

Considerations for the Doctor of Nursing Practice Degree

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Today's progressively complex healthcare landscape increasingly demands leaders who are adept at managing change in uncertain environments. Representing this country's largest group of healthcare workers, RNs influence how research translates to practice and ensure quality patient outcomes. Doctoral programs provide prospective nursing students with opportunities to pursue degrees focused on research or practice. The doctor of nursing practice (DNP) degree emphasizes leadership in clinical settings.

The DNP degree supports the growing need for well-prepared nurse leaders who can navigate complicated health systems and successfully implement innovations that change practice. Advanced practice nurses (APNs) working at the bedside or in administrative positions require leadership skills to rapidly synthesize information and apply new, setting-specific knowledge to improve patient outcomes. The American Association of Colleges of Nursing ([AACN], 2004) defined nursing practice as “any form of nursing intervention that influences health care outcomes for individuals or populations, including the direct care of individual patients, management of care for individuals and populations, administration of nursing and health care organizations, and the development and implementation of health policy” (p. 3). The AACN's broad definition of nursing practice makes the DNP degree the preferred career

development path for nurses working in a variety of direct and indirect care roles and practice settings (Chism, 2009).

The number of DNP programs has increased annually since 2004 when the AACN first endorsed the DNP as the entry degree for APNs, outpacing the growth of doctor of philosophy (PhD) programs (AACN, 2015b) (see Figure 1). As of June 2015, 264 DNP programs existed, with another 60 programs in the planning stages (AACN, 2015b). Many programs that offered the doctor of nursing science (DNS) degree converted to programs awarding a PhD degree (Reid Ponte & Nicholas, 2015). DNP programs across the country enrolled 18,352 students in 2014, with 3,065 graduating that year (AACN, 2015b). These figures demonstrate the strong interest of nurses in pursuing the DNP degree. The purpose of this article is to provide brief background information concerning the evolution of the DNP degree and its present status, to define the DNP degree, and to guide oncology nurses' decision-making process regarding the DNP degree.

Background

The first doctoral degrees for nurses focused on education and research, not practice. In 1979, Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio, offered the first “clinical” doctoral program in nursing: the nursing doctorate (ND) (Bednash, Breslin, Kirschling, & Rosseter, 2014; Chism, 2009;