

Considerations for selecting a nursing doctoral program: PhD (Doctor of Philosophy) or a DNP (Doctor of Nursing Practice)

Choosing a doctoral program in nursing is an important decision, one that requires investigation and careful consideration. In addition to choosing a particular school, you would also consider the type of program that is the best fit for you and your professional goals, specifically, a PhD or a DNP?

The purpose of this information resource is to help you with your decision-making. It is organized around a set of questions and a table outlining the general characteristics of each program. There is value in each program and roles for individuals holding either degree.

1. Which degree fits best with your career goals and professional interests?
 - a. If your career path is that of a Nurse Researcher or Research Scientist in either an academic setting or a research-intensive clinical setting, consider a PhD (a research doctorate). Roles also include that of Faculty or Administrator.
 - b. If your career path is one that emphasizes clinical responsibilities, such as a Nurse Practitioner, Clinical Nurse Specialist, Certified Nurse Anesthetist, Administrator, or Clinical Nurse Faculty, consider a DNP, which is a practice doctorate.
2. Questions to consider regarding a specific program or university for a PhD or DNP education:
 - a. Is the school accredited by either the National League for Nursing (NLN) or the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education (CCNE)? (DNP programs only). Non-accredited programs may not be recognized by your employer.
 - b. All programs are not equal: What is the reputation of the program? What are the requirements for admission? Examine the school rankings; sources include one of the national weekly journals (eg, US News and World Report), a consumer report, or a research funding report (such as an NIH report).
 - c. How long has the program been in existence? Does it have a record of successful graduates?
 - d. Is the program part time or full time? Which one fits your goals and priorities?
 - e. Does the program require that you relocate, and if so, is that possible? Is it a predominantly in-person, classroom program; mixed online and in-person; or partially or exclusively online?
 - f. Does the program allow for you to have a one-on-one faculty mentor?
 - g. What is the typical length of a student's program of study? How many students graduate within the typical period? Be wary of programs in which many students do not graduate "on-time." This may indicate a lack of adequate mentoring.

- h. What is the availability of student support services, such as editorial review, librarian, statistical assistance, Information Technology (IT) support, and peer support services for students?
 - i. How many students are admitted each semester / year? Is each student assigned a specific advisor? What is the student to faculty ratio? High faculty to student/advisee ratios may indicate lower quality mentoring.
3. Is the school non-profit or for-profit? Students attending for-profit institutions may have limited access to low-interest student loans or other forms of financial aid (Korn, 2012).
4. Issues specific for the PhD Program:
 - a. How many faculty serve as principal investigators on funded research projects?
 - b. Do faculty regularly publish in peer-reviewed journals?
 - c. Do faculty have federally-funded grants (e.g., National Institutes of Health [NIH], Veterans Health Administration (VHA), Agency for Health Research and Quality [AHRQ] or grants funded by private foundations (e.g., American Cancer society [ACS], Robert Wood Johnson Foundation [RWJF], Sigma Theta Tau International [STTI])?
 - d. Does any member of the faculty in the school conduct research in the area in which you are interested? For example, if you want to do genetics research but the program specializes in heart disease....this may not be a good match. There needs to be a good match with faculty research programs at the university.
5. Issues specific for the DNP Program:
 - a. What type of capstone project is required (eg, evidence synthesis, evidence-based practice project, evidence based quality improvement, research)? Does the coursework prepare students adequately for conducting a capstone project? Ask to see a sample capstone project.
 - b. How many didactic and clinical hours are required for completion?
 - c. How many tracks are there in the DNP program, for example, clinical or administrative?
 - d. In what areas of scholarship are faculty involved, e.g., quality improvement, evaluation, policy change, leadership?
6. What are your personal considerations about work life, school life, and personal/family life related to continuing your education?
7. What are your career aspirations after completing your doctoral study?

8. What are the expected total costs for completing the program? (How much debt are you willing to incur?) What scholarships are available? Does the college have an individual dedicated to helping students obtain scholarship monies and/or financial aid? What is the average amount of student financial aid provided for most of the students who attend this school's program?

Education is never wasted! If you are reading this resource, and it is a question mark in your mind if you should continue your studies (or go back to school after a short or long time), you aren't alone. We wish you well!

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Supported by VHA Office of Nursing Services - Nursing Research Advisory Group

PhD (Doctor of Philosophy in Nursing)	DNP (Doctor of Nursing Practice)
<p>Objective: Prepares graduates in nursing science to conduct independent research that advances the empirical and theoretical foundations of nursing. The research generates new knowledge of generalizable findings and adds to the body of knowledge.</p>	<p>Objective: Prepares graduates in nursing practice to be leaders and role models in applying and translating research evidence into practice. Practice doctorates include development and validation of expertise in one or more area(s) of specialized advanced nursing practice (eg, NP role, leadership role, clinical faculty role).</p>
<p>Program of Study: Focus is research, usually on a narrowly defined area; the PhD graduate aspires to become the expert in this defined area by contributing to the body of knowledge about this topic. Dissemination of research findings through peer-reviewed presentations and publications is expected. Prepares nurses for faculty positions with research careers in research-intensive universities or as researchers in public or private healthcare systems (AACN, 2010) Usually 4 years (full-time) or more; a post-doctoral fellowship is often encouraged</p>	<p>Program of Study: Focus is practice that is oriented toward improving outcomes of patient care (AACN, 2006). Prepares nurses to assume clinical leadership roles in health care delivery systems, complex clinical environments, and evidence-based practice (Udlis & Mancuso, 2012) Usually 2 years (full time)</p>
<p>Competencies and Content: Prepares one to conduct independent research. The curriculum includes courses on statistics, research, methods, and theory courses to develop knowledge and skills in theoretical, methodological, and analytic approaches to the discovery and application of knowledge in nursing and healthcare. The PhD program core focus is on nursing theory and research methods and the development of competencies to expand science that supports the discipline and practice of nursing (AACN, 2010)</p>	<p>Competencies and Content: Graduates are capable of analyzing and using research, through translation into practice and quality improvement. The curriculum includes courses on advanced clinical practice, including both practice and patient management, organizations, systems and leadership skills, use of evidence to improve practice, informatics, health systems, health policy, and factors which influence healthcare outcomes for individuals, populations, and organizations The DNP program builds on traditional master's programs by providing education in evidence-based practice, quality improvement, and systems leadership, among other key areas to develop knowledge and skills in applying and translating research into practice (AACN, 2012). Also includes a clinical practicum or residency requirements</p>

PhD (Doctor of Philosophy in Nursing)	DNP (Doctor of Nursing Practice)
<p>Program Faculty: Possess research doctorate (typically a PhD) in nursing or related field Demonstrate sustained research funding Are recognized as experts in their research area (AACN 2006) Scientific rigor is evident through numerous peer-reviewed publications and presentations</p>	<p>Program Faculty: Possess a nursing practice doctorate; some faculty may have a research doctorate in nursing or related field Demonstrate expertise in a specific practice area Demonstrate leadership experience in specialty practice Scientific rigor is evident</p>
<p>Program opportunities: Currently there are 120 research-focused doctoral programs in nursing with another eight in the planning stages (AACN, 2010). <i>Not all programs are created equal, is the research training solid?</i></p>	<p>Program opportunities: Currently there are 184 DNP programs and an additional 101 DNP programs are in the planning stages (AACN, 2012). <i>Not all programs are created equal; does the program prepare you adequately for the role you are seeking?</i></p>
<p>Program Outcome: Prepares graduates to function as leaders in nursing research, serving in roles such as nurse scientist in academia or a research-intensive practice environment. The graduate is prepared to develop a program of research. The PhD is recognized worldwide The PhD is considered in academe as the entry-level degree for an assistant professor on a tenure track.</p>	<p>Program Outcome: Prepares graduates as clinical practice leaders in nursing, serving in roles such as an advanced practice nurse or healthcare administration. Graduates are prepared to conduct clinical improvement projects; focus is on translating current evidence into practice. DNP education prepares graduates and ensures their eligibility to sit for national, advanced specialty certification (Mancuso & Udulis, 2012)</p>
<p>Resources: Mentors and/or preceptors in research settings Access to research settings with appropriate resources Access to funding to cover tuition and dissertation studies Access to information and research technology resources congruent with program of research (AACN, 2010)</p>	<p>Resources: Mentors and/or preceptors in leadership positions across a variety of practice settings and access to diverse practice settings with appropriate resources for areas of practice Program is part of a comprehensive university or university medical campus Access to financial aid Access to information and patient-care technology resources congruent with areas of study (AACN, 2010)</p>

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<p>Final Project and Eligibility for certification: Program completion requires successful completion of coursework, program-level examinations (for example, progression exams at the end of core courses), conduct and defense of dissertation</p> <p>Does not include preparation to sit for national certification exam in a practice area</p>	<p>Final Project and Eligibility for certification: Requires capstone or scholarly project grounded in clinical practice and designed to solve practice problems or to inform practice directly</p> <p>Graduates may be eligible for national certification exam if professional practice requirements are met</p>
<p>Program assessment and evaluation: Oversight by the university's authorized bodies (i.e., graduate school) and regional accreditors (AACN, 2006)</p>	<p>Program assessment and evaluation: Receives accreditation by specialized nursing accreditation agency (CCNE, 2012)</p>