

# PhD or DNP? Defining the path to your career destination

Learn how to choose the degree that's right for you.

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**H**ave you been toying with the idea of earning a doctoral degree in nursing? Maybe you want to pursue a career in research, teaching, or advanced practice and you know that another degree can help you achieve those goals. You may, however, not know whether you should go for a doctor of philosophy (PhD) in nursing or a doctor of nursing practice (DNP). A little research into both may help point you in the right direction. This article provides a brief history of doctoral education in nursing and compares key aspects of PhD and DNP degrees.

## Looking back

Over the past 70 years, nursing has made impressive progress as a discipline as well as a profession. Nurses began to earn research-focused PhD degrees in the 1960s, typically in fields like education or sociology, which led to the early development of nursing theory and research. In the 1970s, the growing demand by nurses for a nursing-specific PhD led many universities to develop PhD in nursing programs.

Later in that decade, nurse scholars identified the need for a second nursing doctoral degree similar to practice-focused degrees in other disciplines. This led to the development of degrees such as the doctor of nursing science (DNS) and doctor of nursing (ND) degrees. In 2004, the members of the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) recommended that to clarify degree options, the DNP should be the

degree associated with practice (“practice doctorate”). They also recommended transitioning to doctorate-level preparation for advanced nursing practice by 2015.

## Doctoral education today

In the United States, the nursing profession generally recognizes two doctoral degrees: PhD in nursing and DNP. In 2010, the Institute of Medicine called for “a greater pool of nurses prepared to assume faculty and research positions” and recommended “doubling the number of nurses with a doctorate by 2020.” However, the proportion of nurses with doctoral degrees remains less than 0.5%. As of 2015, the AACN reported that 322 institutions offered nursing doctoral programs in the United States. Some institutions offer both PhD and DNP programs, while a few offer a dual PhD/DNP. (See *Nursing doctoral degrees: how do they compare?*)

## PhD in nursing

If you choose the research-focused PhD degree, you'll graduate prepared to build nursing knowledge by generating new evidence through research and helping to meet the growing demand for nurse scientists and faculty. Continued evolution of the nursing profession depends on nurses who develop the science, steward the profession, and educate new nurse researchers.

In the past, most PhD in nursing programs required full-time study, but now many offer part-time options. In 2016, nursing pro-



gram administrators reported that 43% of the 3,108 students in PhD programs attended part-time. The various PhD programs offer multiple entry points and formats, with all graduates completing research for a dissertation.

## The DNP

If your goal is to achieve the highest level of education for nursing practice, then a DNP program may be the way to go. According to the AACN (2006), the DNP degree prepares “experts in specialized advanced nursing practice...that is innovative and evidence-based, reflecting the application of credible research findings.” With a DNP, you can lead system-level change to improve health outcomes.

Although the AACN's initial 2015 goal of doctoral-level entry to advanced practice has been delayed, the DNP initiative has stimulated discussion and action within nursing practice and education. Support of the DNP by professional organizations varies. For example, three organizations (American Nurses Association, American Association of

## Nursing doctoral degrees: How do they compare?

The table below provides an overview of doctoral degree options.

	PhD with nursing focus	DNP	Dual doctorate PhD/DNP
Program purpose	Focus on research  Preparation as a leader and scholar to generate external evidence through rigorous research	Focus on clinical practice  Preparation as a leader and clinician to generate internal evidence through quality improvement and evidence-based practice	Combines leadership in advanced clinical practice with research to develop nursing science
Program entry	BSN to PhD Post-MSN PhD	BSN-DNP (or pre-RN MN/ MSN-DNP) Post-MSN (APN)	Post-MSN
Typical program length	4-5 years post-master's (full-time study)	2-3 years post-master's (full-time study)	5+ years post-master's (full-time study)
Accreditation	PhD programs with a nursing focus are not accredited by a nursing organization. The institution may be regionally accredited by a higher education organization	Accredited by a nursing organization, such as CCNE, ACEN, or CNEA	Accreditation according to PhD and DNP standards
Roles for the graduate	Researcher, faculty member, administrator in academic settings  Researcher, executive in health care organization	Direct-care provider in primary care or specialty practice (with advance practice certification)  Faculty member, administrator in academic settings  Executive in healthcare organization	Combines the role options of both degrees

ACEN = Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing, APN = advanced practice nurse, BSN = bachelor of science in nursing, CCNE = Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education, CNEA = Commission for Nursing Education Accreditation  
MN = master of nursing, MSN = master of science in nursing, PhD = doctor of philosophy, DNP = doctor of nursing practice

Nurse Executives, and American College of Nurse-Midwives) view it as one education option for advanced practice. Others (National Organization of Nurse Practitioner Faculties, National Association of Clinical Nurse Specialists [NACNS], Council on Accreditation of Nurse Anesthesia Educational Programs [COA]) require a doctoral degree for advanced practice. The NACNS and COA have established target dates for requiring new clinicians in their specialty to have a doctoral degree.

You can pursue a DNP through a variety of formats. All DNP graduates complete a specified amount of practicum as well as a practice-based project.

### Selecting the right program

Choosing between the PhD and DNP can be challenging. In fact, some graduates of nursing doctoral programs are unable to distinguish the roles of nurses with different degrees. In a study by Dreifuerst et al (2016), 22% of nursing PhD graduates reported they began doctoral study intending to become clinicians, while 13% of DNP graduates said they began their programs intending to become researchers.

Consider these three factors when choosing your doctoral program

- fit with your career goals
- format of the academic program
- balance between costs and available funding support.

Bednash suggests that “the fundamental question is whether the nurse wants to develop the knowledge and skills to generate new science in an area of interest or whether the nurse wants to take existing knowledge and use it to shape nursing practice and health-care.” (See *The right questions lead to the right degree.*)

While studying for a doctoral degree can be a rewarding experience, be prepared for the challenges you’re likely to encounter. A study of DNP students and graduates found that success depends on support from family, peer students, friends, and employers; lifestyle changes, such as making work or school part-time

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## The right questions lead to the right degree

To ensure you choose the right program to meet your professional goals, ask yourself the following questions.

- What specializations or areas of study are available?
- What areas of expertise do the program faculty represent?
- What academic resources support student success?
- What types of financial support and scholarships are available?
- What's the typical program length for full- or part-time study?
- What's the program completion rate?
- Where are previous graduates employed?
- What's the program format (traditional on-site, executive course, web-based)?
- Is the program full-time or part-time?

If you are considering becoming an advanced practice registered nurse (APRN), also ask:

- Are graduates eligible to apply for certification?
- Does the specialty require a master of science in nursing (MSN) degree or doctor of nursing practice (DNP)? If DNP, by what date?
- What's the degree requirement of the state in which you plan to practice?
- What are potential employers' degree requirements?

If your career goal is to be a nurse educator, also ask:

- What are your potential academic employers' degree requirements?

rather than both full-time; and perseverance.

### Making the investment

Regardless of which path you choose for your doctoral degree, PhD and DNP graduates must work together. The nursing profession needs more doctoral-prepared leaders to collaborate on improving health outcomes and strengthening healthcare systems, so this is a perfect time for you to invest in your future with a PhD or DNP. ★

Visit [www.americannursetoday.com/?p=24994](http://www.americannursetoday.com/?p=24994) for a full list of references.

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# By the numbers: Your path to an advanced degree

**A** graduate degree in nursing—whether it's a master of science in nursing (MSN), doctor of nursing practice (DNP), or doctor of philosophy (PhD) in nursing—can open new horizons for your career. And, with the trend towards more education, having that advanced degree will help make you more marketable and may boost your earnings.

## 6 tips to graduate school success:

- 1 Find a mentor.
- 2 Tap into your support system at home.
- 3 Don't overbook yourself.
- 4 Participate in class.
- 5 Pay attention to your health: eat well, get enough sleep, and exercise.
- 6 Find friends to cheer you on.



## You have many options for graduate degree programs in the United States\*.

**289**  
DNP programs

**50**  
states (plus District of Columbia, Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands) with DNP programs

**133**  
PhD programs

**214**  
RN-to-MSN programs



\*Source: American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2015 data.