

Local Learning Institutions Lead the Way in *Nursing Doctorate Programs*



When observers cast their gaze toward the future of nursing, they see the evolving doctorate of nursing profession (DNP) degree as playing a role in the advancement of both the profession and individuals' careers. The relatively new DNP degree is a practice-focused doctorate. It places students into a rigorous program that ultimately provides them with skills and knowledge enabling them to advance to the highest levels of practice.

Currently, 29 DNP programs have been established throughout the nation, and many more are in development. It's anticipated that, along with the research-focused PhD degree, the practice-focused DNP will become the standard for the profession's terminal degrees. Indeed, the American Association of Colleges of Nursing has set forth a goal: to see advanced practice nurses (APNs) doctorally prepared by 2015. The goal addresses the need for APNs throughout all healthcare settings, and it's expected that the DNP will develop new leaders in the areas of clinical practice and research, as well as administration and education.

The Delaware Valley has proven to be a hub, as regional academic institutions have placed themselves at the vanguard of the emerging trend. Each of the following institutions has developed doctoral programs with distinctive elements. Though admission standards are strict, these programs are geared toward both full- and part-time students — a benefit to working nurses.

Drexel's DrNP Degree: Focus on Clinical Research

In September 2005, Drexel University became the tri-state region's first institution

to offer a nursing doctoral program. Drexel offers a DrNP program, a significant distinction. "While the DNP doesn't require a dissertation, the DrNP does," explains H. Michael Dreher, DNSc, RN, Drexel's director of Doctoral Nursing Programs.

Drexel's is only the second DrNP program established in the United States (Columbia University was the first). However, Drexel's is the first-ever clinical research DrNP developed. Required dissertations focus on clinical nursing practice and are structured to be completed in one year and to generate an evidence base.

Also, the Drexel DrNP, modeled along the lines of the Doctor of Public Health, is a "hybrid" program. "We combine traditional practice and academic research doctorates," explains Dreher. "Currently, we're the only school that does this."

The result of five years of planning and development that focused on national trends in doctoral nursing education, Drexel's DrNP degree model includes four tracks: practitioner, educator, clinical scientist and clinical executive. As the degree combines practice-focused doctoral education, practical clinical research and scholarship, graduates may make themselves much more attractive to employers in hospitals and institutions.

"The degree provides them with clinical research skills, which are incredibly important," says Dreher. "Magnet hospitals now seek doctorally prepared clinicians who can both evaluate and oversee the conduct of research. That is a major distinction between the DNP and the DrNP. A DNP graduate is perceived as someone who can disseminate and evaluate research. But our graduates also oversee the conduct of research."

Most students who enter the DrNP program have an MSN degree, but that's not required, says Dreher. "We do allow students to enter with a non-nursing master's degree," he says. "Also, we've started a BSN-to-DrNP program that doesn't require a master's. However, it does take longer to complete."

The post-master's requires 48 quarter credit hours. The BSN-to-DrNP requires 90 credit hours, he notes.

Rutgers: Blended Format

Rutgers began offering this past January a DNP program designed to instill in graduates the knowledge and skills necessary to assume leadership roles in various settings including clinical, educational and organizational.

The two-year, 41-credit, post-master's DNP program includes theoretical courses, a clinical residency, and the development of a practice portfolio. It features an online and blended learning format — an integration of online and in-class learning. Nursing courses are offered online with synchronous (online and/or in-person meetings) and asynchronous (online learning) elements. Required epidemiology and healthcare management courses may be taken in class at Rutgers or, upon approval, at another university.

While the Rutgers DNP program doesn't require a dissertation, graduates have to complete a "capstone" project, which leads to a potentially publishable clinical paper. "For their capstone course, students must devise a plan to either develop a program, a different avenue of providing care or an innovative way of addressing organizational elements," says Wendy Nehring, RN, PhD, FAAN, associate dean for Academic Affairs and director of the Graduate Program at Rutgers, The State

University of New Jersey, College of Nursing. "Further, they must develop, implement and evaluate the plans. The degree includes set courses, but the capstone courses and residency are individualized for and by the student." The set coursework, which includes clinical and administrative tracks, is delivered in a blended format, which is similar to a PhD program in that it integrates both online and in-class learning, says Nehring.

Requirements include a baccalaureate and master's degree; satisfactory grade-point average (3.2 or higher) in master's level courses; satisfactory Graduate Record Examination scores; submission of materials such as registered nurse licensure; an essay that describes the applicant's goals for doctoral study as well as career goals; curriculum vitae; two scholarly papers; letters of reference; and transcripts.

Jefferson: Target Progressive Professional Development

Philadelphia's Thomas Jefferson University will begin offering in September a DNP degree that essentially expands its continuum of educational opportunities for nurses offered by the Jefferson School of Nursing, Jefferson College of Health Professions.

"When we looked at the direction the profession is taking, in moving toward creating a larger cadre of doctorally prepared nurses, we thought it was natural for us to develop our own program, because so many of our graduates move on to the doctoral level," says Mary Schaal, RN, EdD, professor and dean of the Jefferson School of Nursing. "Also, all of our current programs are structured toward progressive professional development."

The main differentiator from other DNP programs, Schaal believes, is the educational environment Jefferson offers. "We have a rich, dynamic environment in terms of edu-

ational and clinical opportunities. Students can get involved in the most up-to-date research and the application of that research. They'll work with the teams that are creating the latest interventions," she notes.

Also, as an academic health center, Jefferson provides its doctoral students an inter-professional educational experience that includes a combination of online and in-class courses. When its DNP program is up and running, students can take core courses

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(e.g., health policy, biostatistics, organizational change, advancements in healthcare) with students from Jefferson Medical College, Jefferson College of Graduate Studies and other disciplines within Jefferson College of Health Professions.

In addition, students will acquire their advanced education in a community of clinicians, researchers and educators, where they'll have access to world-class facilities. "This will give our program a different flavor than a program housed in a school that's part of a university that includes a nursing program," Schall adds.

DNP students will be required to complete three practica that include a doctoral project and promote application of knowledge gained in all of the courses. Each student works with two mentors to develop an individualized practicum plan that will include competencies, content, and practicum experiences needed for clinical practice leadership or systems/organizational leadership, according to the school.

As with other institutions, admission into the Jefferson DNP is highly competitive. Applicants must have a cumulative GPA of 3.2 in a program resulting in the award of a master's degree in nursing. Also, applicants must submit transcripts for all undergraduate and graduate study; references; and an essay that outlines career and educational goals, objectives and area of interest. Each applicant must provide a portfolio with work samples that best reflect experience and education, as well as a copy of his /her current RN license, CRNP license (if applicable), specialty certification (if applicable) and curriculum vitae.

Conclusion

More than 100 doctoral programs are in the planning stages across the country, says

Drexel's Dreher. Expect to see the DNP become firmly entrenched in the profession. ■

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For More Info

■ Drexel University

www.drexel.edu/cnhp/drnp_program/about.asp

■ Rutgers

http://nursing.rutgers.edu/prospective_students/academic_programs/doctor_of_nursing_practice

■ Thomas Jefferson

www.jefferson.edu/JCHP/nursing/dpn.cfm and www.jefferson.edu/JCHP/nursing/DNPapproved.cfm

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