

Practicing nurses are returning to school to further their education. There is a growing demand for nurses with advanced degrees to meet the needs of an expanding population of patients living with cancer. However, there are many different graduate nursing degree and program options, and several considerations should be taken into account when selecting a degree and a school. Discerning career goals is key to making the best decisions.

#### AT A GLANCE

- Nurses are a vital part of the oncology careforce and are returning to school for graduate degrees.
- There are a number of advanced degree options that prepare the oncology nurse for different roles.
- It is vitally important to reflect on and discern short- and long-term career goals and align them with the best educational preparation.

#### KEYWORDS

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# Graduate Nursing Education

## Selecting the right program to match career goals

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**N**ational and global data demonstrate a continued shortage of nurses required to meet the healthcare needs of an aging population. In addition, the need for an educated and specialized oncology nursing careforce persists (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019; Takvorian et al., 2020). Cancer incidence continues to rise across the world, even as mortality from cancer is declining and the disease shifts to one of chronicity. It is projected that 26.1 million Americans will be living with a history of cancer by 2040, up from 15 million in 2020 (Bluthmann et al., 2016). The growing population of patients with cancer and cancer survivors increases the need for expert cancer care. There also is a current and projected shortage of oncologists to provide care to this population (Yang et al., 2014). Greater numbers and expanded use of advanced practice RNs (APRNs) are necessary to meet the need for high-quality cancer care (Bruinooge et al., 2018).

The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine's (2016) report on the future of nursing calls for nurses to continue their education and to perform at the highest scope of practice. Nurses are returning to school to continue their education earlier in their careers, and they should be encouraged to do so (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2016). Oncology nurses looking to pursue an advanced degree are faced with many decisions; there are numerous educational options available, various

degrees to choose from, and many different ways to obtain those degrees (e.g., on campus versus online). Oncology nurses are encouraged to be thoughtful and deliberate when contemplating an advanced degree and to understand all the decision points that go into choosing the graduate program and degree that is the best fit for them. There are many considerations regarding what degree and what type of educational program to choose.

### Considerations

#### Professional Goals

Before deciding what graduate degree to pursue, nurses should first discern and identify short- and long-term professional goals. Do they want to be an APRN? Do they want to do research, be prepared as an academic educator or faculty member, or be a nurse executive? Perhaps a combination career goal is in mind, with a start as an APRN and then a later transition to academic education. Nurses should decide their career goals first, then identify the best educational preparation and degree to prepare them for those goals.

#### Degree Options

Graduate degrees in nursing include MSN, doctor of nursing practice (DNP), and PhD. Many oncology nurses wish to work in advanced practice roles, becoming certified and licensed as APRNs. Other graduate education paths lead to careers in nursing administration or clinical nurse leader roles that are not preparatory for APRN certification and licensure. Those interested in conducting research,