



A Guide for Nurses: Education, Lifelong Learning, and Your Career

Nursing can be a fulfilling career that allows you to make a difference in the lives of many. Recently, U.S. News & World Report ranked being a Registered Nurse (RN) as [#18 on their 100 Best Jobs list](#). It's also a career with many professional opportunities, with the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) predicting a [15% employment growth for RNs between 2016 and 2026](#) (over 437,000 new RN positions). As a nurse, pursuing lifelong learning – from degree programs to continuing education opportunities – will be essential to providing top-quality care and continuing your growth within the field.

In this guide, we explore how various degree programs for nurses can help develop your skills and enhance your nursing career, starting with RN to BSN programs and MSN programs, and moving all the way up to postgraduate certificate and doctoral degrees in nursing.



RN to BSN Programs: Building a Strong Foundation

THE VALUE OF A BSN IN YOUR NURSING CAREER

In 2016, the American Association of Colleges of Nursing ([AACN](#)) found that over 97% of organizations strongly prefer hiring nurses with a Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN). Of those surveyed, 54% only hire RNs with a BSN. A BSN is also commonly required for moving beyond basic clinical positions to higher-paid, mid-level administration, research, teaching, or specialized nursing roles. This holds true in the Veterans Administration – the largest U.S. employer of RNs – where nurses [cannot be promoted](#) out of entry-level jobs without a BSN.

Thus, the biggest potential increase in salary for BSN-prepared nurses can come with the increased opportunities for advancement over the course of your career. Of course, as with all occupations, RN earnings vary by experience, workplace, responsibility, performance, and region. For salary data for your state, regional area, or industry (hospital, home health, nursing care facility, etc.), [see information from the BLS here](#).*

So why do organizations want to hire and promote BSN-prepared nurses? Education prepares nurses for the increasing complexity of today's healthcare environment, and [research shows](#) that RNs with higher education see improved clinical outcomes, including lower mortality rates and fewer medication errors.

A DIRECT PATH FROM RN TO BSN

Many nursing schools offer RN to BSN programs that allow RNs to build on prior nursing education and RN experience. Compared to associate degree and diploma nursing programs, RN to BSN programs offer a broader curriculum useful in diverse patient care settings and cases. In addition, RN to BSN programs can help you enhance the communication, critical thinking, prioritization, and management skills beneficial for interacting with patients and colleagues. Classes can also expand your knowledge in areas like nursing research, community health, physical assessment, legal and ethical issues in nursing, and illness and disease management across healthcare settings.

MSN Programs: Pursuing Professional Specialties

THE VALUE OF MSN AND RN TO MSN PROGRAMS

Master of Science in Nursing (MSN) programs – and RN to MSN programs – can prepare you for advanced roles in direct and indirect patient care by helping you strengthen your nursing skills and hone in on the specialization of your choice. Below, we review some popular areas pursued by MSN-prepared nurses.

NURSE PRACTITIONER CAREERS AND EDUCATION

Nurse Practitioners (NPs) provide initial, ongoing, and comprehensive patient-centered care, including conducting physical exams and diagnosing, treating, and managing various health conditions. In addition to disease management, NPs work to educate patients on healthy living and develop personalized health-promotion and disease-prevention strategies. With the [BLS predicting a 36% employment growth](#) for NPs by 2026 (compared to a 7% average across all occupations), NPs are important primary and specialty-care providers, particularly in medically underserved inner cities and rural areas.

Salary data presented by state, regional area, and industry (physician offices, hospitals, outpatient care centers, etc.) is collected and made [available by the BLS here](#).*

To become an NP, RNs must complete a master's level program or higher and acquire national certification. NP graduate and postgraduate programs teach advanced clinical knowledge and include practicum courses that prepare RNs to serve in specialty areas, such as family practice, pediatrics, gerontology, and women's health.

NURSE INFORMATICS CAREERS AND EDUCATION

The rise of electronic medical records and healthcare technology has led to a need for Nurse Informaticists who combine nursing skills with information management knowledge to improve nursing efficiency, decision-making, and patient care. Nurse Informaticists may plan, manage, and evaluate healthcare information systems and processes as well as collect and analyze patient data. As trusted experts, Nurse Informaticists also conduct training on using these systems.

Professionals from the mid-Atlantic and Pacific regions tended to report higher salaries, as did those who were certified in nursing informatics and those who had a master's or PhD degree. [See more detailed salary information and data here](#).*

Master's programs in nursing informatics include information technology science and infrastructure courses alongside courses in nursing science and practice. Graduate projects and practicum courses may focus on topics like project and database management.



NURSING ADMINISTRATION CAREERS AND EDUCATION

Whether running a small team of nurses or an entire health system, Nurse Administrators are critical to managing the RN workforce, with the [BLS predicting](#) a 20% employment growth for medical and health services managers by 2026. In their daily work, Nurse Administrators recruit and supervise nursing staff, coordinate workflows, make policy and financial decisions, promote improvements in patient care, and support interactions between doctors, nurses, and patients. Salary data broken down by state, regional area, and industry (hospitals, physician offices, outpatient care centers, etc.) is [collected by the BLS and presented here](#).*

MSN programs with a nursing administration specialization may include courses on human resources management, project management, leadership, team building, information technology infrastructure, and financial management. To further develop leadership skills, some nurses interested in this specialty pursue a Doctor of Nursing Practice after earning their MSN.

NURSE EDUCATOR CAREERS AND EDUCATION

Working in schools, hospitals, and other institutions, Nurse Educators combine clinical expertise with a passion for teaching. With an ongoing [shortage of nursing faculty](#), Nurse Educators play a pivotal role in mentoring future generations of nurses as well as supporting practicing clinicians in expanding their skills. Nurse Educators may develop, evaluate, and revise curricula as well as conduct, publish, and present research, possibly influencing public or organizational policy.

According to the AACN, Nurse Educators with an MSN teach mostly in practice settings or serve as clinical preceptors, staff development educators, or faculty in associate degree and allied nursing programs. MSN degree programs focusing on nursing education may include courses in instructional method and design, pedagogy, curriculum, and learning assessment strategies, as well as practicum courses giving you experience in real educational settings. Nurses interested in becoming full-time senior faculty at four-year colleges and universities are encouraged to pursue doctoral degrees after earning an MSN.



TWO PATHWAYS FOR EARNING YOUR MSN

Many MSN programs are designed for nurses continuing their education after previously earning a BSN. However, you don't always need a BSN to pursue an MSN. RNs who know they want to work in a specialty requiring a master's degree can go straight into an RN to MSN program. RN to MSN programs offer a streamlined, intensive way to earn both a BSN and MSN together, with fewer total classes than if you completed a BSN and MSN separately. In these programs, the BSN-level content is taught first, so that you progress into graduate courses only after mastering basic nursing fundamentals.

Postgraduate Certificates: Shifting Your Focus in Nursing

WHAT TO EXPECT IN A POSTGRADUATE CERTIFICATE PROGRAM

For MSN-prepared nurses who wish to expand their skill set or change specializations entirely, postgraduate certificates in nursing can help you gain additional expertise and knowledge in the area you're passionate about – without the time and cost investment of completing another master's degree.

Postgraduate certificate programs offer a mix of classroom learning and on-site practicum experiences in a variety of clinical and nonclinical nursing specializations, similar to the specializations available for MSN students. For example, South University's postgraduate certificate programs can prepare you for a role as a Family Nurse Practitioner, Adult-Gerontology Primary Care Nurse Practitioner, or Nurse Educator. Postgraduate certificate programs may also include a capstone project that requires you to synthesize and apply the advanced knowledge and research skills acquired throughout the program.



Doctoral Nursing Degrees: Establishing Nursing Leadership

ACHIEVING EXCELLENCE IN CLINICAL PRACTICE: DOCTOR OF NURSING PRACTICE (DNP)

If you aspire to reach the top of the clinical nursing career ladder, the Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) may be right for you. (If you're more interested in devoting your time to nursing research rather than clinical practice, you might prefer a research-focused nursing PhD program instead.) Among the highest nursing degrees available, the DNP is designed for those who want to be head nurses, managers, or otherwise exhibit top-tier expertise and leadership in clinical practice. DNP programs can give nurses the advanced knowledge and skills that they need to pursue upper management positions in clinics, hospitals, and other healthcare institutions.

A DNP typically takes two to five years to complete. During that time, through coursework, projects, and advanced field experiences, students can learn about evidence-based practices, scaling information technology systems, applying leadership skills in nursing, and clinical best practices for complex patient care scenarios, risk reduction, health promotion, and more. When nurse researchers propose new ideas, nurses with a DNP are often the ones leading the implementation of these innovations in clinical practice. In addition, clinical nursing leaders can do a lot to help patients, and [many advanced practice nurses choose to further refine their skills in a DNP](#) program.



Discover South University's Degree Programs, Designed for Working Nurses

Whether you're considering a BSN, MSN, DNP, or postgraduate certificate, South University has you covered. Led by faculty with professional nursing experience,** our campus and online nursing programs can help you develop the knowledge, clinical proficiency, and experience to become a more confident and skilled healthcare professional.

Our programs are built for working nurses and designed so that you can complete your degree without putting your career on hold. You can earn your degree online, allowing you to pursue your degree on your time. Or study at one of our 11 campus locations where you can find flexible scheduling and evening and weekend options. Our transfer-of-credit policies*** are also designed to make the most of the effort you've already put into your education, and, for RN to BSN and RN to MSN programs, some students may be eligible for a full block transfer of credits from their associate's degree or diploma in nursing.

Learn about our programs at SouthUniversity.edu
or by contacting 888.444.3404.

*South University does not guarantee employment or any particular level of compensation following graduation.

**Credentials and experience levels vary by faculty and instructors.

***Transfer credit is evaluated on a case-by-case basis. South University offers no guarantee that credit earned at another institution will be accepted into a program of study offered by South University.

Programs, credential levels, technology, and scheduling options vary by school and are subject to change. Not all online programs are available to residents of all U.S. states. Administrative office: South University, 709 Mall Boulevard, Savannah, GA 31406-4805. ©2019 South University. All rights reserved. Our email address is materialsreview@southuniversity.edu.

See SUproms.info for program duration, tuition, fees and other costs, median debt, salary data, alumni success, and other important info.