

## Health & Wellness Resource Center

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### **Doctoral degrees have options.**

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Today, nursing education is at a crossroads. Instead of maintaining its distinct qualities, each program has assimilated elements of the others. Research, theory, and integrative science are the common focuses.

Further complicating the issue is the fact that we basically see the BSN graduate as a generalist and the master's level graduate as a specialist. In doctoral studies, we revert to being generalists. It is not until the dissertation that we specialize.

#### Historical Perspective

By the 1960s, there were 4 different options for nurses interested in a doctoral degree in nursing: the EdD degree in education, the DNSc professional practice degree, the PhD in nursing, and the PhD in generic fields such as anthropology, sociology, and psychology.

The EdD focuses on educational issues and how to be the best educator you can be. You are basically being trained as a teacher in nursing, the best way to teach in a clinical setting. What is the best way to create this training? EdD programs increased the body of knowledge related to educational abilities, but do not necessarily contribute to our body of science. The graduates are expert educators and leaders in curriculum change.

DNSc, DNS, and DSN are actually the same degree. It is considered a professional degree, with an emphasis on clinical practice and the application of new knowledge. Although there is a research component, the focus is not on the development of new knowledge.

The PhD is a research-focused degree. PhD graduates are trained in intellectual inquiry to add to the body of knowledge. There is no clinical component.

The lesser known ND (doctor of nursing) degree is completely practice focused.

#### Why the Need?

Why do we need nurses with a doctoral education?

A study by Linda H. Aiken, RN, PhD, and others at the Center for Health Outcomes and Policy Research at the University of Pennsylvania demonstrated that the level of hospital nurses' education had an impact on surgical patient mortality rates.

The researchers found that when there were more BSN nurses at the bedside, the mortality rate was lower. Although not all doctoral nurses will be at the bedside, it is supported to say that advanced degrees in nursing will help patient outcomes.

There is also a need for leadership skills. We need to advance our body of knowledge and help to educate future nurses.

Part of the problem is that nursing's culture encourages going to the bedside for experience, then get more education, then return to the bedside to get more experience, then get more education. In many other professions, such as pharmacology and physical therapy, students finish their education before they ever reach the bedside.

It is one of the indicators that has us in our current predicament, with less than 5% of our profession having a terminal degree in nursing. Of that small pool, many are nearing retirement age. Another sobering fact is that 42% of nursing schools reported a faculty shortage that resulted in turning away qualified students.

### Before You Decide

Ask yourself why you are seeking a doctoral degree. Is your motivation for research? Is it clinical? Is it to gain respect among other healthcare providers? You must decide where you want to go.

But first, consider finances, because graduate education is expensive. What are your options? Are you in a position to obtain student loans or are you eligible for the federal loan forgiveness program in your state?

Find out early about prerequisites. Most schools require graduate statistics and a conceptual models course. You may have to take a graduate statistics course before applying to a graduate program.

Be able to articulate a research idea. Some programs want you to have a well-circumscribed idea for your dissertation topic. Investigate faculty expertise. If your research interest is in alternative therapies, a program where no faculty members have experience in this field is not a good fit.

Visit the programs' Web sites to get a biographical sketch of the faculty members. Look for topical areas of interest, as well as research methodology. Their publications and professional activities are a reflection of expertise.

Don't rush your decision. Consider family, time to commute, gas costs, reliable transportation, computer upgrades, workload and how supportive your employer will be.

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