

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation  
New Careers in Nursing



**Doctoral Advancement in Nursing  
Student Toolkit**

# Doctoral Advancement in Nursing Student Toolkit

*First Edition  
October 2013*

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Washington, D.C., 2013.

Published by agreement between the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the American Association of Colleges of Nursing for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation New Careers in Nursing Scholarship Program (NCIN).

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# Doctoral Advancement in Nursing: Student Pathway to Doctoral Nursing Education Toolkit

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# Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

## New Careers in Nursing

### Purpose

The purpose of this Toolkit is to provide resources for nurses who are considering applying and enrolling in either a Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) program or a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) program.

The materials in the Toolkit are intended to assist with information gathering and planning during the process of learning about the DNP and PhD programs. The Toolkit includes useful and practical knowledge to help you choose the right program.

New materials will be added as new documents and information become available. Your feedback on the usefulness of the Toolkit, as well as your suggestions for other information, is welcome.

### Objectives

The objectives of the Doctoral Advancement in Nursing Student Toolkit are to:

- Provide basic information to guide undergraduate students and others who may be interested in pursuing post-baccalaureate education.
- Provide potential applicants to doctoral programs in nursing with tools and resources to achieve successful admission to the program of their choice.
- Provide potential applicants to doctoral programs in nursing with information about the PhD and DNP degrees so that they may match their career goals with the chosen program of study.
- Provide guidance for potential applicants regarding requesting letters of recommendation.
- Increase student success in the application and admission to the doctoral program of their choice.

### How to Use the Toolkit

This Toolkit contains information on topics considered essential when applying to doctoral programs. Students contemplating doctoral degrees can use these materials as a template to support a successful application and enrollment process. Resources are provided to supplement the information included in this Toolkit. The information and supplemental resources are not meant to be inclusive.



# Part I: The Spotlight is on Nursing Doctoral Education

## Section One: Introduction

This is an exciting decade for nursing doctoral education. With all of the important changes occurring in health care, and the increase in scientific knowledge regarding health promotion and treatment of diseases, this may be the most pivotal decade in the history of nursing doctoral education. You may ask, “What makes this time unique?” The answer is that a national spotlight is being directed to nursing doctoral education.

The focus intensified with the October 2010 release of the Institute of Medicine (IOM) report on *The Future of Nursing*, supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, which called for doubling the number of nurses with doctorates. The expert committee charged with preparing the evidence-based recommendations contained in this report wrote that, to respond “to the demands of an evolving health care system and meet the changing needs of patients, nurses must achieve higher levels of education.”<sup>1</sup>

The United States is grappling with a severe shortage of doctorally prepared nurses. Nurses with doctoral degrees are needed to serve as faculty members, nurse scientists, and experts in advanced nursing practice. Prospective doctoral graduates will help meet these needs.

## Section Two: Facts About Nursing Doctoral Education in the United States

Nursing is the nation’s largest health care profession with more than 3.1 million registered nurses practicing nationwide. Yet many more nurses are needed to meet the growing demand for nursing care. Masters and doctorally prepared nurses are needed for advanced practice, clinical specialties, teaching, and research, and future demand is expected to outpace supply. As you consider pursuing a doctoral degree in nursing, please consider the following issues.

**Faculty Shortages** at nursing schools across the country are limiting student capacity at a time when the need for nurses continues to grow. Budget constraints, an aging faculty, and increasing job competition from clinical sites have contributed to this emerging crisis. The decline in the number of doctorally prepared nursing faculty is a major problem contributing to the overall shortage of nurses. To minimize the impact of faculty shortages on the nation’s nursing shortage, the **American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN)** is leveraging its resources to secure federal funding for faculty development programs, collect data on faculty vacancy rates, identify strategies to address the shortage, and focus media attention on this important issue. According to a *Special Survey on Vacant Faculty Positions* released by AACN in October 2012, a total of 1,181 faculty vacancies were identified in a survey of 662 nursing schools

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1 Source: <http://www.aacn.nche.edu/media-relations/fact-sheets/nursing-workforce>

with baccalaureate and/or doctoral programs across the country. Besides the vacancies, schools cited the need to create an additional 103 faculty positions to accommodate student demand. The data show a national nurse faculty vacancy rate of 7.6 percent. Most of the vacancies (88.3%) were faculty positions requiring or preferring a doctoral degree. One of the top reasons cited by schools having difficulty finding faculty was a limited pool of doctorally prepared faculty (32.9%).

Clearly, the doctorally prepared nurse will have many opportunities to engage in a challenging and meaningful career as a faculty member in a prestigious academic setting.

**Nurse Scientists** with research-focused doctorates (PhDs or Doctor of Nursing Science, or DNS, degrees) are needed to advance the discipline as knowledge of basic and applied sciences in health care grows. Nurses need a scientific foundation to remain effective and efficient, and translate research into practice, at this time when there is a vast growth in knowledge, patients are facing new and reemerging infectious diseases, the country's diversity is growing, chronic illness is becoming more prevalent, health care delivery is changing, and globalization is increasing. Additionally, nurses are increasingly called to team science and interdisciplinary research in order to provide the scientific knowledge required to address complex health care issues. Those pursuing careers as nurse scientists will access the increased opportunities translational science creates for researchers who study phenomena relevant to nursing with knowledge and skills in interdisciplinary and translational research.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to the need for more nursing faculty and nurse scientists, graduates with practice-focused doctorates (DNPs in **specialized advanced nursing practice**) are also needed. These experts focus heavily on practice that is innovative and evidence-based, reflecting the application of credible research findings. In hallmark reports, the IOM (1999, 2001, 2003) has focused attention on the state of health care delivery, patient safety, health professions education, and leadership for nursing practice. These reports highlight the human errors and financial burden caused by fragmentation and system failures in health care. Among the recommendations in these reports are that health care organizations and groups promote health care that is safe, effective, client-centered, timely, efficient, and equitable; that health professionals be educated to deliver patient-centered care as members of interdisciplinary teams, emphasizing evidence-based practice, quality improvement, and informatics; and that the best prepared senior level nurses be in key leadership positions and participate in executive decisions.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Source: <http://www.aacn.nche.edu/education-resources/phdposition.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Source: <http://www.aacn.nche.edu/publications/position/DNPEssentials.pdf>

## Part II: Pursuing a Post-Baccalaureate Degree

### Section One: Introduction

Now that you are in or approaching your final years of undergraduate or master's program study, have you thought about where you'd like to see yourself going in the future? Many new graduates, or those who have been working as nurses for a few years, have had the opportunity to work with doctorally prepared nurses and see wonderful opportunities for career advancement for those possessing a doctoral degree in nursing. Combining your special area of interest, such as care of neonates or improving outcomes in patients with diabetes, along with studying research methods or advanced clinical content in a doctoral program may be right for you. If you have an interest in pursuing a role as a clinician engaged in advanced practice, becoming a faculty member in a school of nursing, or becoming a nurse scientist, obtaining the doctoral degree is the next step for you.

### Section Two: Is There a Need for a Doctoral Education in Nursing?

For nurses looking to assume leadership positions, advanced faculty appointments, and specialist roles, a doctorate is the appropriate credential. Today's nursing student can choose from doctoral programs focused on either research (PhD) or Doctor of Nursing Science (DNS) or practice (DNP). Given the need for more nurses to serve as Advanced Practice Registered Nurses (APRN), assume faculty positions, embark on careers as research scientists, and pursue leadership roles, nursing schools are moving quickly to increase the number of students entering both practice-focused and research-focused doctoral programs.

Nursing science and nursing education are in transition. As the DNP degree becomes the standard for specialized advanced practice roles, DNP graduates will increase in number and influence, bringing a powerful nursing voice to health care reform and improving patient care. The graduates of research-focused doctoral programs will continue to be the scholars and investigators who develop the knowledge necessary to expand the science and practice of nursing. All doctorally prepared nurses will serve as role models, mentors, and teachers, although the focus and setting of their work may vary.

A strong curriculum is an essential component of doctoral education in nursing. Research-focused doctoral programs must include essential elements such as: qualified faculty with funded research programs that match the student's interest, infrastructure and resources to support and facilitate student progress, and a comprehensive evaluation program to assure attainment of goals and continuous improvement. Practice-focused doctoral programs should also provide a well-prepared faculty with current and relevant patient care experience consistent with the student's interest;



opportunities for clinical practice and inter-professional mentorship in institutions with reputations for high quality patient care; and an academic infrastructure that allows and encourages students to engage in coursework taught by non-nursing faculty to ensure that graduates have the skills and knowledge to assume leadership positions as members of inter-professional teams. For more information on essential components of doctoral programs, see the AACN website at <http://www.aacn.org>.

Most doctoral programs in nursing prepare graduates through a variety of educational pathways. Nurses may enter doctoral programs after completing a baccalaureate or a master's in nursing. Some doctoral programs admit nurses with baccalaureate or graduate degrees in other disciplines and offer second career options. Varied pathways provide flexibility and support graduates in achieving diverse career goals. Prospective students also should be proactive and seek guidance regarding career goals and selection of appropriate educational pathways. Applicants are advised to seek mentorship, and gain as much knowledge as possible by visiting the websites of each individual school that may be of interest in order to ensure the selection of a program that will prepare them to achieve their ultimate career goals.

### Section Three: Who Should Apply?

Those considering doctoral study should be aware that admission to a doctoral program is competitive and that only those who are highly qualified, motivated, and committed to a research career are likely to be admitted. Students' past performance must demonstrate evidence of success in rigorous programs of study. Some programs require an undergraduate grade point average (GPA) of 3.0 or better. Additional evidence might include successful graduate record examination (GRE) scores (<http://www.ets.org/gre/>), highly supportive letters of recommendation from undergraduate professors/mentors, and a record of academic or career accomplishments. Students who have not yet taken the GRE or have taken the GRE and wish to improve their scores are urged to take a GRE prep course in order to boost their confidence and/or refresh their memories. Generally, GRE results are accepted if they have been taken within the last five years. Foreign students may have to take TOEFL examinations (<http://www.ets.org/toefl/>) to demonstrate English language proficiency. Plan to take these examinations early in the process to make sure you have adequate time to prepare and meet program application deadlines.

If a personal interview is required, the admission committee will be impressed by a highly motivated and interested applicant who is familiar with the program, is aware of key faculty members with similar research interests, and is articulate and able to state concisely and clearly why he/she wants to pursue doctoral study. The expectation is also that students will be focused on their studies and can commit a significant portion of their time to study, writing, and meeting the program goals (AACN, 2010). Each program of study is different and has different expectations and requirements. Once there is a clear picture of expectations related to graduate study, the applicant is able to make an informed decision to pursue a doctoral degree based upon the knowledge that the program will provide the knowledge and skills needed to achieve the individual's objectives.

## Section Four: Why Should I Apply?

Individuals interested in pursuing doctoral studies should complete a list of factors (driving and restraining) that may impact the decision to pursue the advanced degree. Making a list of these factors may help potential students understand and seek ways to overcome the restraining forces (Cathro, 2011).

Key components for successful completion of doctoral study have been identified as:

1. carefully determining the type of doctoral education desired (PhD or DNP);
2. development of a strategic plan for successful completion of doctoral studies; and
3. creating a systematic plan for the completion of oral and written program requirements.

(Smith & Delmore, 2007).

Additionally, doctoral students will be assigned to or select a faculty mentor/advisor who will oversee the program of study and courses selected, and advise the student in completion of a doctoral dissertation or capstone project. Specific questions for consideration when contemplating whether to pursue doctoral education include:

- Why do I want a doctoral degree?
- Am I interested in a research or clinical degree?
- What are my career goals or aspirations?
- Which type of doctoral program will best meet my career goals?
- What is it like to be a doctoral student?
- Is this the right time for me to attend school?

## Section Five: Where Should I Apply?

The first step in this process is deciding the type of doctoral program that is right for you. There are many factors to consider as you make this crucial decision. Here are some basic questions to ask yourself when beginning this process:

- What career trajectory do I foresee for myself in five years?
- Do I meet the admission requirements?
- Am I willing to move to obtain this degree?
- Does the school of nursing have researchers or evidence-based clinicians who are congruent with my research or clinical interests?
- Does this program seem like the best fit for me?
- Is there faculty who I think I can work with to meet my educational goals?
- Is financial aid available?
- Is there affordable health insurance?

- What resources are available to students?
- How many students are admitted per year?
- What is the retention and graduation rate for students in doctoral programs?
- What is the average time to completion for the attainment of the doctoral degree?
- Are there fellowship, research assistant, or teaching assistant opportunities available?
- Is housing available at a reasonable price?
- If I am moving with my significant other, are there job opportunities available for him/her?
- What types of social activities exist in the area?

These are the types of questions that should be asked before making any big decisions. Once you have gone through each one and decide that you are ready to begin, the next step in this inquiry process is to find a suitable program for you. There are a number of doctoral nursing program paths to choose, each with their own role in applicability in the nursing workforce.

## Part III: The Doctoral vs. The Undergraduate Experience

### Section One: Introduction

In order to clarify some of the educational differences in doctoral versus undergraduate programs, this Toolkit will delineate some facts that might provide a clear and realistic picture of what attending doctoral school will be like and how attending a doctoral program differs from the undergraduate learning experience.

### Section Two: What Will the Experience Be Like?

Study in doctoral programs differs in some ways from study in undergraduate programs. In general, the doctoral student engages in self-directed learning and is more often graded on his/her ability to analyze and synthesize rather than on scores achieved on a multiple choice test. This method of learning will require more independence in ways of thinking and development of a close mentoring relationship with a faculty advisor who will guide doctoral students in their studies. Most doctoral programs publish student handbooks and offer seminar style classes to orient students to the expectations of the program and to establish realistic goals to guide their studies and evaluate their progress.

For an example of one school's difference between the undergraduate and graduate school experiences, see Table 1 on the next page.

TABLE 1: Undergraduate versus Graduate School Differences

Differences	Undergraduate	Graduate
Years in School	Usually 4 years	DNP 3–4 years (Depending on completion of the capstone project) PhD 3–5 years (Depending on completion of the dissertation)
Responsibility	Meet external deadlines; teacher guided and directed assignments	Self-directed completion of deadlines; Few external deadlines; Capstone and dissertation work is developed with input from mentor and dissertation/capstone committee.
Coursework	Structured classes and assignments; lecture mode in large classes; multiple-choice exams Core courses outside major are required	Discussion oriented small classes; heavier workload; critical analysis papers; essays; in-depth study of one field; individualized plan of study developed by student and advisor/mentor.
Classes/Class Size	Many general classes not in the major; classes are used as means for evaluation Class sizes may be larger in foundational courses	In-depth classes in major area; research intensive evaluations; class sizes may be smaller
Faculty Interaction	Student initiates interaction; no further interaction with faculty once finishes class	Very involved with faculty; may work one to one; work will be judged by faculty committee
Learning	Basic educational foundations; learns what is already known	In-depth study of subject; involves creation of knowledge through research
Clinical Work	Supervised clinical work; up to 10 students per clinical faculty	Independent; works on research or clinical problems; creates knowledge or develops evidence based clinical interventions
Motivation	Outside-oriented (parents, family)	Self-oriented; goal-oriented
Financial aid	Financial aid may be easy to attain for a first degree; parents may help student; may also owe a lot of money when student graduates	Financial aid may be more difficult; fellowships, traineeships, teaching or research assistantships may be options.

References: North Dakota State University (n.d.). Differences between undergraduate and graduate schools. Human Development and Family Science; *GradSchools.Com*. (2013). Undergraduate vs. graduate school: A professor's perspective. <http://www.gradschool.com>.

The above table highlights some of the differences in the undergraduate versus the doctoral learning experience that need to be considered by a student who is deciding whether to attend doctoral school. After reviewing the table, it might be worthwhile to once again ask the question “Am I ready to take on the academic challenges required for doctoral study?” If the answer is *yes*, you should consider the next action steps to be taken when pursuing doctoral education.

The diagram in Part V demonstrates action steps that you may find helpful when pursuing doctoral education.

## Part IV: How Do I Decide: DNP or PhD?

### Section One: Introduction

One of the resources that provides extensive information on doctoral education in nursing is the AACN website (<http://www.aacn.nche.edu>). Your goals related to whether you are interested in pursuing a career focused in clinical practice or in research will determine the type of doctoral degree chosen. In addition, visit the New Careers In Nursing (NCIN) website and take the self-assessment quiz entitled “Is There an Advanced Degree in Your Future?” to gain further insight into making this crucial decision. (<https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/DANStudentAssessment>)

### Section Two: What Doctoral Degree Should I Pursue?

**Fast-Track Baccalaureate to Doctoral Programs:** This accelerated option provides an efficient educational pathway for motivated baccalaureate program graduates seeking an early career doctorate. These programs are available to both nurses in practice and new graduates, with the option to focus on either research or practice. Given the rigorous nature of these programs, full-time study is strongly recommended. The benefit of the accelerated programs is that by pursuing both the master’s and PhD or DNP degrees in a coordinated curriculum, the plan of study may be shortened by a significant number of credits. This may reduce the time to graduation and/or ease the financial burden of tuition.

**The Practice-Focused Doctorate:** The DNP is designed for nurses seeking the highest level of preparation in nursing practice. In 2004, nursing schools affiliated with AACN voted to move the level of education necessary for advanced nursing practice from the master’s degree to the doctorate by the target year of 2015. This move calls for doctoral preparation for the four APRN roles defined as nurse practitioners, clinical nurse specialists, nurse anesthetists, and nurse midwives. Both post-baccalaureate and post-master’s DNP programs are available with more than 150 nursing schools currently offering this degree and more than 100 new programs under development. DNP graduates are leaders in the health system and work collaboratively with nurse researchers and interprofessional colleagues in the health care system to implement new nursing science and practice innovations.

**Research-Focused Doctorate:** The Doctor of Philosophy and Doctor of Nursing Science represent the highest level of formal education for a career in research and the scholarship of discovery. Program graduates develop new nursing science, serve as leaders of the profession, and educate the next generation of nurses. In the academic setting, the research-focused doctorate is required for success as a researcher in all disciplines, including nursing. In the scientific arena, the research-focused doctorate is the beginning preparation for the development of independence in scientific pursuit. Attainment of the research-focused doctorate requires a strong scientific emphasis within the discipline; an understanding of the science of related disciplines and

translational science; dissemination of innovations; and inter-professional collaboration. Currently more than 120 nursing schools offer a research-focused doctorate.

**Post-Doctoral Programs:** Post-doctoral programs provide a bridge for new graduates with a research-focused doctorate to become independent, productive researchers who will generate and communicate knowledge fundamental to clinical nursing practice. New scientists embarking on postdoctoral study are expected to develop more depth in an area of science and enhance their expertise and skills for communicating within the scientific community and for securing funding for research. These programs are available at almost 40 research-intensive schools nationwide.”<sup>4</sup>

### Section Three: Comparison of Practice- and Research-Focused Doctoral Programs

“The DNP degree is a practice doctorate. The PhD and the DNS are research doctorates. Graduates of PhD programs are prepared to conduct independent research and disseminate their findings. The DNP will provide graduates with the skills and tools necessary to assess the evidence gained through nursing research, evaluate the impact of that research on their practice, and as necessary, make changes to enhance quality of care. Scholarship is an integral part of both doctoral degrees.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> AACN, *Your Guide to Graduate Nursing Programs*, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Source: Duke University School of Nursing at <http://nursing.duke.edu/academics/programs/dnp/dnp-phd-comparison>

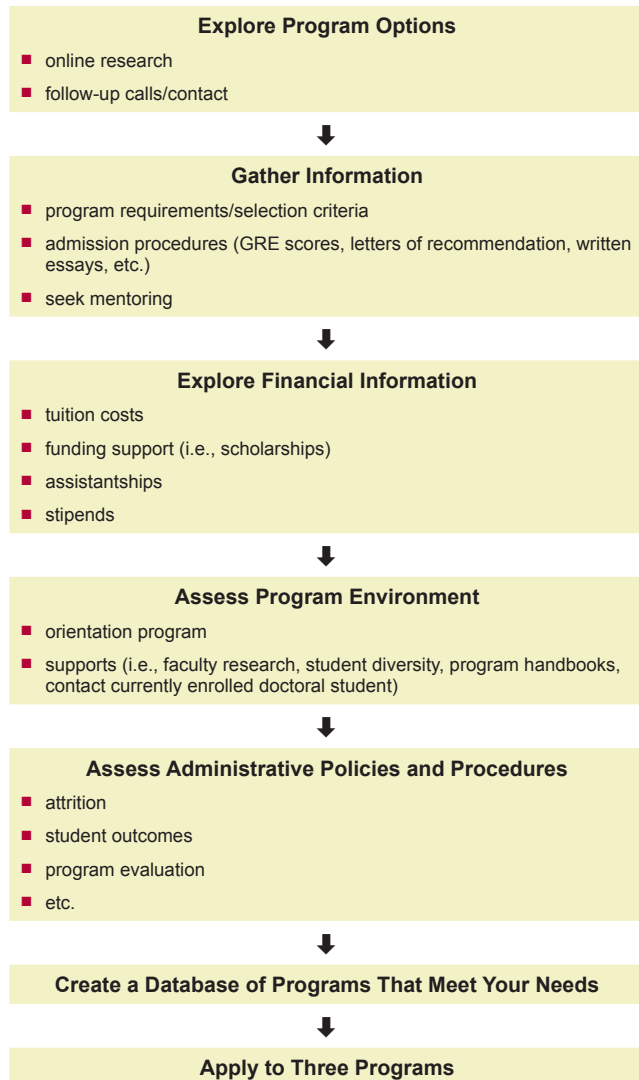
TABLE 2: **DNP Compared to PhD**

	<b>Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP)</b>	<b>PhD and DNS in Nursing</b>
Focus	Nursing Practice	Nursing Research
Degree Objectives	To create nursing leaders in interdisciplinary health care teams by providing students with the tools and skills necessary to translate evidence gained through nursing research into practice, improve systems of care, and measure outcomes of patient groups, populations and communities.	To prepare nurse scientists to develop new knowledge for the science and practice of nursing. Graduates will lead interdisciplinary research teams, design, and conduct research studies, and disseminate knowledge for nursing and related disciplines, particularly addressing trajectories of health, illness and care systems.
Curriculum Focus	Translation of evidence to practice, transformation of health care, health care leadership, and advanced specialty practice	Content specific coursework to support the dissertation, research design and methods, analysis and statistics.
Core Courses	Evidence Based Practice and Applied Statistics Data Driven Health Care Improvement Financial Management and Budget Planning Effective Leadership Health Systems Transformation	Philosophy of Science & Theory Development Advanced Research Methods Statistics & Data Analysis Longitudinal & Qualitative Research Methods Content specific cognates and electives
Clinical Hours	500 to 1000 depending on point of entry within capstone project	None
Capstone Project	Yes	No
Dissertation	No	Yes
Employment Opportunities Post Graduation	Health care administration, clinical nurse faculty, direct care clinician	Nurse scientist, nursing faculty

Source: Adapted from Duke University School of Nursing at <http://nursing.duke.edu/academics/programs/dnp/dnp-phd-comparison>



## Part V: Action Steps for Pursuing Graduate Education



# Part VI: Preparing for Successful Admission to Doctoral School

## Section One: Introduction

When you are beginning your pursuit of the doctoral degree, you should become aware of the admission requirements of the program(s) that you are planning to apply to including the common admissions requirements such as the GRE scores and the importance of undergraduate grade point averages. Most universities use these as admission requirements since they tend to be predictors of success during doctoral education. Other factors that could impact your ability to succeed include the ability to study independently, work collaboratively, and persevere (Source: PhD—Promising Practices).

By consulting your advisor or an advisor in a desired program, you can be guided to explore websites and links that contain useful information regarding doctoral programs available throughout the country, most especially the programs' areas of focus, and their admission criteria. This Toolkit provides you with a list of potential resources that can be used to identify doctoral programs available in the United States. Resources such as *Peterson's Grad School Bound* website and *Peterson's Guide to Nursing Programs* (2013) provide comprehensive information on doctoral nursing programs in the United States and Canada.

Some advice that has been given to students who are exploring the idea of attending doctoral school includes:

- **Focus on your current studies.** A high grade point average is a requirement for most doctoral programs.
  - Concentrate on the immediate goal of graduating with a high GPA.
- **Find research opportunities on and off campus.** Participation in these research opportunities will expose the student to potential mentors who can write letters of recommendation required in the application process.
  - The personal statement usually required as part of the application process will be stronger as a result of this participation.
  - Research involvement can be in disciplines other than nursing.
  - Paid summer research opportunities may exist elsewhere and in other educational institutions. Explore these options.
  - Identify an area of interest that might serve as a basis for doctoral study. You don't have to have an exact research question or narrowly defined area of interest, but put some thought into defining the general area such as “end of life decision-making” or “maternal hypertension during pregnancy.”
  - Find a faculty mentor. Get to know the faculty. Identify one or two current faculty members that might have a research focus in your area of interest.

- The earlier the better. Don't wait until the senior year to find a faculty mentor. The earlier you begin to work with your faculty mentor, the more opportunity you will have to engage in scholarship and build your resume.
- Visit faculty during their office hours. Ask faculty about their research interests and what led them to become interested in that area.
- **Take the GRE or any other entrance exam required early.** If you are feeling anxious or a bit rusty in certain areas, purchase a GRE preparation book or enroll in a review course. Don't wait until you are ready to graduate.
- **Start thinking about what to include in a personal statement or entrance essay.**
  - Visit the university writing lab for tutoring if needed.
  - Ask a faculty member to review a rough draft of your personal statement and make suggestions for improvement.
- **Gather data on how doctoral school can be financed.**
  - Be aware of the tuition and expenditures required for doctoral school attendance.
  - Be aware that most schools offer some form of financial assistance that may consist of fellowships, stipends, teaching or research assistantships, and/or loan packages.
  - Use the resources found in the Toolkit that describe sources of funding available.

References: Stanford University Graduate and Undergraduate Studies. (2013). *Grad school preparation*. <http://www.stanford.edu/dept/humsci>; University of California San Diego. (2013). *Career services center: Nursing*. <http://career.ucsd.edu/undergraduates/consider-grad-school/Nursing.html>.

## Section Two: Doctoral School Preparation Timeline Guide

This is a general outline of the timeframe for what should be accomplished when contemplating entering doctoral school.

### DURING YOUR UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION:

- Discuss your interests for post baccalaureate work with your advisor and faculty members.
- Begin to define or inquire about specialties in your chosen field (science or clinical degree; what advanced practice role do you want to pursue?).
- Meet with academic or faculty advisors to discuss your interest in pursuing doctoral education.
- Become knowledgeable of the resources available to you and develop a list of schools of interest.
- Get involved in research or clinical practice to determine which doctoral degree and area of interest may be a good fit for you.

- Ask faculty members for their input and advice.
- Investigate fellowships, scholarships, and financial aid.

**NEAR UNDERGRADUATE COMPLETION OR SHORTLY THEREAFTER:**

- Register and prepare for appropriate doctoral admission tests.
- Have a list of 3–6 target schools. Visit as many of these campuses as possible. Identify faculty in each school that have similar or complementary research/practice interests.
- Begin to acquire letters of recommendation. Seek letters from those with doctoral degrees on faculty and in clinical practice who are familiar with you and your work.
- Begin to define your research/clinical interest area.
- Get started on your application essay. Set a timeline for yourself on application deadlines.

**ONCE YOU ARE SURE ABOUT PURSUING DOCTORAL EDUCATION:**

- Confirm and collect recommendation letters (3–5).
- Take necessary admission tests if you haven't already.

(Source: [www.gettysburg.edu/career](http://www.gettysburg.edu/career))

**GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS DURING THE TIMELINE:**

- Is the program or institution nationally recognized and accredited? What is the institutional reputation?
- Where is the institution located? Is it far from home? Will it be more costly living far away from home?
- Is the program diverse (ethnic, geographic, etc.)? Is there a specific region from which most students have come (demographics)?
- What is the typical amount of time a student will take to graduate from the program?
- Where are the program graduates working?
- Is there financial support available throughout the entire program of study?
- What is the typical amount of educational debt accrued?
- Are doctoral stipends or other forms of financial assistance available?
- What are the expectations to receive a stipend?
- How many students drop out and what are the reasons for dropping out (retention rate)?
- What is the average time from admission to completion of the program (including dissertation or capstone projects)?
- What opportunities exist for interdisciplinary advisement and collaboration?

- What is the quality and number of available clinical sites for practice and internships?
- What is the percentage of those admitted who gain doctoral degrees (graduation rate by cohort)?

**Other questions that can help you decide which doctoral school is right for you are included in AACN's *Guide To Nursing Graduate Programs*.** For a complete list of questions and answers go to: <http://www.aacn.nche.edu/publications/brochures/GradStudentsBrochure.pdf>. See below for some of these questions:

- What is required in terms of undergraduate grade point average, entrance testing (e.g., GRE and TOEFL), and prerequisites?
- How long is the program, what is the credit load and are full- and part-time study options available?
- Are education programs offered online, face-to-face, and/or in a hybrid format?
- Are master's and DNP programs accredited by one of the two nationally recognized accrediting bodies for nursing education—the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education (CCNE) or National League for Nursing Accrediting Commission (NLNAC)?
- Is the university or college accredited by a higher education learning commission?
- Where are graduates finding jobs and what percentage of graduates have job offers at the completion of their studies?

# Part VII: The Application Process

## Section One: Introduction

Once you have considered all aspects of the various nursing programs and made a decision where to apply, the next step is to find the admission requirements. This Toolkit will assist in the sometimes confusing application process. The application process typically involves completing the application form, paying a fee, submitting transcripts, taking admission tests such as the Graduate Record Examination (GRE), writing an admission essay or personal statement, and obtaining letters of recommendation. This next section of the Toolkit elaborates on those items.

## Section Two: Preparing to Take the Entrance Exam(s)

### ENTRANCE EXAMS

Most graduate nursing programs require that applicants take some type of entrance exam(s). These may most commonly include the GRE or the Miller's Analogy Test (MAT). The TOEFL may be required for students applying from outside of the United States. It is important to understand that although there are a number of exams that might be acceptable, so to be sure, you must inquire about the admission requirements of the schools to which you want to apply.

### GRE

Most schools of nursing primarily accept scores from the GRE. The GRE is an admission exam commonly used to evaluate qualification for admission into a doctoral program, along with the transcripts of undergraduate courses and letters of recommendation.

The examination has three major components: verbal reasoning; quantitative reasoning; and analytical writing. Below is a description of each component of the exam which is provided on the ETS—GRE website, [http://www.ets.org/gre/revised\\_general/about/content](http://www.ets.org/gre/revised_general/about/content).

**The Verbal Reasoning section measures your ability to understand what is read and how you apply your reasoning skills. Students will be expected to:**

- analyze and draw conclusions from discourse; reason from incomplete data; identify author's assumptions and/or perspective; understand multiple levels of meaning, such as literal, figurative, and author's intent
- select important points; distinguish major from minor or relevant points; summarize text; understand the structure of a text
- understand the meanings of words, sentences and entire texts; understand relationships among words and among concepts

**The Quantitative Reasoning section measures your ability to use quantitative reasoning. You will be expected to:**

- understand quantitative information
- interpret and analyze quantitative information
- solve problems using mathematical models
- apply basic mathematical skills and elementary mathematical concepts of arithmetic, algebra, geometry, probability, and statistics

**The Analytical Writing section measures your ability to provide focused responses based on specific tasks. You will be expected to:**

- articulate complex ideas clearly and effectively
- support ideas with relevant reasons and examples
- examine claims and accompanying evidence
- sustain a well-focused, coherent discussion
- control the elements of standard written English

The GRE exam is taken at test centers throughout the U.S. and in other countries. On the ETS-GRE website, you will find links for more information, testing centers, practice questions, institutions, and sponsors approved to receive the test scores, and a host of other helpful information to prepare you for the exam. <https://www.ets.org/gre>.

**TIPS FOR PREPARING TO TAKE THE GRE**

Preparing for the GRE is one of the most important tasks and should be taken seriously. Most nursing programs require that applicants take some type of entrance exam(s). The most common doctoral program entrance exam is GRE. The following are tips for those who are planning to take the GRE:

- Review your high school math. The GRE math section will include some basics from your algebra and geometry classes. If you feel the need for help, hire a tutor or buy math books such as *Algebra for Dummies*.
- Know the exam in terms of what will be covered. It is also important to know that the parts of the GRE have time limits for completion.
- Prepare from four to 12 weeks in advance of the test. There are various commercial programs available such as Kaplan and the Princeton Review that can be helpful in preparing.
- Expand your vocabulary and read as much as possible.
- Do practice timed tests. It is important to mimic the conditions of the exam so you feel comfortable during it.
- Make sure that you get enough sleep the night before the exam. Students who do not get enough sleep have difficulty thinking and remembering what they have learned.

- Determine areas that are weak and work on strengthening them. If math is your weakness, hire a tutor or concentrate on studying in that area.
- If you are not satisfied with the exam results, you can always take the test again. Many schools will only record the highest score achieved.

Sources: Dove, L., & Murray, P. *Top 10 study tips for the GRE*. [www.howstuffworks.com](http://www.howstuffworks.com); U.S. News and World Report. (2012). *Test prep: 6 tips for GRE success*. <http://www.usnews.com/education/best-graduate-schools/articles>.

## Section Three: Writing the Personal Statement/Admission Essay

### GOAL

The personal statement provides the opportunity to communicate who you are to the admissions department. It is an essential component of the admission packet. Unlike the transcript, the GRE score, or letters of recommendation, the personal statement allows you to share with the admissions department why you believe you are a good fit for that institution. It is an opportunity to sell yourself; while the transcript highlights previous academic success with coursework, letters of recommendation speak to past accomplishments and potential for success.

Generally, the personal statement should be clear and concise. Avoid clichés and commonly used phrases, check spelling, and be sure to use correct grammar.

### RESOURCES

There are many Internet resources that provide guidance for writing the personal statement.

**The University of California, Berkeley** indicates that the student should consider the following when writing the personal statement:

- What is your purpose for wanting to pursue graduate study?
- What excites you about the specific area of study?
- What is your intended future use of your graduate degree?
- You should describe your preparation, knowledge, and expertise to study in this field.
- You may wish to describe any inconsistencies or problems within your application and how you overcame the circumstances to be successful.

You can also make an appointment with a career counselor to write the outline for your letter. You should also write several drafts and have each draft reviewed by the Student Writing Center at your college and by your faculty advisor.

Source: <https://career.berkeley.edu/grad/gradstatement.stm>



**The Purdue Online Writing Lab** provides specific tips for writing the personal statement and identifies specific questions that you should consider before writing the statement:

- What makes you distinctive?
- What details of your life might set you apart from other candidates?
- What sparked your interest in the field?
- What are your short term and long term career goals?
- Are there gaps and/or discrepancies within your academic record that should be explained?
- Can you describe your personal attributes that may be viewed favorably?
- What makes you a stronger candidate than others?
- What makes your application stand out among the others?

Source: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/642/01/>.

**USA Today** listed the following 10 tips for writing a graduate school personal statement:

- Get started by making an outline
- Describe the reasons for selecting your desired career path
- Be specific and include descriptions
- Do not write a “one size fits all” letter. Describe the rationale for selecting the specific program. Do your research.
- Describe the noteworthy reasons that attracted you to a particular program
- Describe your personal interests in a particular area of research or clinical practice
- Give examples of your motivation and capacity to succeed
- Be concise since personal statements are usually limited to two pages
- Proofread and refine
- Enjoy the process.

Source: <http://www.usatodayeducate.com/staging/index.php/blog/10-tips-for-writing-a-grad-school-personal-statement>

**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR WRITING THE PERSONAL STATEMENT ARE LISTED BELOW:**

- Dartmouth Writing Program: Personal Statements—General Advice, <http://www.dartmouth.edu/~writing/materials/student/tasks/graduate.shtml>
- Peterson’s, Write a Graduate School Essay that Will Knock their Socks Off, <http://www.petersons.com/graduate-schools/write-graduate-school-essay.aspx>

## Section Four: Preparing for a Doctoral Admissions Interview

There are many resources that will assist you in preparing for the doctoral admission interview. The style of the interview may vary by school and may involve being interviewed by a single person or an entire committee. In any case, below are some helpful hints to make the interview a success.

### PRIOR TO THE INTERVIEW

- Review specific information about the school by perusing their brochures and web information, and review information specific to the doctoral program and the research expertise of the faculty with whom you want to work. Be prepared to discuss all aspects of your previous work, transcripts, and gaps or deficiencies in your academic record. You should be prepared to discuss your career goals and how the program aligns with your career aspirations. Anticipate questions the interviewers may ask, be prepared to provide examples of accomplishments, skills, and experience, and prepare succinct answers. Typical interview questions may include:
  - Tell me your story and why you are interested in doctoral school (Describe how your previous academic work has prepared you for doctoral school)?
  - What is your research/practice interest area?
  - What do you perceive as your strengths and areas for development? If you have specific challenges, how would overcome these identified challenges?
  - What attracts you to this specific program?
  - How would your professors describe you?
  - Can you describe one of your greatest accomplishments and one of your greatest challenges and how you handled it?
  - What contributions do you anticipate making to this field of study?
  - What value will you bring to this program?
- Develop some questions to ask your interviewers so that they can see you have come prepared and have visited the school's website. Specific questions about the school's quality will impress the interviewers. For example, "What is the maximum number of doctoral students that faculty may be assigned to mentor?" or "How many PhD students write pre-doctoral grants and receive funding for their dissertations?"

### DURING THE INTERVIEW

- You should come at least 15 minutes early for the interview. This may mean finding out the exact location of the interview prior to the scheduled time to ensure timeliness. Your attire should be businesslike, neat and professional. You should have copies of your resume/CV and any manuscripts/publications to distribute to committee members. Try to express confidence, which is most likely to come from preparing and practicing for the interview beforehand.

## AFTER THE INTERVIEW

- You should be prepared to ask the committee when you can anticipate an admission decision. Thank the committee for their time. You should also follow up with a written thank you card to each of the committee members.

Source(s): Student Academic Success Center, UC Davis, Student Affairs, [http://advisingservices.ucdavis.edu/advising/grad/handouts/graduate\\_school\\_interview\\_tips.html](http://advisingservices.ucdavis.edu/advising/grad/handouts/graduate_school_interview_tips.html)

Perterson's Graduate Admission: Tips for a Great Interview, <http://www.petersons.com/graduate-schools/graduate-admission-tips-interview.aspx>

## THE OUTCOME

After completing your application(s), you may become anxious awaiting the admission decision. Many programs notify applicants by email while some continue to rely on traditional mail services.

Keep the following in mind so that you stay focused on the process:

- If you have applied to several programs, you may have formed a list of your first, second, and third choices based on your research, campus visits, and interviews. It is important to be aware of the time frame in which each of the programs will notify accepted applicants.
- If you have not received an admission decision from any of the programs to which you have applied within the expected time frame, you should call or email the graduate admissions office of the dean of graduate or doctoral programs.
- Usually an acceptance notice will provide a date by which the student must accept the offered seat in the program and make a financial deposit that may be applied to the first tuition payment. If you miss the deadline date and do not reply, neither accepting the seat or nor declining to attend, your seat may be offered to another applicant on the waiting list.

Several outcomes are possible including:

- You have been accepted into your first choice program. In this case, you should immediately respond positively and secure your seat as quickly as possible.
- You have been accepted by your second or third choice program but have not yet heard from your first choice program. In this case, you should contact your first choice program and ask if they have made admission decisions. If not, contact your second/third choice programs and ask for an extension of the date required for response so that you can make a reasoned decision once you have all the data.
- You have not been accepted into your first choice program. If you have been accepted into your second or third choice program, you now must decide whether to attend one of these programs. Or you may want to meet with an admissions office representative or graduate dean of your first choice program to inquire about why you were not accepted and seek advice as to what you should do to strengthen your application and re-apply. Remember to consider all of the factors discussed

in the Toolkit including academics, tuition support, health insurance, fit between student/faculty area of interest, work-life balance, housing, etc. Take your time. Think it over. Put emotions aside. Come to a reasoned decision.

#### **COMMON REASONS WHY APPLICANTS ARE NOT ACCEPTED INTO THE PROGRAMS THAT HE/SHE HAS APPLIED TO:**

- Marginal GPA and/or GRE scores
- Weak/late/missing letters of reference
- Failure to make an impression during the admission interview
- Weak personal essay (lack of organization, clarity, typographical or spelling errors)
- Poor fit between the applicant's goals/areas of interest and strengths/resources of the program

#### **USE THE FOLLOWING TIPS AND STRATEGIES FOR REMEDYING ANY IDENTIFIED APPLICATION DEFICIENCIES:**

- **GPA:** If the undergraduate GPA is not adequate to meet the admission requirements, some programs will allow the applicant to take one or two courses in the doctoral curriculum on a trial or non-matriculated basis. This opportunity allows the applicant to demonstrate his/her ability to succeed by obtaining a satisfactory grade in the course and impressing the professor.
- **GRE Scores:** If GRE scores are inadequate, the applicant may enroll in a prep course and retake GREs with the goal of improving his/her scores.
- **Personal Essay:** If the personal essay is lacking, the applicant may ask for an opportunity to rewrite the essay and reapply the following year. With input from a mentor or academic advisor, the essay may be refined and strengthened.
- **Letters of Reference:** It is more difficult to obtain information regarding letters of reference. If you waive your right to read the letters of reference when you requested the reference, you will not be allowed to see the letter. The best thing to do is to initially choose your references wisely, and if you sense reluctance to write the letter by the reference provider, withdraw your request immediately and seek another reference.
- **Lack of fit between the applicant's goals/area of interest and the resources/strengths of the program:** If you are informed there is not a fit between your interest area or career goals and the ability of the school to meet these goals, the best thing to do is to either critically review your goals and modify them to be more consistent with the academic institution's or choose another school. It is unlikely the school will modify its program to meet your needs, and if a student is admitted to a school under these circumstances, the result is often a negative experience for both the student and the school. A good fit cannot be forced, and if there is a mismatch between the student's needs/goals and the academic resources, it is beneficial if this is discovered early-on before valuable time, effort and financial resources are invested.

If doctoral study is right for you, most likely you will be successful in finding the best program to meet your needs. Be persistent, be wise, and don't be discouraged.

## Part VIII: Resources for Financing Doctoral School

### Section One: Introduction

The American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) has developed a fact sheet to highlight funding sources available to students considering doctoral study to become future nurse educators.<sup>6</sup> We are sharing that and additional information below to help guide you in your search for funding your doctoral study.

### Section Two: Funding Your Doctoral Nursing Education

The first place to go when seeking funding for your doctoral nursing education is the financial aid office at your academic institution. Most grant and loan programs administered by the U.S. Department of Education, such as Perkins Loans, PLUS Loans, and Stafford Loans, are managed through the nursing school's financial aid office. Eligibility for some programs, including Perkins Loans, is based on financial need. In order to receive any assistance through these programs, you must complete a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (or FAFSA) online at <http://www.fafsa.ed.gov>.

#### FEDERAL FINANCIAL AID OFFERED BY YOUR SCHOOL OF NURSING

Schools of nursing manage a variety of scholarship and loan programs for students pursuing doctoral nursing degrees. Some programs do not require repayment while traditional loan programs have a payback requirement. Other programs may also require a post-graduation service commitment. Funded by the Division of Nursing at the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), these programs include:

**Nurse Faculty Loan Program** assists doctoral students pursuing faculty careers. Students must agree to teach at a school of nursing in exchange for cancellation of up to 85 percent of their educational loans, plus interest, over a four-year period.

- **Advance Nursing Education Traineeships** provides financial assistance to doctoral nursing students including full or partial support for the costs of tuition, books, program fees, and reasonable living expenses.
- **Nursing Student Loan Program** assists doctoral nursing students with a maximum of \$17,000 at low interest, with a preference for those with financial need. The repayment period is 10 years. The program provides \$3,300 in non-taxable loans to students during their first two years of study and \$5,200 for their last two years.
- The U.S. Department of Education administers the **Graduate Assistance in Areas of National Need** program that provides fellowships, through schools of nursing, to assist doctoral students with excellent records who demonstrate financial need

<sup>6</sup> Source: AACN Extant Resource, <http://www.aacn.nche.edu/media-relations/fact-sheets/funding-resources>

and plan to pursue a research-focused doctoral degree. Nursing has been identified as an area of national need. <http://www.ed.gov/programs/gaann>.

**Important Note:** Not all schools of nursing offer these funding opportunities, so check first with the financial aid department of the schools of nursing you are considering attending.

### FEDERAL FINANCIAL AID OPTIONS

The Division of Nursing at HRSA also offers loan and scholarship programs for which individual students can apply, including:

- **NURSE Corps Loan Repayment and Scholarship Programs** support current students and new doctoral graduates. These programs include:
  - **Loan Repayment:** Repays up to 85 percent of nursing student loans in return for at least three years of practice in a designated health care facility with a critical shortage of nurses. <http://www.hrsa.gov/loanscholarships/repayment/nursing>.
  - **Scholarship:** Offers individuals who are enrolled or accepted for enrollment as full-time nursing students the opportunity to apply for scholarship funds. Upon graduation, scholarship recipients are required to work in a health care facility with a critical shortage of nurses for at least two years. <http://www.hrsa.gov/loanscholarships/scholarships/nursing>.
- **National Institute of Nursing Research (NINR) Ruth L. Kirschstein National Research Service Awards for Individual Predoctoral Fellows In Nursing Research (F31)**—Fellowships to support tuition and dissertation research to train future nurse scientists for research careers. <http://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/pa-files/PAR-11-117.html>
- **The Bureau of Health Professions at HRSA** also offers funding opportunities for doctoral students. See <http://bhpr.hrsa.gov/nursing>. These programs include:
  - The **Faculty Loan Repayment Program** provides up to \$40,000 in loan repayment for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds who serve as faculty at eligible health professions schools for a minimum of two years. <http://www.hrsa.gov/loanscholarships/repayment/Faculty>.
  - The **Scholarships for Disadvantaged Students Program** provides scholarships to full-time students from disadvantaged backgrounds who demonstrate financial need. <http://www.hrsa.gov/loanscholarships/scholarships/disadvantaged.html>
- **State-Sponsored Scholarship and Loan Forgiveness Programs**—Some states have developed programs that offer loan forgiveness for nursing faculty or have proposed legislation to provide funding assistance to nurse educators. To find out if a program is available in your state or if one is being considered, see: Health Workforce Information Center: State Resources <http://www.healthworkforceinfo.org/states>

- **AACN’s State Advocacy Resources for Nurse Educators** <http://www.aacn.nche.edu/government-affairs/state-advocacy/resources>. Individuals are encouraged to check with their state higher education agency or board of nursing to find out what other financial aid programs are available. To make contact with your local board, go to <https://www.ncsbn.org/contactbon.htm>.
- **Private Scholarships and Specialty Area Programs** In addition to federal and state financial aid programs for doctoral nursing students and nurse educators, dozens of programs are available through private organizations and specialty-focused agencies. Below is a sampling of available programs:
  - The **Johnson & Johnson Campaign for Nursing’s Future-AACN Minority Nurse Faculty Scholars Program** provides \$18,000 in annual scholarship funding to individual graduate students from minority backgrounds who agree to teach after graduation. <http://www.aacn.nche.edu/students/scholarships/minority>.
  - **The Jonas Center for Nursing Excellence**—Scholarships for doctoral study at select schools of nursing with an emphasis on developing future nurse educators. <http://www.jonascenter.org/who-we-are>.
  - The **Foundation of the National Student Nurses’ Association** administers the Promise of Nursing Faculty Fellowship to advance careers in nursing education. <http://www.nсна.org/FoundationScholarships/FNSNAScholarships/PONFellowship.aspx>.
  - The **Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Nursing and Health Policy Collaborative at the University of New Mexico** provides financial support and guidance for advanced careers in health policy for those pursuing a PhD in Nursing. <http://nursinghealthpolicy.org/#the-fellowship>.
  - The **National Hartford Centers of Gerontological Nursing Excellence** offers pre- and post-doctoral scholarships for doctoral students specializing in academic geriatric nursing. <http://www.geriatricnursing.org/applications>
  - The **American Cancer Society** offers scholarships for doctoral students interested in cancer nursing. Scholarships may be renewed for up to two years for master’s degree students (\$10,000/year) and four years for doctoral degree students (\$15,000/year). <http://www.cancer.org/Research/ResearchProgramsFunding>.
  - The **Epilepsy Foundation** provides a number of research grants for individuals, including doctoral students, pursuing research in the area of epilepsy. <http://www.epilepsyfoundation.org/research/grants.cfm>. The American Nurses Association administers the Minority Fellowship program for nursing students pursuing a doctoral degree and a career focused on the prevention and treatment of mental illness and substance abuse. <http://www.emfp.org>.
- Finally, there are many online databases that nursing students are encouraged to visit in order to search for sources of assistance. These include:
  - The **Michigan State University Libraries** maintain an excellent resource page for nursing students seeking financial assistance. <http://staff.lib.msu.edu/harris23/grants/3nursing.htm>.

- Developed by the Johnson & Johnson Campaign for Nursing’s Future, **DiscoverNursing.com** features a searchable database of financial aid opportunities. <http://www.discovernursing.com/scholarship-search>.
- The **Health Workforce Information Center** includes a special section on funding opportunities for all health professions, including nursing. <http://www.healthworkforceinfo.org/funding>.
- **MinorityNurse.com** maintains a listing of scholarship and fellowship money for students from diverse backgrounds, including opportunities to fund doctoral study. <http://www.minoritynurse.com/scholarships>.
- **ExploreHealthCareers.org** provides easy access to students seeking information about health careers, including a searchable directory of funding opportunities. <http://www.explorehealthcareers.org/en/Field.6.aspx>.
- Several general interest **scholarship search engines** are available on the Web and may include opportunities for doctoral nursing students. <http://www.finaid.com> and <http://www.fastweb.com>.

For additional links to other financial aid resources for doctoral nursing students, see AACN’s Financial Aid and Scholarship Resource found at: <http://www.aacn.nche.edu/Education/financialaid.htm>.

Source: Adapted from Funding Resources for Future Nurse Educators, <http://www.aacn.nche.edu/media-relations/fact-sheets/funding-resources>



# Part IX: Variables that Impact Doctoral School Success

## Section One: Introduction

As you consider applying to doctoral school, you should assess your support systems. According to Smith & Delmore (2007) evaluating a personal support system includes examining your family support, peer support, and the likelihood that you will become part of a study support or a peer group.

Part of a support system assessment includes seeking answers to the following questions:

- Do I have healthy personal and professional relationships?
- Am I maintaining a healthy lifestyle (proper exercise, rest, nutrition, and sleep)?
- Am I spending an adequate amount of time on my studies to ensure academic success?
- Am I in tune with my feelings (stress, feelings of being overwhelmed)?
- Do I have a safe place or peer support group to share my concerns regarding school, family, or work/life balance?

## Section Two: Variables That Impact Doctoral School Success

- **Personal Support:** It is easier to attend doctoral school when you feel supported by family and friends. When considering enrollment in doctoral school, it is important to evaluate the level of support you can expect during this new journey from the members of your personal network. Enrolling in doctoral school is an enormous commitment of time, and you may feel pressures from family or friends as a result. Ensuring a strong support system prior to enrollment in doctoral study may lessen the burden experienced with competing family, school, or work priorities. Students supported by friends and family have more positive feelings about entering doctoral school and more positive outcomes during the course of study.
- **Peer Support and/or Study Group:** Once enrolled it is important that you find a peer support or study group. Forming peer support and study groups have been found to help ease the stress associated with balancing these activities, in addition to helping keep the student on track with the doctoral coursework (Smith & Delmore, 2007).
- **Healthy Life Balance:** Your faculty advisor or mentor can help to find resources for maintaining a healthy life balance including techniques to manage stress and time.
- **Housing:** If you are moving to a new location, a faculty advisor or the office of student support services can provide guidance to you regarding campus or community housing. Many universities will provide lists of housing options

including housing available for rent, lease, or sublease. Generally each campus will have a residential life office or other resources to guide students through this process.

- **Employment Assistance for Family Members:** If your spouse, significant other, or family is relocating with you, you are encouraged to seek assistance from the office of graduate education regarding potential employment opportunities for your spouse or significant other, if needed.
- **School Age Children:** If school age children are moving with you, the university may be instrumental in offering information about the local school districts.
- **Student Organizations:** Most universities sponsor graduate student organizations which are intellectual, cultural, multicultural, social, or focused on a special interest that appeal to graduate students across all programs of study. Engaging in these organizational activities with other graduate and professional students in the university helps students expand their frame of reference and offers the opportunity to meet others from diverse disciplines who may be interested in the same research area. It's a good idea to carefully review the website of each university you may be interested in applying to in order to ascertain if there are student organizations that appeal to you and can assist you in formulating a healthy work/life balance.
- **Social Activities:** Many universities provide a graduate lounge or a campus hub for doctoral students to gather, drink coffee, and engage in social and academic discussion. The opportunity to network and become part of a group of students who support each other during doctoral study is crucial. Many students considering application to several doctoral programs will ask for the email address and permission to contact a current student to find out what opportunities exist for social activities with the university under consideration. Staff members and/or admissions officers usually are eager to assist applicants and guide them to information regarding social activities both within the university and within the local and regional area in proximity to the university.

**Good Luck! Have Fun and Enjoy Your Journey!**

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# Appendix

## Applying to Doctoral School (The Checklist)

Date	Application Activity	Status—Yes/No
Spring of Previous Year	Schedule and complete required admission tests	
	TOEFL Scores (if applicable)	
Early September	Approach faculty members/professional colleagues to submit letters of recommendation	
September/October	Compose personal essay for each school to which application will be made. Request edit/review from faculty member and/or career center.	
October/November	Request transcripts be sent by registrar	
October/November	Complete application form(s) by posted deadline	
December	List of questions for Interview	
February	Request information on financial aid/fellowship/teaching/research assistantship from each school applied to	
March	Investigate housing options	
March	Follow-up with schools you have not heard from and make sure you have all needed information to make the final decision.	
April	Send thank you notes those who assisted you in the process, supplied letters or reference, or advised you and inform them of your success and chosen school.	

## Other Resources

There are many other resources readily available to you as you contemplate a doctoral degree:

- AACN Nursing Program Search <http://www.aacn.nche.edu/students/nursing-program-search>
- AACN Nursing Education Programs <http://www.aacn.nche.edu/education-resources/nursing-education-programs>
- AACN Your Guide To Nursing Graduate Programs <http://www.aacn.nche.edu/publications/brochures/GradStudentsBrochure.pdf>
- About.com—Graduate School <http://gradschool.about.com/od/transitions/a/Graduate-School-Vs-College-You-LL-Need-Different-Study-Skills.htm>
- ETS GRE website [https://www.ets.org/gre/revised\\_general/about/content](https://www.ets.org/gre/revised_general/about/content)
- Five Qualities Required To Be A Scientist <http://www.mikebrotherton.com/2007/11/05/five-qualities-required-to-be-a-scientist>
- Idealist <http://www.idealists.org/info/GradEducation/Resources/Preparing>
- Peterson’s Grad School Bound <http://www.petersons.com/graduate-schools.aspx>
- Peterson’s Guide to Nursing Programs <https://www.aacn.nche.edu/publications/peterson’s-guide>
- The 10 Most Important Qualities of the Ideal Graduate Research Candidate <http://kamrul-important.blogspot.com/2010/02/10-most-important-qualities-of-ideal.html>
- Three qualities of successful PhD students: Perseverance, tenacity, and cogency <http://matt.might.net/articles/successful-phd-students>

# Acknowledgments

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