

The Research Doctorate in Nursing: The PhD

David Rice, PhD, RN, NP

Rice is the director of Professional Practice and Education at City of Hope National Medical Center in Duarte, CA.

No financial relationships to disclose.

Rice can be reached at drice@coh.org, with copy to editor at ONFEditor@ons.org.

Key words: research doctorate; PhD; nursing education; nursing science; leadership

ONF, 43(2), 146–148.

doi: 10.1188/16.ONF.146-148

When nurses are considering an advanced degree beyond the master's level of educational preparation, a number of considerations may direct the decision-making process. The doctorate of philosophy (PhD) in nursing is a research degree that will well serve nurses who have the desire to apply theory and develop formal programs of research, become faculty of nursing, combine clinical practice with formal research, and advance through professional leadership in the ranks of hospitals and health systems organizations.

The research-focused doctorate in nursing prepares nurse scientists to lead the field and to advance the science of nursing. In addition to conducting independent research and developing their own programs of research, nurse scientists will also likely work in multidisciplinary and interprofessional teams to achieve broad research outcomes. They design and conduct studies to answer certain aims. These aims can be in response to theoretical questions, as well as to questions that derive from clinical practice or focus on individual, group, or population characteristics and behaviors—to name only a few prompts for inquiry. The findings of the inquiry are disseminated through scholarly publication and presentation, are likely to prompt additional research, and will ultimately inform an evidence base for practice, policy, and advocacy.

Background

Historically, before doctoral degrees in nursing were available, nurses who pursued doctoral degrees did so in fields related to nursing (e.g., health education, public health, psychology, economics). However, the first doctorate that was available to nurses was established in 1924. This was the doctor of education (EdD) degree, awarded by the Teachers College of Columbia University in New York, New York. The EdD degree continues to this day, and it is a research-focused doctorate with an emphasis on education.

PhD programs in nursing began toward the end of the 20th century. However, in the 1970s, Boston University began the doctor of nursing science (DNS) degree. Further complicating the matter, Margaret Newman of New York University later promoted a purely practice-focused nursing doctorate (ND) (Schneckel, 2009). The first of these ND programs was offered in 1979 by Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio (Reid Ponte & Nicholas, 2015).

The intent of the DNS or DNSc degree was to combine research with clinical practice rather than research with theory development and application (Loomis, Willard, & Cohen, 2006). Ultimately, the DNSc degree was considered to be equivalent to the PhD degree. The curricula, program design and expectations, and dissertation and research