types. Median earnings one year after graduation for students completing certificates in practical nursing at for-profit institutions are

sometimes higher than for graduates of public institutions, though there is more variation in this outcome across programs at for-profit compared to public colleges.

Data & Methods

We make use of institution-level data from the College Scorecard merged with data from IPEDS to explore the costs and benefits of graduating from a one- or two-year nursing program at a for-profit compared to a public college. We limit our sample to the cohort completing credentials in 2017 because this is the most recent year for which there are the program-level variables necessary for our analysis, including, in the Scorecard data, the number of students taking out federal student loans. We also limit our sample to institutions that report awarding credentials in at least one of the two target CIP codes (code 5138 for "Registered Nurse" and code 5139 for "Practical Nurse"). Finally, we limit our analysis to institutions that primarily award either certificates or associate's degrees. Each observation in the data is by institution, year, and program. Thus, institution-year combinations may appear twice if the institution offers both of the target credentials.

We analyze two different credentials: associate's degrees in Registered Nursing (RN) that require at least two years of full-time study and certificates in Practical Nursing (PN) that require fewer than two years of full-time study. The credentials are identified by 4-digit Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP) codes in the Scorecard data. As a result, we may be including non-nursing credentials in our analysis. Burr demonstrates that for-profit colleges are more likely to offer some of the "secondary" credentials falling under the umbrella of this four-digit CIP code such as Nurse's Assistants, which are identified by the same 4-digit CIP code as Practical Nurses (Burr, 2025). We calculate program-level tuition and fees by averaging across the relevant variable in the Scorecard data. If some institutions charge less for programs like nursing assistant, we may be underestimating tuition and fees.

The College Scorecard is a unique source of data describing economic outcomes at the college and program level for the universe of colleges and universities in the United States that award federal financial aid such as Pell Grants.[3] We make use of variables describing the number of students who take out loans, the average amount of students' loans, and median earnings one year after graduation. However, particularly at the program level, there is a large amount of missing data. Appendix A compares counts of public and for-profit two-year institutions for which key outcome variables are available. Though only 31% of institution-program observations include the key outcome variables, when we compare programs with and without key variables, we find that they are observationally similar, suggesting the data is missing at random (see Tables 1A and 1B below). IPEDS includes variables providing measures of revenue, assets, expenditures, and liabilities at the institution level. We make use of variables describing federal, state, and local appropriations and grants, as well as net tuition revenue, to describe the costs of nursing programs to taxpayers and students.

[3]Some of our interview subjects noted that most state boards of nursing in the United States allow non-accredited schools to award nursing degrees and permit their students to take the NCLEX licensing exam. But non-accredited schools are not permitted to award federal Title IV student loans to their students. As a result, our analysis of student loan amounts only includes data from accredited nursing schools and programs.

Table 1A. Institutional characteristics of for-profit schools (FPs) granting nursing credentials with and without minimum necessary Scorecard data

	FPs with Data (Reg Nurse)	FPs without Data (Reg Nurse)	FPs with Data (Prac Nurse)	FPs without Data (Prac Nurse)
Tuition and fees ($)	15529.71	14303.67	15652.13	14438.05
	(4897.40)	(4885.38)	(4800.60)	(4943.12)
Percent white	35%	26%	27%	30%
Percent Black	29%	28%	31%	26%
Percent Hispanic	22%	34%	27%	33%
Percent Asian	3%	4%	6%	3%
Percent with Pell	65%	68%	68%	67%
Percent with a federal loan	70%	64%	72%	61%
Observations	118	288	175	231

Table 1B. Institutional characteristics of community colleges (CCs) granting nursing degrees with and without minimum necessary Scorecard data

	CCs with Data (RN)	CCs without Data (RN)	CCs with Data (PN)	CCs without Data (PN)
Tuition and fees ($)	4217.87	4285.50	4664.95	4158.97
	(2204.19)	(3130.52)	(2877.14)	(2546.33)
Percent white	59%	57%	67%	56%
Percent Black	13%	15%	16%	14%
Percent Hispanic	15%	16%	10%	17%
Percent Asian	3%	3%	2%	3%
Percent with Pell	36%	40%	45%	37%
Percent with a federal loan	25%	22%	39%	19%
Observations	630	689	259	1060

Cost Analysis

We begin by comparing the per student costs to taxpayers and students at the two institution types (public versus for-profit) for each of the two credential types.[4] Our cost analysis is displayed in Table 2. The costs to taxpayers come from averaging across variables from the IPEDS finance files and dividing by total undergraduate enrollment for the institutions in our sample. In order to calculate loan default amounts, we began by averaging across the program-level mean debt amounts from the College Scorecard data. We multiply the average by .9 because we assume that students default on 90% of the amount they borrowed. We then multiply this product by program specific default rates calculated from the Scorecard data. These rates

[4] Our analysis is modeled after (S. R. Cellini, 2012), though we sample institutions based on credential awards and the availability of some program-level variables from the College Scorecard.

should be considered estimates because this variable is suppressed or missing for several programs in both institution types. We calculate foregone earnings for 16-44-year-olds using the Bureau of Labor Statistics median weekly wages for 2017. We average across age categories and then multiply this average by 52.14 weeks/year. In order to calculate interest on loans, we started with program-level average amounts borrowed and calculated interest using the rates on federal and non-federal loans in 2017 reported by debt.org. We assume 75% of student loans are federal in order to estimate an overall interest rate of 5.75%. We then multiplied this estimated interest rate by the average debt amounts, by program, reported in the Scorecard data.

Klor de Alva & Schneider (2011) argue that a cost analysis comparing different institution types should also account for taxes paid by for-profit institutions and taxes forgone by public and private, non-profit institutions. They write that the cost to taxpayers of non-profit institutions should include forgone taxes on changes in endowment (e.g. gifts and investment income) and property taxes, though ultimately, they are not able to find data on property taxes for colleges and exclude this from their analysis. On the other hand, taxes paid by for-profit colleges on revenue, profits and investment incomes should be considered a benefit or deducted from the cost to taxpayers of these institutions (Klor de Alva & Schneider, 2011). We use IPEDS to calculate the per-student value of gifts and investment revenue for credentials from both institution types and estimate taxes paid or forgone on these earnings using the same rates applied by Klor de Alva & Schneider (40% on investment income and 25% on gifts). We also include federal, state, and local income tax expenses, as Klor de Alva & Schneider do. These tax amounts are then added to the cost to taxpayers of credentials earned at public colleges and subtracted from the cost at for-profit programs.

Table 2. Costs to taxpayers and students of RN and PN programs, by institution control

Costs	**Public, RN ($)**	**Public, PN ($)**	**For-profit, RN ($)**	**For-profit, PN ($)**
Costs to taxpayers of subsidies for higher education	$14,422	$13,579	$7,403	$7,965
Taxes paid or forgone by institutions	$60	$89	$2,628	$816
Costs to students	$43,283	$44,169	$58,820	$60,894
Total taxpayer costs	$14,482	$13,668	$4,775	$7,150
Total costs (student and taxpayer)	$57,765	$57,837	$63,594	$68,043

Notes: All values reported in this table come from averaging across the relevant variables from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System for the institutions in our sample, with the exception of the following. In order to calculate loan default amounts, we began by averaging across the program-level mean debt amounts from the College Scorecard data. We multiply the average by .9 because we assume that students default on 90% of the amount they borrowed. We then multiply this product by the program-level default rates calculated from the Scorecard data. We calculate forgone earnings for 16-44-year-olds using the Bureau of Labor Statistics median weekly wages for 2017. We average across age categories and then multiply this average by 52.14 weeks/year. In order to calculate interest on loans, we took the interest rates on federal and non-federal loans in 2017 from debt.org. We assume 75% of student loans are federal in order to estimate an overall interest rate of 5.75%. We then multiplied this estimated interest rate by the average debt amounts, by program, reported in the Scorecard data.

Benefits Analysis

Median Earnings

The College Scorecard data does not include many variables describing the benefits of enrolling in or completing associate's or certificate programs in nursing. The only variable with reasonable coverage at the program level is median earnings one year after credential completion. Figure 2A displays the distribution of median earnings for students completing associate's degrees in registered nursing in for-profit compared to public institutions. Figure 2B displays the same for students completing certificates in practical nursing.

Figure 2A suggests that median earnings for registered nursing program completers are similar at the two institution types, though there are more for-profit programs that produce low median earnings. The distributions displayed in Figure 2B suggest that the median earnings for graduates of for-profit practical nursing certificate programs are sometimes higher than for graduates of public institutions, though there is more variation in median earnings across the for-profit programs than the publics. The distribution of median earnings for for-profit graduates is also slightly bimodal, suggesting that there may be more for-profit programs that produce unusually low earners, compared to the publics. As mentioned above, one weakness of the program-level Scorecard data is that it is only available at the four-digit CIP code level. A student earning an associate's degree with CIP code 5138 is most likely earning a degree in registered nursing, but there are also other programs defined by this code. Thus, it is possible the bimodal distribution in the median earnings outcome is due to for-profit colleges offering more entry-level credentials defined by the same CIP than public institutions. It is also possible there are a handful of programs or schools with lower-than-average outcomes. It is impossible to know for sure without access to more high-quality data. Another weakness of this median earnings data from the College Scorecard data is that it is only available for program graduates, and it is also conditional on employment. Unfortunately, it is not possible to calculate program-level completion rates from IPEDS/Scorecard data, though there is some evidence in the literature that speaks to how completion rates and employment rates may vary across institution type.

Figure 2. Median Earnings

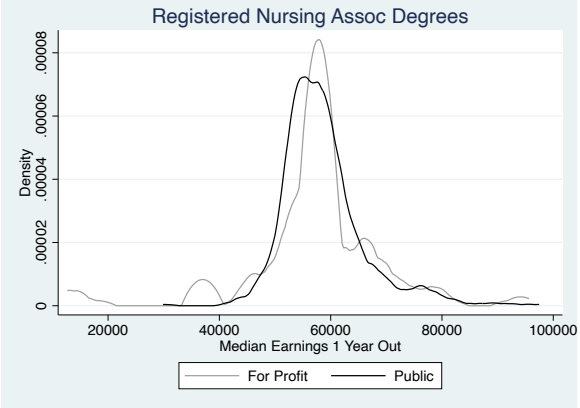

Figure 2A. Density of median earnings after 1 year for RN graduates at public compared to for-profit programs

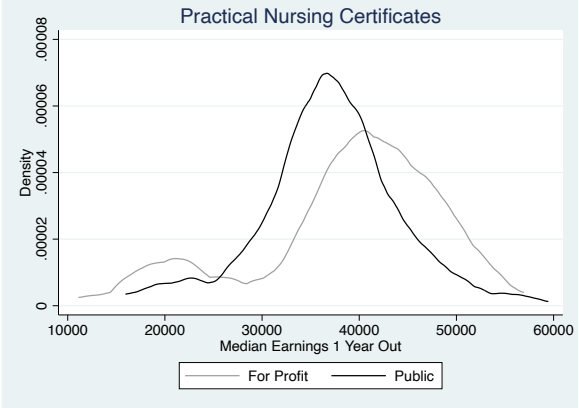

Figure 2B. Density of median earnings after 1 year for PN graduates at public compared to for-profit programs

Additional Studies on Student Outcomes

David Deming and his colleagues (2016) conducted a resumé audit study that suggests graduates of nursing programs at for-profit institutions may experience some labor market discrimination. The authors find that resumés that display a nursing credential from a public institution receive more call-backs than those from for-profit institutions, though this varies by whether or not the job requires that the applicant has passed a nursing license exam (certification). When the job requires certification, the call-back rate is approximately 6% at public institutions, compared to 5% at for-profits. However, when there is no certification requirement, the callback rate is 9% at public institutions, compared to 4% at for-profits.

Cellini and Chaudhary (2012) use data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (1997 cohort) and individual fixed-effects models, which compare an individual's post-graduation earnings to their earnings before enrollment, to estimate the economic return to associate's degrees from for-profit versus public institutions. Though these authors are not able to estimate returns at the program level, they are able to compare returns for enrollees versus completers. For enrollees, they estimate returns of 11% for students at for-profit colleges and 6% for those at public institutions. The estimated returns for completers are 16% for students at for-profits and 20% for those at public colleges. The estimates for enrollees account for the fact that public institutions have, on average, lower completion rates than the for-profits. This explains some of the difference in relative returns. However, using a Chow test, they find that the average returns for enrollees at public, compared to for-profit, colleges are not statistically significantly different.

Pittman and her colleagues (2019) compare first-time pass rates for the National Council Licensure Examination (NCLEX) exam for graduates of for-profit versus public institutions. They separate outcomes by degree type and compare pass rates for certificate, associate's, and bachelor's degree programs. Using IPEDS completion data from 2007 to 2016 and NCLEX pass rates from 2011 to 2015, they find that for-profit status is a significant predictor of lower NCLEX pass rates for all three degree types (controlling for socioeconomic factors). Averaging

across credential types and years, the for-profit nursing programs have lower average pass rates (68%) than public programs (88%). Across all degree types they find lower pass rates for the for-profits, but the difference is largest for the associate's degree of nursing programs.

The research exploring student outcomes of for-profit higher education is extremely limited. We would argue that this is primarily the result of lack of data access. The majority of the studies cited here, as well as our own analysis, rely on publicly available, often institution-level data. Much of the literature has also become quite dated, as for-profit colleges and community colleges have experienced large policy changes since 2012. In order to better assess the relative benefits of different institution types, we need more high-quality studies using current student-level data to estimate the economic return of for-profit credentials.

Summary of Interviews

Introduction

The research team undertook a set of nine semi-structured interviews between July and September 2025 with deans, career services professionals, faculty, and administrators from private for-profit and not-for-profit nursing programs, and with those from public not-for-profit programs. The goal of the interviews was to explore what experts and practitioners consider to be the various financial and other factors that differentiate 2-year for-profit institutions from public/nonprofit programs in the training of Licensed Practical/Vocational Nurses and BSNs. In the course of 30-minute guided Zoom discussions, the interviews focused on what these experts consider to be key metrics related to the cost to students and society of training programs for their nursing programs. As an incentive to participate, interview subjects received a $50 Amazon gift card as partial compensation for their time. The research team granted interview subjects anonymity and confidentiality in exchange for their views, and no interview participant is identified by name or program in this report. In all interviews, subjects were asked to recommend others in their programs or professional networks with whom the research team could connect for additional interviews, and in that way, the interview sampling pool should be considered a "snowball sample." The goal was to obtain a general sense of these professionals' perspectives on their careers and their current programs across a range of program types to identify common and distinct challenges related to their funding model.

The summary below is organized by the five topics that guided each interview: program accessibility & cost; student retention & persistence; licensure exam prep & success; quality & outcomes of training; and post-graduation employment & financial outcomes. Each topic section highlights themes that emerged from the interviews, and where applicable, topic summaries include distinctions between for-profit and not-for-profit models.

Program Accessibility & Cost

In discussing program accessibility, interviewees from private for-profit colleges and from community colleges stressed the importance of their roles as providers of training to non-traditional students: older, first-generation immigrants or college students, less affluent, predominantly female, and people of color. There was a great deal of commonality in the sense of pride taken in their community and in their professional contributions and an acknowledgement that they were all teaching the same skills and preparing nursing students for the same qualifying exam (NCLEX). In addition, interviewees from both program types, including career services advisors, administrators, and faculty, recognized the difference in cost structures of the various program types.

Distinctions:
One administrator with a for-profit private program suggested that community colleges have more breaks in the academic schedule and that their private program was more intense from a time-management perspective. They said that this acknowledged and rewarded the students who were taking a mid-career break to advance their education at a higher cost and who were no longer working (although most interview subjects acknowledged that most of their full-time students also held down at least part-time jobs while in school).

Waitlist:
In general, public community colleges and universities will be able to take the best students because of their lower tuition levels and limited seating availability, so they may see waiting lists build up sooner than for-profits. One administrator of a multi-campus, for-profit nursing program commented that whether one of their programs has a waitlist or not depends largely on geography and demographics. If an educational catchment area is large, there may be more demand for seats, as opposed to a program in a smaller geography or one with a less affluent socio-demographic student base and/or a higher number of students on "petition" for relief from GPA entrance requirements.

Other findings:

- Almost all interview subjects reported that the vast majority of their students worked at least part time at jobs while attending their programs as full-time students.
- One nursing program administrator mentioned businesses in their area providing scholarships of $1000-$3000 to students in their region. These businesses see it as a way to support workforce development.

Student Retention & Persistence

Interview participants reported that retaining students in their programs was a high priority, regardless of program model. The issue of non-completers is understudied. For non-profit colleges, sunk program costs like faculty time and lab costs that are borne by taxpayers may be hidden when students don't complete their training, but students at for-profit colleges bear the loan debt and may be unable to repay it easily and quickly when they drop out. Accreditation agencies pay close attention to non-completer rates, but a few interviewees referred to permitted "carveout" situations for students who leave their programs for reasons of financial stress, transfers to other nursing programs or majors, personal situations, changes in majors, or health issues that improve retention rate data from accreditors. Most interview participants described program investments to identify at-risk students, connecting them with tutors sometimes called "success coaches" for more than just academic and test-taking help but also for assistance with problems outside the program, like work-life balance.

Most interviewees reported that when students dropped out of their programs, it was not for academic reasons but personal ones. Most interviewees reported that their programs had robust academic support systems in place that track student performance and flag students who were struggling academically before they failed courses. Financial pressure during the semester was a common personal reason our interviewees cited as a reason students drop out, not necessarily

related to the availability of additional grants or scholarships available from the program. Other commonly cited reasons were mental health challenges, adjustment to college after being out for a while, teenagers at home, caregiving, job loss, and other personal issues that many nontraditional students commonly experience.

Other findings:
Most interviewees reported that student academic support systems (tutoring, grade monitoring and quick academic intervention) were quite robust at their campuses. One dean reported having a 3-course-fail rate before a student fails out of their program.

Licensure Exam Preparation & Success

Passing the NCLEX exam is a key licensing gateway for nursing students; without the license, graduates cannot practice their profession. Most campuses across the industry offer some kind of NCLEX test prep and roll the cost into their fee structure (one administrator mentioned the fee being $3900 total for 4 semesters). Interviewees mentioned using modules offered by Advanced Technologies Institute (ATI) most frequently. Many faculty, administrators, and deans reported using NCLEX test question style and format throughout their curriculum but emphasized that their courses went well beyond the test content because NCLEX is a minimum-standards licensing exam. Interviewees said that test prep services offered by firms like ATI were more than sufficient, but that their more affluent students often would supplement with outside test prep resources.

Quality & Outcomes of Training

Interview participants consistently reported that their programs trained their students well for careers in nursing, and that program completion, NCLEX exam passing, and job placement rates were all regularly monitored by accreditation agencies and state boards of nursing. Clinical programs in local hospitals were very similar across college models, as was the use of simulation technology. There is not much use of "internships," per se, in nursing, but clearly many hospital systems that host nursing students in their clinics do hire those students upon graduation.

Distinctions:
As online tools, mixed reality, telemedicine, and simulation become more widespread in nursing education, interviewees reported that equipment costs are accelerating for nurse training programs. In particular, simulation labs are a big component of nursing instruction. Simulation training begins in Level I and continues through Level IV in most programs and trains nursing students on both common and high-stakes situations they may not encounter in their clinical training. One faculty member at a community college reported that a high-fidelity simulation mannequin can cost $100,000 and that their lab on a single campus had eight mannequins on which students train. It is common for public community colleges to use state and local grant funding to pay for lab equipment, but private for-profit and not-for-profit administrators often have to use outsource management programs (OPMs) like Orbis Education and Risepoint to help set up and maintain labs. One dean at a not-for-profit program said that their contract with an

OPM to set up, operate, maintain, and update their simulation lab soaks up 70%of their tuition income.

Post-Graduation Employment & Financial Outcomes

Interviewees at nonprofit and for-profit colleges reported that their students understand that nursing remains an in-demand field and that jobs will be available to them after they graduate. In addition, students from both models understand the return on their education that will accrue: Associate's Degree in Nursing (ADNs) will earn more than Medical Assistants, Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSNs) may earn more than ADNs, and Advanced Practice Professional nurses will earn more than BSNs. All interviewees reported working in programs with strong career services offices, and interviews with career service professionals revealed important support systems in place to help students for months after passing the NCLEX exam. Perhaps not surprisingly, all interview participants said they do not often hear from graduates about problems with debt load, regardless of program model.

Distinctions:
One administrator at a private nonprofit college reported that their graduates, despite completing their degrees with significantly more debt than nursing students who complete their training at a community college, understand that the pathway to more remunerative careers in nursing essentially is "pay-to-play." In their area, the community colleges and universities are not able to keep up with demand for nursing training, accept and admit the best students, and offer the lowest tuition. But private colleges are able to offer training for a lucrative nursing career at a higher but still-manageable tuition level to students who may not have the highest GPA or who do not want to sit on a waiting list for another semester.

As an example of the "pay-to-play" nature of their program, this administrator shared the story of a firefighter switching career paths into nursing. Weighing giving up a relatively high-paying job while in school, the firefighter probably can count on working part-time as an EMT to pay bills while in school. The firefighter would want to finish the nursing program as quickly as possible without the risk of spending time on a waiting list to get accepted into a public college. In the end, they are willing to take on more debt to finish nursing training on their own timetable.

Other findings:

- A career services advisor for online nursing programs at a for-profit college reported that 90% of their time is spent with students around or after graduation on placement services such as:
    - resumé review and tailoring for different positions
    - cover letter writing and editing services
    - mock interviews (not used very often)
    - coaching (helping guide students frustrated in their job search)

- This career services officer said that their college accreditor requires that at least half of their graduates are working in the fields in which they were trained. With cohorts graduating every month, their office staff divides up lists of graduates and tracks their

correspondence with students. Graduates complete an "attestation" about where they are working, and the career services office surveys them for up to a year after they graduate about their employment, reporting the data to their accreditor.

- One faculty member at a community college, in discussing the challenges facing new nursing program graduates, commented that there has always been a nursing shortage, so the demand for nurses remains strong. The challenge for new graduates is helping them calibrate their expectations about getting a job they *want*, in their preferred *field* and *location*. The perfect job is rarely there, and graduates from their program need help in understanding how to move up the career ladder in nursing.

- We heard conflicting comments from interview participants about whether employers prefer PNs or RNs now. This might vary by region, but there was no discernible pattern among program types.

- A career services officer for a for-profit college reported offering a professional development class required of all ADN students that includes financial literacy topics. Such was the need to understand 1099 forms and how 401(k) and bank Roth savings accounts work.

Student Survey

Summary

To obtain the self-reported impressions of 216 graduates from nursing programs on a range of topics, including their student debt levels, experience on the job market, satisfaction with their allied health programs, and self-efficacy, we conducted a national survey among program graduates. Participants were recruited who have completed programs operating as for-profit, nonprofit private, or public institutions. In this summary of survey findings, nonprofit private and public programs have been combined and labeled nonprofit. In addition, because of study limitations related to cost and timing and in discussions with our survey panel vendor, we decided to broaden our survey sample to graduates of 2-year and 4-year nursing and allied health programs to reach as broad a population as possible (the cost-benefit model presented elsewhere in this report includes data only from 2-year programs for reasons of data availability and parsimony). The experiences of non-completers, while important to understand, was beyond the scope of our study but certainly worthy of further investigation.

Graduates across both program types (for-profit and nonprofit) report strong employment and high satisfaction with instruction and faculty responsiveness. Nonprofit graduates more often report no debt and higher "worth the cost," while for-profit graduates report higher mid-band debt and slightly higher current employment in related roles. Career-readiness competencies are broadly strong; opportunities exist in digital technology, leadership, and global/intercultural fluency. Counseling availability and career services are common improvement areas across program types.

Key Findings

Differences Between Operating Models

- The debt profile diverges for these operating models: for-profit graduates concentrate in the $25–50k band (≈38%) while nonprofit graduates more often report $0 (≈35%).
- "Worth the cost" is higher among nonprofit respondents (≈75% vs. 67%).
- Time to first job >6 months is more common among for-profit respondents (≈8% vs. 2%).
- For-profit respondents more frequently endorse self-efficacy items related to resourcefulness and handling unexpected events.
- Nonprofit respondents show slightly higher shares reporting discrimination (exploratory) and slightly higher workforce preparation.

Similarities Across Operating Models

- Very high job placement (≥97%) and high rates of working in related roles.
- Strong ratings for instruction quality (≈89%), faculty responsiveness (≈83%), and advising (≈62%).
- High competency levels in clinical skills (≈92%), professionalism/work ethic (≈94%), teamwork (≈88%), and communication (≈89%).

- Sense of belonging is broadly positive (≈74%).

Overall Comparison

Both operating models deliver strong employment outcomes and high satisfaction with instructional quality. Nonprofit programs tend to offer a lower debt burden and stronger value perceptions, while for-profit programs show advantages on selected self-efficacy indicators and current related employment. Differences on some climate items are exploratory and should be interpreted with care given multiple-comparison adjustments.

Methods

Design and objectives
We conducted a cross-sectional, web-based survey of recent students and completers of nursing and allied-health programs to describe (1) demographic and educational backgrounds, (2) institutional and academic experiences, (3) competency development and self-efficacy, and (4) early career outcomes. The instrument was drafted in spring 2025 and is reproduced in Appendix C.

Participants and eligibility
Respondents were screened in-survey. Eligible participants (a) completed one of the targeted programs (e.g., LPN/LVN, RN-ADN/BSN, Medical Assistant, Radiologic Technologist) and (b) attended a for-profit, public, or nonprofit 2- or 4-year institution. Individuals under 18 years of age and those not matching any program or institution category were ineligible.

Recruitment and procedures
The survey was administered online via emailed invitations from Dynata (dynata.com), a commercial panel vendor. Invitations contained an institutional review board-style information sheet and a consent question; participation was voluntary and compensated per the panel's incentive policy. Respondents could exit at any time. Data collection occurred in July 2025.

Instrument and measures
The questionnaire comprised six sections: demographics/socioeconomics; educational background; student experiences and satisfaction; competencies; self-efficacy; and career outcomes. Item stems and response options came from established, validated instruments where possible, with targeted adaptations for the study population.

Student engagement & experiences. Two items adapted from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) asked how much coursework emphasized core intellectual activities (e.g., analyzing ideas) and the extent to which coursework challenged students to do their best work.[5]

[5] National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). Survey instrument facsimiles and resources. Center for Postsecondary Research, Indiana University.

Student satisfaction. Selected satisfaction items mirrored the Ruffalo Noel Levitz Student Satisfaction Inventory (SSI) domains (instructional quality, course availability, clinical placements). SSI is a proprietary instrument governed by RNL's license; our study used short, adapted items to capture parallel constructs without reproducing the full SSI.[6]

Career readiness competencies. Self-rated competency items aligned with the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) Career Readiness Competencies (e.g., critical thinking, communication, teamwork, professionalism, technology).[7]

Nursing/allied-health competencies. Clinical and professional items (clinical skills, patient communication, Electronic Health Record use, ethics) were mapped to the Quality and Safety Education for Nurses (QSEN) pre-licensure knowledge–skills–attitudes framework[8] and to the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) Essentials[9] where appropriate for nursing respondents. These sources guided content validity but were not reproduced verbatim.

General self-efficacy. We administered the standard 10-item General Self-Efficacy Scale (GSE) (four-point responses: 1 "Not at all true" to 4 "Exactly true").[10]

Career outcomes. Items captured employment status, time-to-first job, job satisfaction, field relevance, salary band, internships/clinicals, licensure/certification, and professional memberships, consistent with common first-destination reporting practices.

Scale Formats
Institutional/academic support and overall satisfaction (5-point Likert), NSSE-style engagement items (4-point "Very little" to "Very much"), SSI-style satisfaction (7-point), NACE and clinical competencies (5-point), and GSE (4-point).

Results

The survey results are presented below by section. We have aggregated most of our results into two levels for ease of communication. For example, the agreement scale for academic support has been aggregated into "agree vs disagree" from the choices in the survey questions that used a 5-point scale from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." Descriptive statistics are shown; bivariate inferential tests of the difference between the perceptions of the two operating models are reported in the narrative. We report the actual significance level for values of $0 < p < 0.150$ to provide more context for the comparisons.

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[6] Ruffalo Noel Levitz (RNL). Student Satisfaction Inventory (SSI). Program overview and interpretive materials.
[7] National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE). Career Readiness Competencies (revised April 2024).
[8] QSEN Institute. Pre-licensure Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes (KSAs).
[9] American Association of Colleges of Nursing (2021). The Essentials: Core Competencies for Professional Nursing Education.
[10] Schwarzer, R., & Jerusalem, M. (1995). Generalized Self-Efficacy scale. In J. Weinman, S. Wright, & M. Johnston (Eds.). Measures in health psychology: A user's portfolio. NFER-NELSON. See also Scholz, U., Doña, B. G., Sud, S., & Schwarzer, R. (2002). Is General Self-Efficacy a Universal Construct? European Journal of Psychological Assessment, 18(3), 242–251.

Sample Profile

Participation by graduates of for-profit and nonprofit programs was similar relative to demographics. The sample included slightly more LPN/LVN diploma earners from nonprofit programs (9.0% vs 2.9%, p = 0.057) than for-profit programs. Similarly, nonprofit programs had slightly more white students than for-profit programs (76.6% vs 64.8%, p = 0.056). In total, 216 graduates completed the survey, 105 from for-profit programs and 111 from nonprofit programs. The sample composition is summarized below.

Programs (overall distribution):

	Total
RN BSN	55.6%
RN ADN	26.4%
Radiologic Tech (AAS)	6.5%
LPN/LVN Diploma	6.0%
RN Diploma	2.8%
MA Certificate and Certification	2.3%
MA Certificate	0.5%

Age (overall distribution):

	Total
18–24	1.4%
25–34	33.3%
35–44	31.0%
45–54	20.4%
55–64	9.7%
65+	4.2%

Gender (overall distribution):

	Total
Female	86.6%
Male	13.4%

Race/ethnicity (overall distribution):

	Total
White	70.8%
Black or African American	10.7%
Asian	8.3%
Hispanic or Latino	5.1%
Prefer not to say	2.3%

Cost & Debt at Graduation

While there is substantial overlap in the range of debt experienced by students graduating from both operating models, significantly more students from nonprofit programs graduate with zero debt (35.2% vs 18.5%, p = 0.006). Additionally, more students from for-profit programs graduate with debt in the range $25,000 to $50,000 (37.9% vs 17.6%, p = 0.001).

	Total	For-Profit	Public & Private Nonprofit
$0	27.0%	18.5%	35.2%
$1–10k	14.2%	9.7%	18.5%
$10–25k	22.8%	24.3%	21.3%
$25–50k	27.5%	37.9%	17.6%
$50k+	8.5%	9.7%	7.4%

Career Outcomes

The principal goal for students in career programs like nursing training is to obtain a very specific skill set that will map onto a well-defined career path for the student. Our survey contained questions about whether the student was currently employed in a job related to their training and how relevant their training was to that job. Career outcomes are similar across both operating models, with "having found a related job" and "currently holding a related job" being endorsed by nearly all graduates. Preparation for the workforce garnered the lowest agreement, with 7 in 10 indicating that they were very or extremely prepared.

	Total	For-Profit	Public & Private Nonprofit
Found related job (Yes)	98.1%	97.1%	99.1%
Currently in related job (Yes)	95.7%	97.8%	93.8%
Job relevance (Very/Extremely)	87.9%	90.3%	85.6%
Job satisfaction (Very/Somewhat)	83.3%	81.9%	84.5%
Prepared for workforce (Very/Extremely)	72.1%	69.6%	74.5%

The time required to find the first job after completion illustrated some nuanced differences in outcomes between the operating models. More specifically, while 4 in 10 graduates had a job immediately after graduation for both models, more graduates of for-profit programs took longer than 6 months to find a job than graduates of nonprofit program (8.1% vs 1.9%, p = 0.043).

	Total	For-Profit	Public & Private Nonprofit
Immediate (0 months)	39.4%	39.4%	39.4%
1 month	24.6%	22.2%	26.9%
2 – 6 months	31.0%	30.3%	31.7%
> 6 months	4.9%	8.1%	1.9%

Academic Support

The perceptions of the academic support received by students was equivalent among graduates of for-profit and nonprofit programs. For both models, 6 in 10 found that the advising was helpful, 7 in 10 agreed that tutoring and related resources were available, and approximately 8 in 10 found the instruction to be excellent and the faculty in both operating environments to be responsive.

	Total	For-Profit	Public & Private Nonprofit
Advising helpful	61.9%	61.2%	62.6%
Tutoring/resources available	70.0%	67.0%	72.9%
Instruction excellent	78.5%	77.5%	79.4%
Faculty responsive	82.9%	84.5%	81.3%

Institutional Support

Similarly, perceptions of institutional support are undifferentiated between the two operating models. (For examples of prompts that we gave to survey participants, see Appendix C.) It is noteworthy that institutional support is endorsed positively, broadly speaking, by fewer respondents than was academic support. Both for-profit and nonprofit programs have opportunity to improve institutional support.

	Total	For-Profit	Public & Private Nonprofit
Admin services helpful	64.3%	63.1%	65.4%
Counseling available	36.7%	35.9%	37.4%
Financial aid adequate	52.4%	53.4%	51.4%
Career services helpful	46.2%	41.8%	50.5%

Climate & Inclusion

Both operating models are perceived by their graduates similarly on measures of climate and inclusion. Directional differences include the rate at which graduates endorsed experiencing discrimination (13.1% among graduates of nonprofit programs vs 5.9% among graduates of for-profit programs ($p = 0.077$). While not significant at $p < 0.15$, graduates of for-profit programs more frequently endorsed a sense of belonging (77.5% vs 70.1%).

	Total	For-Profit	Public & Private Nonprofit
Sense of belonging (agree)	73.7%	77.5%	70.1%
Experienced discrimination (agree)	9.6%	5.9%	13.1%
Satisfied with diversity (agree)	69.9%	66.7%	72.9%

Overall Satisfaction & Value

Graduate perceptions of program satisfaction and value are undifferentiated. Directional differences hint that nonprofit programs are viewed with marginally higher appeal, a trend that is visible across measures but was not significant at $p < 0.10$. However, satisfaction was higher among nonprofit graduates (90.6% vs 83.3%, $p = 0.115$).

	Total	For-Profit	Public & Private Nonprofit
Overall educational experience (satisfied)	87.1%	83.3%	90.6%
Recommend program (yes)	85.6%	82.2%	88.8%
Worth the cost (agree)	70.8%	66.7%	74.8%

Learning Emphasis (NSSE Selected Items)

Graduate perceptions of areas that emphasize learning are undifferentiated between the two operating models. Although not significant at $p < 0.015$, graduates of for-profit programs more frequently endorsed a high emphasis on analysis (26.5% vs 21.5%). Both operating models have opportunity to build on these learning foci. Only 1 in 4 graduates endorsed “analysis” as a highly emphasized learning focus; only half endorsed that their program emphasized challenging students to do their best.

	Total	For-Profit	Public & Private Nonprofit
Analyzing ideas (high emphasis)	23.9%	26.5%	21.5%
Challenged to do best (high emphasis)	50.7%	50.0%	51.4%

SSI Selected Items

More graduates of for-profit programs endorsed satisfaction with course availability (94.1% vs 85.9%, $p = 0.048$). Satisfaction with the quality of instruction was undifferentiated across the

operating models, with approximately 9 in 10 expressing satisfaction with the quality of instruction.

	Total	For-Profit	Public & Private Nonprofit
Quality of instruction (satisfied)	88.9%	88.2%	89.6%
Course availability (satisfied)	89.9%	94.1%	85.9%

Career-Readiness Competencies (NACE)

Across the career-readiness competencies explored in our survey, student perceptions differed little, with only marginal differentiation for critical thinking (95.1% high competence vs 89.6%, $p = 0.138$). Both operating models are perceived as preparing students well in critical thinking, communications, collaboration, and professionalism skills. Both operating models have opportunity to consider the merits of improving student competency in technology and intercultural fluency, both being areas that may be increasingly important in the future.

	Total	For-Profit	Public & Private Nonprofit
Critical thinking	92.3%	95.1%	89.6%
Oral/written communication	89.4%	91.2%	87.7%
Teamwork/collaboration	88.5%	88.2%	88.7%
Digital technology	64.9%	65.7%	64.1%
Leadership	68.3%	71.6%	65.1%
Professionalism/work ethic	93.7%	93.1%	94.3%
Career management	75.0%	75.5%	74.5%
Global/intercultural fluency	47.8%	51.5%	44.3%

Clinical Competencies

Perceptions about clinical competencies were undifferentiated between for-profit and nonprofit programs, with graduates endorsing producing high levels of skill across the areas measured. Competency in the areas of Electronic Health Record (EHR) system use lagged behind the other areas for both operating models.

	Total	For-Profit	Public & Private Nonprofit
Clinical skills proficiency	91.8%	92.2%	91.5%
Patient communication & empathy	95.2%	96.1%	94.3%
Ethical decision-making	93.2%	95.0%	91.5%
Medical terminology & procedures	93.7%	95.1%	92.4%
EHR use	88.4%	88.2%	88.6%

Self-Efficacy

Graduates from for-profit and nonprofit programs have similar perceptions about their degree of confidence in most settings included in the survey. The exceptions are "resourcefulness," where for-profit graduates are more confident than nonprofit graduates (62.7% vs 37.7%, p = 0.001) and "dealing with unexpected events" (55.9% for-profit vs 43.8% non-profit, p = 0.082).

	Total	For-Profit	Public & Private Nonprofit
Solving difficult problems by trying hard	51.9%	54.9%	49.1%
Managing opposition	12.0%	13.7%	10.4%
Accomplishing goals	43.2%	40.2%	46.2%
Dealing with unexpected events	49.8%	55.9%	43.8%
Resourcefulness	50.7%	62.7%	39.0%
Solving difficult problems through effort	59.6%	63.7%	55.7%
Coping abilities	50.0%	54.9%	45.3%
Can find multiple solutions	45.4%	48.0%	42.9%
Finding a solution when in trouble	42.3%	47.1%	37.7%
Ability to handle whatever happens	47.1%	51.0%	43.4%

Conclusion

This study has explored the factors that differentiate associate's degrees in registered nursing and certificates in practical nursing at for-profit colleges from those offered by public/private nonprofit colleges. We used a mixed-methods approach to present findings from a cost-benefit model that analyzed secondary data from IPEDS and the College Scorecard, then presented findings from a set of interviews with administrators, faculty, and deans from the two program types, and finally collected primary data from a survey of graduates from both models. Overall, the results show that the two delivery models share many of the same approaches to delivering high-quality nursing training: faculty who are dedicated to training a non-traditional student demographic; administrators who manage rising costs in a dynamic technological landscape; and career services officers who are devoted to placing their program graduates in the best possible jobs.

Our analysis of the societal costs and benefits of two types of nursing credentials at public, compared to for-profit colleges, revealed lower taxpayer costs at for-profit nursing programs than at public programs, but similar benefits to students entering the nursing and healthcare workforce with new degrees. At the same time, students face higher costs at for-profit, compared to public institutions. The literature suggests that students enrolling in both for-profit and public colleges experience a positive economic return to their credentials, but it will take for-profit students longer to recoup their investment (Cellini & Chaudhary, 2012).

One item of note in considering the cost of nursing programs is the significant costs associated with high and accelerating costs for training. As we discuss in greater detail in the Interview section of the study (see p. 24), online communications equipment, mixed reality, telemedicine, and simulation equipment for labs are a large expense item in program budgets; such cost centers may be covered by tuition or subsidies at public institutions, but at for-profit programs, the high cost of training equipment is passed on to students in the form of higher tuition rates.

One topic for future research is the economic impact of non-completers. The literature suggests there may be small differences in the rates of students at the two institution types who fail to graduate (Deming, Goldin, & Katz, 2012). Increasing the number of completers would lower the cost of degrees to taxpayers, whether from for-profit or public institutions. From the interviews performed in the current study, we know that most students who drop out of nursing programs don't fail academically but are forced to respond to life's more prosaic intrusions like family crises, job demands, and the challenge of returning to higher education later in life. The task for administrators at both for-profit and public nursing programs will be to improve their student retention and completion rates to meet the growing demand for PNs and RNs.

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Appendix A: Cost-Benefit Model Tables

Cost-Benefit A1. Has one-year post-graduation median earnings and median debt levels for students who completed an associate's degree in the 5138 CIP (registered nursing)

CONTROL	has_51382 0	has_51382 1	Total
Priv FP	2,358	400	2,758
Priv NP	1,201	231	1,432
Public	5,825	2,108	7,933
Total	9,384	2,739	12,123

Cost-Benefit A2. Has one-year post-graduation median earnings and median debt levels for students who completed a certificate in the 5139 CIP (practical nursing)

CONTROL	has_51391 0	has_51391 1	Total
Priv FP	2,098	660	2,758
Priv NP	1,334	98	1,432
Public	6,853	1,080	7,933
Total	10,285	1,838	12,123

Cost-Benefit A3. Distribution of data over time for associate's in registered nursing (top panel) and certificate in practical nursing (bottom panel), respectively

CONTROL	year 2015	year 2016	year 2017	Total
Priv FP	134	136	130	400
Priv NP	76	84	71	231
Public	677	746	685	2,108
Total	887	966	886	2,739

CONTROL	year 2015	year 2016	year 2017	Total
Priv FP	216	222	222	660
Priv NP	32	37	29	98
Public	305	425	350	1,080
Total	553	684	601	1,838

Appendix B: Survey Measures

Table A summarizes each construct, sample items, response scales, scoring rules, and sources/notes. Exact item wording and full response options are provided in Appendix C.

Table A: Survey Construct, Sample Items, Response Scales, Scoring Rules, and Sources/Notes

Construct / Scale	Example Item(s)	Response Scale	Scoring	Source / Notes
Student engagement (NSSE-style)	"How much has your coursework emphasized analyzing ideas, experiences, or evidence?"; "How much did your coursework challenge you to do your best work?"	4 points: Very little, Some, Quite a bit, Very much	Mean of items (higher = more engagement/challenge); require ≥1 item present	Adapted from NSSE facsimiles; attribution required for any verbatim use.
Institutional & academic support	Helpfulness of advising; availability of instructors; adequacy of academic resources	5 points: Strongly disagree to Strongly agree	Mean composite if ≥80% items present; otherwise set missing	Study-created items aligned to common student support constructs
Student satisfaction (SSI-style domains)	Instructional quality; course availability; quality of clinical placements	7 points: Not satisfied to Very satisfied	Domain means; overall satisfaction as the mean of domain means	Domains parallel RNL Student Satisfaction Inventory; proprietary—no verbatim items reproduced
Belonging / campus climate	"I feel like I belong at my program/institution"; respect for diverse backgrounds	5 points: Strongly disagree to Strongly agree	Mean composite; higher = greater belonging	Guided by NSSE belonging resources; adapted wording
NACE Career Readiness	Self-rated proficiency: Critical Thinking,	5 points: Not at all	Mean within each competency and overall	NACE Career Readiness Competencies

competencies (2024)	Communication, Teamwork, Professionalism, Technology, Leadership, Equity & Inclusion, Career & Self-Development	to Extremely	mean across competencies	(rev. Apr 2024)
Nursing/allied-health competencies (QSEN/AACN)	Clinical skills readiness; patient communication; informatics/EHR use; ethics and professionalism	5 points: Not at all to Extremely	Mean composite; report by discipline where N allows	Mapped to QSEN KSAs and AACN Essentials (2021); adapted items
General Self-Efficacy (GSE-10)	"I can always manage to solve difficult problems if I try hard enough." (plus 9 items)	4 points: Not at all true, Hardly true, Moderately true, Exactly true	Sum 10–40 or mean; ≥80% item completion required	Schwarzer & Jerusalem (1995); Scholz et al. (2002) psychometrics
Career outcomes	Employment status; time-to-job; field relevance; salary band; licensure/certification status	Categorical items; salary bands	Proportions and distributional summaries	Aligned with First-Destination reporting conventions

Appendix C: Graduate Survey

Qnity Institute

CECU Nursing and Allied Health Education Study

I. Consent

Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a research study about student experiences, satisfaction, competencies, and career readiness in nursing and allied health education programs. Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time. The survey will take approximately 20 minutes. Your responses will be kept confidential and used for research purposes only. By proceeding, you indicate your consent to participate.

1. **Do you agree to participate?**
   Yes

   No (If no, you will exit the survey)

II. Introduction:

Thank you for participating in this survey. We are interested in understanding your experiences and perspectives on your nursing or allied health education. Please answer the questions as honestly and accurately as possible.

III. Screening:

2. **What type of institution did you primarily attend for your nursing/allied health program? If multiple response choices apply to you, please select the institution type for the most recently completed program.**
   For-profit 2-year college

   For-profit 4-year college

   Public 2-year college

   Public 4-year college

   Nonprofit 2-year college

   Nonprofit 4-year college

   None of these INELIGIBLE

3. **What was your specific program of study? If multiple programs apply to you, please select the most recently completed program. The rest of the survey will focus on your experiences related to the program you select here.**

   LPN/LVN Diploma in Nursing

   RN Diploma in Nursing

   RN ADN (Associate's Degree in Nursing)

   RN BSN (Bachelor of Science in Nursing)

   Medical Assistant Certificate

   Medical Assistant Certificate and Certification (Certified MA)

   Radiologic Technologist (Associate of Applied Science) (Registered RT)

   None of these INELIGIBLE

IV. Demographic and Socioeconomic Information

4. **In which year did you complete the <INSERT Q2> program?**
   - (Open ended numeric response in 4-digit year format)

5. **What is your age?**
   - (Open-ended numeric response; 17 and younger INELIGIBLE)

6. **What is your gender?**

   Male

   Female

   Non-binary

   Other (please specify)

   Prefer not to say

7. **What is your race/ethnicity? (Select all that apply)**

   American Indian or Alaska Native

   Asian

   Black or African American

   Hispanic or Latino

   Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific[1] Islander

White

Other (please specify)[2]

Prefer not to say

8. **In which state do you live?**
   - (Pull down list of states and territories)

9. **What is your marital status?**

   Single

   Married

   Divorced

   Widowed

   Prefer not to say

10. **How many dependents do you have?**
    - (Open ended numeric response)

11. **What is your approximate annual household income?**

    Less than $25,000

    $25,000 - $49,999

    $50,000 - $74,999

    $75,000 - $99,999

    $100,000 or more

    Prefer not to say

12. **What is the highest level of education completed by your parents/guardians (check all that apply?)?**

    Less than high school

    High school diploma or GED

    Some college

    Associate's degree

    Bachelor's degree

    Graduate degree

    Prefer not to say

13. **Are you a first-generation college student?**
    Yes

    No

14. **What best describes the area you live in?**
    Urban

    Suburban

    Rural

15. **Do you identify as having a disability?**
    Yes

    No

    Prefer not to say

16. **What is your primary language spoken at home?**
    - (Open-ended text response)

V. Educational Background:

The remainder of this survey will ask you questions about your <INSERT FROM Q2> program.

17. **How long did it take you to complete your <INSERT FROM Q2> program?**
    - (Open-ended numeric response, specify units)

18. **What was the primary mode of instruction?**
    - In-person
    - Online (synchronous)
    - Online (asynchronous)
    - Hybrid (online synchronous)
    - Hybrid (online asynchronous)

19. **Did you transfer from another institution?**
    - Yes
    - No

20. **What was your final GPA?**
    - (Open ended numeric response)
    - Prefer not to say

21. **Approximately, how many courses did you take as part of your <INSERT Q2> program?**
    - (Open-ended numeric response)

22. **Of those, how many courses did you consider to be particularly difficult?**
    - (Open-ended numeric response)

23. **What is the approximate amount of your total student debt?**
    - $0
    - $1-$10,000
    - $10,001-$25,000
    - $25,001-$50,000
    - $50,001 or more
    - Prefer not to say

IV. Student Experiences and Satisfaction:

24. **Academic Support: (Likert Scale: 1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree)**
    - The academic advising was helpful.
    - I had access to sufficient tutoring and learning resources.
    - The quality of instruction was excellent.
    - Faculty were responsive to my questions and concerns.

25. **Institutional Support: (Likert Scale: 1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree)**
    - Administrative services were efficient and helpful.
    - Counseling and mental health services were readily available.
    - Financial aid services were adequate.
    - Career services were helpful in preparing me for employment.

26. **Please rate your agreement with the following statements (Campus Climate and Inclusion, Likert Scale: 1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree)**
    - I felt a sense of belonging in the program.
    - I experienced discrimination or bias. (If yes, please explain)
    - I was satisfied with the diversity of the student body and faculty.

27. **Please rate your agreement with the following statements (Overall Satisfaction, Likert Scale: 1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree)**
    - I am satisfied with my overall educational experience.
    - I would recommend this program to others.
    - I believe the education I received was worth the cost.

28. **During your program, how often did your coursework emphasize the following items? (NSSE Selected Items from the longer scale, Likert Scale: 1=Very little, 4=Very much)**
    - Analyzing the basic elements of an idea, experience, or theory?
    - Challenge you to do your best work?

29. **Please rate your satisfaction with the following aspects of your program (SSI Selected Items (there are several versions of this scale, all are long, Likert Scale: 1=Not at all satisfied, 7=Very satisfied)**
    - Overall quality of instruction.
    - Availability of courses that were needed for the program.
    - Clinical site placements

VI. Competencies and Skills Development:

30. **Please rate your competency on the following skills (NACE Career Readiness Competencies, Likert Scale: 1=Not at all competent, 5=Extremely competent)**
    - Critical thinking/problem-solving
    - Oral/written communications
    - Teamwork/collaboration
    - Digital technology
    - Leadership
    - Professionalism/work ethic
    - Career management
    - Global/intercultural fluency

31. **Please rate your competency on the following skills (Nursing/Allied Health Specific Competencies, Likert Scale: 1=Not at all competent, 5=Extremely competent)**
    - Clinical skills proficiency
    - Patient communication and empathy
    - Ethical decision-making
    - Knowledge of medical terminology and procedures
    - Ability to use electronic health records.

32. **General Self-Efficacy Scale (Short Version): (Likert Scale: 1=Not at all true, 4=Exactly true)**
    - I can always manage to solve difficult problems if I try hard enough.
    - If someone opposes me, I can find the means and ways to get what I want.
    - It is easy for me to stick to my aims and accomplish my goals.
    - I am confident that[4] I could deal efficiently with unexpected events.
    - Thanks to my resourcefulness, I know how to handle unforeseen situations.
    - I can solve most problems if I invest the necessary effort.
    - I can remain calm when facing difficulties because I can rely on my coping abilities.[5]
    - When I am confronted with a problem, I can usually find several solutions.

- If I am in trouble, I can usually think of a solution.
- I can usually handle whatever comes[6] my way.

VII. Career Readiness and Outcomes:

33. **What is your current employment status?**
    - Employed, working
    - Unemployed
    - Seeking employment
    - Employed, on leave
    - Retired

34. **How long after graduation did you obtain your first job?**
    - (Open-ended numeric response, specify units)

35. **If employed, what is your current job title and industry?**
    - (Open-ended text response)

36. **If employed, what is your approximate annual salary/income?**
    - Less than $25,000
    - $25,000 - $49,999
    - $50,000 - $74,999
    - $75,000 - $99,999
    - $100,000 or more
    - Prefer not to say

IF EMPLOYED, ASK THE NEXT 2 QUESTIONS:

37. **How satisfied are you with your current job? (Likert Scale: 1=Not at all satisfied, 5=Very satisfied)**

38. **How relevant is your education to your current job? (Likert Scale: 1=Not at all relevant, 5=Extremely relevant)**

ASK EVERYONE:

39. **How well did your education prepare you for the workforce? (Likert Scale: 1=Not at all prepared, 5=Extremely well prepared)**

40. **Did you participate in any internships or clinical rotations during your education?**
    - Yes, please specify how many
    - No

41. **Are you a member of any professional organization?**
    - Yes, please specify
    - No

42. **Do you hold any professional licenses or certifications?**
    - Yes
    - No

43. **What are your expectations regarding your career trajectory? (Open-ended text response)**

44. **What else would you like us to know about your education that we have not asked you about? (Open-ended text response)**

Thank you! You have finished our survey.