Advanced Practice:

Once you become a registered nurse (RN), you may consider the option of pursuing advanced practice nursing. Benefits of obtaining an advanced degree include a change in financial status, flexibility, and increased autonomy. With certain career options, like that of nurse practitioner (NP) and clinical nurse specialist (CNS), you may even establish a private practice depending upon credentialing and the individual state nurse practice acts.
The route to these employment opportunities begins with graduate school. There are general academic admission requirements that many colleges and universities share, but there are also specific requirements depending on the specific field you choose. Several schools also feature accelerated study programs (RN-to-Masters and RN-to-doctorate). The options of both traditional and online programs of study may also allow more students to take advantage of the opportunity to return to school or continue on with their education.

The completion of a master’s degree from an accredited program is essential for advanced practice nursing regardless of the type of specialty program chosen. Master’s degree-prepared nurses are also in greater demand as nurses provide more preventive and primary care to patients, or seek preparation for positions in administration or other leadership areas (Clifford, 2003). While the need and demand for nurses continues, the same need and demand exists for nurse researchers and for doctorally-prepared nursing faculty. Nursing enrollment in research-focused doctoral programs increased by 7.3% to a total of 3,439 (AACN, 2005). Nurse researchers are critical to advancing the science of nursing, and to the future of nursing programs.
Advanced Practice Nursing: An Overview

The role of the advanced practice nurse is determined by the type of specialty field chosen. There are standards of care which govern the practice of advanced practice nurses set by their professional organizations. Additionally, individual state laws outline the scope of advanced practice within the nurse practice statute of each state. Each state also grants licensure for advanced practice nurses to enable them to practice. In all states, the nurse must maintain a current registered nurse license for the state. An advanced practice nurse’s organization or institution will outline the scope of practice for the advanced practice nurse in that environment.

Career Advancement

As you advance in your bedside career, you may realize that you enjoy the challenges of hiring new staff, staffing your unit appropriately, establishing a unit budget, and writing policy. Your goal reaching your professional goal within the upper levels of nursing management. Your goal may be to join other leaders within the realms of the top administration of a facility. In either case, obtaining an advanced degree may assist you in reaching your professional goal within the upper levels of nursing management.

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Increased Income

With an advanced degree, the opportunity for a salary raise increases. For example, the annual income of advanced practice nurses can vary widely depending on geographic location (urban or rural), type of practice (clinic, acute care hospital, or private practice) and specialty (family, pediatric, or psychiatric). Ten years ago, the average salary for a nurse practitioner was $53,000 but increased to an average of $71,000 in 2001 (Pulcini, Vampola, & Ward, 2002). A salary survey of nurse leaders’ earnings showed that for nurses with a BSN, the average salary was $64,890 in 2004 and $69,040 in 2005. The figures increased to $84,810 in 2004 and $80,780 in 2005 for those with a master’s degree in nursing (Hader, 2005). The average for those with a doctorate was $97,570. For the certified nurse anesthetist (CRNA), the median annual income was approximately $105,000 (Bettin, 2003).

Flexibility

Depending on the field you choose, full-time or part-time employment is available. For example, in addition to my position as a full-time nursing faculty member, I also work per diem as a psychiatric mental health nurse practitioner in an acute care hospital. I work on the behavioral units providing history and physicals on individuals admitted to the hospital for mental health and chemical dependency care, as well as in the intensive outpatient mental health and chemical dependency program. On weekends, I conduct psychiatric inpatient rounds, meeting with patients individually to review their care plan and medication regimen, order pertinent lab tests, and consult with the psychiatrist on call or the medical provider for medical illnesses that may be co-occurring. Both jobs allow me the flexibility to function in two very different roles.

Autonomy

One benefit of pursuing an advanced degree is the possibility of establishing an independent practice. Depending upon the state, the option to work independently in private practice or as a consultant is available as a psychiatric mental health nurse practitioner (PMHNP), NP, and CNS. As a consultant, you offer your services to other health care professionals requesting your expert knowledge to assist them in the care of a client. Physicians or staff from long-term care facilities often request the services of either family nurse practitioners or psychiatric mental health nurse practitioners in the care of their residents. This care is focused upon allowing the resident patient to be evaluated, diagnosed, and treated within the facility to prevent the interruption of care or to prevent needless hospitalization of the resident.

Academic Requirements

Keep in mind that to apply for admission to graduate school, you must have your bachelor’s degree in nursing as well as a current registered nurse license (or eligibility to test for the registered nurse exam) in the state in which you apply. An internet search is a good way to begin your research on an advanced degree education. There are many programs of study available throughout the United States and each college or university will have its own specific admission requirements. Some schools may require you to have recent experience in nursing assessment and history taking skill or you may need to complete a total health assessment course (University of Southern Maine, 2006).

Once you are accepted into the program of your choice, you may anticipate a minimum two-year full-time course of study. This full-time course work will include lecture classes, laboratory time, and clinical time. The actual length of the pro-
or psychiatric-mental health nurse practitioners, for example, may have a limited number of graduate school locations or openings in the programs accepting new students available.

There are a couple of learning formats available should you decide to attend graduate school. The first option is the traditional educational format that includes attending lecture and laboratory classes on campus.

For individuals with family, employment, or geographical constraints, distance learning is another option.

There are also programs of study that streamline the process for those who have an associate’s degree and who want to pursue a master’s degree. These programs are referred to as RN-to-Masters programs (Washington State University, 2006) and allow you to complete your advanced degree at an accelerated pace.

If you desire to further your education beyond the master’s level, there are RN-to-doctorate programs available as well. These programs are designed as mentored graduate programs which terminate in a doctor of philosophy degree (Oregon Health Science University, 2006). The focus of the program is on research and teaching.

For a student with a first bachelor’s degree in a field other than nursing, and an associate’s degree in nursing licensed as an RN, there are alternate pathways to a Master’s degree in nursing. Washington State University, for example, provides an individualized review of the transcripts of courses completed in the original bachelor degree and recommends additional courses that the student must take including Professional Issues and Community Theory (Washington State University, 2006).

Certified Registered Nurse Anesthetist (CRNA).

Since the 1950s, nurse anesthetists have fought hard to establish their right to practice (Hamric, Spross and Hanson, 2005). Their battles include the ability to practice independently and to receive third party reimbursement. In most states, CRNAs can prescribe medications depending on the state, either independently or under physician supervision.

There is an increased need for certified nurse anesthetists. “Surgical and pain management services are expanding exponentially outside the traditional hospital setting, creating a growing demand for anesthesia care in ambulatory surgery centers and physician’s offices” (Bettin, 2003, p. 41). The job of the certified nurse anesthetist begins with forming a relationship with the patient in a pre-anesthesia meeting, continues through surgical procedures, and includes accompanying the patient to the recovery room. To become a CRNA, a bachelor’s degree is required and at least one year of experience in an acute care setting (Bettin, 2003). It can take 24-36 months to complete the additional work to complete a master’s degree and the clinical training experience and hours needed.

Certified Nurse Midwife.

There are Certified Midwives (CM) educated in midwifery only, but they are still certified according to the requirements of the American College of Nurse Midwives (ACNM). Certified Nurse Midwives (CNMs) have been recognized by the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists since 1971 (Hamric, Spross and Hanson, 2005). A CMN is an advanced practice nurse who specializes in providing prenatal and postpartum care as well as meeting the needs of a woman during childbirth. CNMs can practice in many different settings in their own private practice, or collaboratively with a physician and may practice in a hospital, clinic, birth centers or in the military.

Graduate School Options

While you are completing your bachelor’s degree, it is important to research the specialty that you are considering and the availability of the graduate schools offering that degree. Certain career options such as nurse-midwife, nurse-anesthetist,
In most states, CNMs can prescribe medications, either independently or under physician supervision.

Clinical Nurse Specialist

The clinical nurse specialist (CNS) designation exists for multiple nursing areas (diabetes management, adult health, adult psych mental health, child adolescent psych/mental health, gerontological, pediatric, public/community health) (ANCC, 2006). It is an advanced practice role with graduate preparation in health promotion and disease prevention, health care policy, ethics, role development, research and cultural diversity. “The clinical nurse specialist is a nurse, who through study and supervised clinical practice at the graduate level (masters or doctorate), has become expert in a defined area of knowledge and practice in a selected clinical area of nursing” (ANA, 1980, p. 23 as cited in Hamric, Spross and Hanson, 2005).

Clinical nurse specialists in intensive care, critical care, coronary care, emergency, neurology, oncology, medical-surgical, and pediatrics also provide various services frequently, in a hospital setting. Psychiatric clinical nurse specialists have been providing group, family and milieu therapy since the 1970’s, although psychiatric nurses have practiced for decades. In some states, in addition to therapy, CNS’s provide medication management through the ability to have prescriptive authority. Depending upon the state, this can be done independently or under physician supervision.

Certification for clinical nurse specialists is provided by the American Nurses Credentialing Center (ANCC, 2006). Also, certain specialty organizations, such the Oncology Nursing Society, provide certification exams. Proof of continuing education is also required for recertification.

Nurse Practitioners

To practice as a nurse practitioner, you must complete an accredited graduate program, obtain national certification, and complete a specified number of clinical practice hours in practicum and internship. Overall, the role of the nurse practitioner involves assessment, diagnosis, and treatment of individuals within the area of their specialty. The scope of practice may vary in individual states. In some states, nurse practitioners have prescriptive authority and medication management is provided. Depending upon the state, this can be done independently or under physician supervision. As an advanced practice nurse, NP’s are also involved with patient and family education in disease prevention and management.

Nurse practitioners work in collaboration with other health care providers in a shared practice, in private practice, outpatient clinics, within a hospital setting, within health maintenance organizations, health departments, long-term care facilities, (continued on p.56)
and schools, in both urban and rural settings. Their roles vary according to specialty, and include primary care, acute care, family, neonatal, adult psychiatric mental health, and child and adolescent mental health.

Nurse Educator

The American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) reports that there is a shortage of full-time master’s and doctorally prepared nursing faculty (2003). In a special survey of 220 schools conducted by AACN in 2000, there was a 7.4% vacancy rate in those schools (AACN, 2003). Faculty age, and corresponding pending retirements of faculty members as well as an inadequate pool of younger faculty for replacement are some of the contributing factors cited for this shortage (AACN, 2003). There has been a downward trend of students majoring in nursing education since 1993.

I find my role of a full-time faculty member in an undergraduate nursing program to be both challenging and inspiring. The population of students is diverse and reflects students with many talents, strengths, and weaknesses. As a faculty member you may be asked to be an advisor to students and assist them in tracking their progress through the nursing program and ensure that they meet the program requirements for graduation. You may also act as a resource for referral or remediation to overcome obstacles of meeting the challenges of nursing school classes. Students require the most up-to-date information and technology as they pursue degrees so that they may be competitive in the employment market.

The need to remain current in evidence-based practice stimulates you as a faculty member to remain astride of the latest changes and technology. As a faculty member, you might prepare lectures on the theory portions of a nursing education, or provide a more hands-on format in practice laboratories. You may also spend time providing clinical oversight in a variety of clinical settings such as acute care hospitals, clinics, long-term care facilities or home health, or teach a variety of courses throughout the program of study. Additionally, day-to-day faculty commitments may include representation on committees for the college or university or in your nursing department. You will also be required to grade a variety of homework assignments or formal papers related to the course work.

Doctor of Nursing Practice

A new credential of doctor of nursing practice has been proposed by the AACN as the new standard for the advanced practice nurse (2006). The institution of this new designation is proposed by the year 2015 for all nurse anesthetists, nurse practitioners, clinical nurse specialists, and nurse midwives. The goal of this proposal is to prepare expert practitioners in a non-research clinical doctorate. Several reasons have been postulated for this move. Patients in health care today have more complex needs that may require a higher level of scientific knowledge for excellent nursing care. There is also a rapid expansion of medical knowledge occurring. Simultaneously, there is a move to increasing the educational preparation of other health professionals such as medicine (MD), pharmacy (PharmD), dentistry (DDS) psychology (PsyD), physical therapy (DPT) and audiology (AudD). As discussed previously, there is currently a shortage of doctorally prepared nursing faculty. This new designation will not alter the scope of practice for Advanced Practice Nurses as their scope of practice will still be outlined by the State Board of Nursing under each Nurse Practice Act.

According to the AACN (2006), the Doctorate of Nursing Practice is designed for individuals in direct clinical practice and areas that support clinical practice, administration, organizational management, and policy

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making. It offers an alternative to the research-focused doctoral program as well as offering advanced education in evidenced-based practice, quality improvement, and systems theory that assist the advanced practice nurse with positions in healthcare today.

The increasing need for advanced practice nurses is projected to continue. There are many different employment opportunities available to fit the personalities, skills, and desires of registered nurses. There are new opportunities being developed such as the doctor of nursing practice that allow you to choose between a more research-based focus or a clinically based focus for your advanced degree.

The benefits of an advanced degree such as financial improvement, flexibility, and creativity as well as autonomy may encourage you to return to school. The diversity of program formats, both traditional on-campus and online classes may increase the opportunities for nurses to return to school. To meet your educational goals, the process of applying to graduate school and the options of attending graduate school have been streamlined with the use of the internet. Pursuing a graduate education, although time-consuming and challenging, is a worthwhile venture to undertake.

References


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