

Find the best route to your career destination

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NURSES can take many different professional-development routes to get to their ultimate career destination. Before you decide which route to take—or whether to take a new route at all—you'll need to consider many factors. Do you know exactly what you want to do? Is this the right time for you to alter your journey? Do you have the support you'll need? If your choice means you'll need to get more education, do you have access to the right academic program? If, on the other hand, returning to school isn't an option, what nonacademic career destinations are desirable and available? To help determine which professional development route to take, see *Career self-assessment quiz*.

Going the academic route

For many nurses, going back to school is desirable or even required.

Bachelor's degree

Today's nurses need more skills and preparation to care for patients with complex problems, so nurses with bachelor's degrees have become more desirable to employers. The current trend is for entry-level nurses to hold bachelor's degrees; nurses with associate degrees are being encouraged to return to school.

Master's degrees

A master's degree in nursing allows nurses to broaden their scope and take on more advanced roles. These degrees include master of science in nursing (MSN), master of nursing (MN), and master of arts in nursing (MA). Nurses also may obtain master's degrees in non-nursing areas, such as master of business administration and master in education.

Doctoral degrees

Doctoral degrees in nursing include the following:

- *Doctor of philosophy (PhD)*. Deemed the research doctorate, it prepares graduates to be nurse scientists, researchers, or educators.
- *Doctor of nursing practice (DNP)*. This degree prepares nurses with advanced skills for an aggregate, systems, or organizational focus related to direct practice.
- *Doctor of education (EdD)*. This role focuses on nursing education.

The authors help you decide where you want to go and how to get there.

Advanced nursing practice and advanced practice RN roles

The two main categories of advanced practice roles are advanced nursing practice (ANP) nurses and advanced practice registered nurses (APRN). ANP nurses perform nursing interventions that influence healthcare outcomes for individuals or populations. APRNs, in contrast, have a high level of expertise in delivering direct care to individuals, families, or communities within a specialized clinical area of nursing.

Career self-assessment quiz

This self-assessment quiz can help you determine which professional-development route is right for you and what your next steps should be.

1. Do you have a fairly definite career goal?

Yes: Go to 2.

No: Seek more information.

Not sure: Get more information.

2. Do you have tangible support to pursue an academic degree?

Yes: Go to 3.

No: Devise a plan to develop a support network.

Not sure: Explore childcare or caregiver support options.

3. Is this the right time for you to pursue a degree?

Yes: Go to 4.

No: Devise a plan to free up the time; set priorities.

Not sure: Get more information.

4. Can you afford to pursue a degree?

Yes: Go to 5.

No: Devise a plan to create more income, pursue nonacademic options, or wait.

Not sure: Review your financial situation.

5. Can you afford not to pursue an academic degree?

Yes: I can delay it: Consider other factors.

No: I can't or shouldn't delay it: Go to 6.

6. Do you have access to an academic program?

Yes: Apply to the program.

No: Locate one; consider online programs.

Not sure: Get more information.



ANP roles include nurse educator, nurse administrator or nurse manager, nurse researcher, and clinical nurse leader (CNL).

- *Nurse educators* may serve as clinical-based educators or nursing faculty members. Clinical-based educators provide education to staff or patients. The future for nurse educators is bright: The nursing shortage has brought a growing need for academic educators.
- *Nurse administrators* and *nurse managers* work at many levels within healthcare systems. At all levels of administration and management, the requirement for advanced degrees is increasing.
- *Nurse researchers* are in demand because of the emphasis on evidence-based practice and the need to create new nursing knowledge and discover methods to improve quality and care outcomes.
- The emerging *CNL* role is likely to grow over time. Currently, CNLs work at the unit level and are considered clinical process experts. They commonly assist with management functions as well.

Four APRN roles exist—nurse practitioner, clinical nurse specialist, nurse anesthetist, and nurse midwife. Each role has a different focus. Salaries are competitive and rising. The job market and future for APRNs are bright.

“But I don’t want to (or can’t) go back to school”

Some nurses choose to develop professionally in ways that don’t involve academic coursework. Many options exist. Some might fit easily into your work life; others might take you to new venues along your professional-development route. (See *Other professional-development options*.)

Many nurses seeking professional development begin by becoming certified in a specialized clinical practice area. Certified nurses can contribute significantly to positive patient outcomes; many report increased job satisfaction.

For instance, in your current workplace, you could champion a particular initiative, such as skin care or fall prevention. Or you could choose a special population on your unit that particularly interests you (such as an ethnic group or the homeless) and become your unit’s expert in their care.

Beyond your own unit, you might prepare educational sessions for your facility, write articles for a facility-wide newsletter, or nominate peers for awards. You could become active in professional organizations, attend conferences, and bring back ideas to your unit.

Other professional-development options

Can’t go back to school right now? Consider the nonacademic professional-development options below.

- Get a certification in a clinical specialty.
- Apply for awards and honors through worksite or professional organizations.
- Develop leadership competencies by participating in local committees or professional organizations.
- Become a preceptor or mentor.
- Give presentations at conferences.
- Write and publish articles.
- Switch to a new clinical site.
- Contribute to a professional practice model or shared governance committee.
- Join an in-house research team.
- Become active in healthcare public policy.
- Develop expertise in the care and culture of a particular population in your nursing area.
- Become a unit champion in a specific practice area.
- Consider serving on a local board (such as a school board) or task force.
- Write editorials in your area of professional expertise for news outlets.
- Volunteer for health fairs, medical mission trips, and disaster relief.

Many professional organizations also offer career-development options, including guidance to strengthen leadership skills, write grants, give presentations, and influence public policy at the local, state, or national level. Mentors can provide valuable support in choosing a professional path, as well as in coaching for specific skills, such as writing for publication.

Your community may offer avenues for professional development, such as working in a local clinic and learning new skills useful for novel populations. You could be a key contributor to community wellness events by providing education and health assessments. Through networking, you could build relationships and be invited to serve on community task forces.

Travel small or large distances

As you make decisions about your career development, look around for professional colleagues whom you respect, and recruit them to serve as resources for you. Meet with them to discuss your personal and professional values, mission, dreams, and resources.

After you’ve pondered and researched your options, start traveling on your selected route. Travel small—or perhaps bold—distances and give yourself the freedom to change your mind along the way. Eventually, you’ll find the best route to the career destination you seek. ★

Visit www.AmericanNurseToday.com for a list of selected references and information on academic degrees for nurses, advanced nursing practice roles, and advanced practice registered nurse roles.

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Academic degrees for nurses

This chart shows academic degree options for nurses, along with educational costs, time commitment, salary ranges, and job prospects.

Degree	Average educational costs	Time commitment	Salary range	Job prospects
Bachelor's degree in nursing for non-nurses with other bachelor's degrees	\$10,000 to \$15,000	18 months to 2 years full time	\$39,000 to \$71,000	Very good into the 2020s and beyond.
ASN-to-BSN degree	\$10,000	15 to 20 months part-time	\$39,000 to \$71,000	Very good. BSN gradually is becoming the minimum requirement for RN practice.
Master's degree in nursing	\$10,000 to \$20,000	18 months to 4 years	\$40,000 to \$100,000	Very good; useful across many settings in many roles.
Doctor of philosophy (PhD) in nursing (research-based)	\$20,000 to \$50,000	3 to 7 years	\$50,000 to \$100,000+	Very good. Research-based nurses with doctorates create new knowledge, advance evidence-based practice, and teach in academic settings.
Doctor of nursing practice (DNP; practice-based)	\$20,000 to \$50,000	1 to 6 years post-master's degree; 3 to 6 years post-BSN	\$40,000 to \$100,000+	Good to very good. Doctorally prepared advanced practice registered nurses and possibly advanced nursing practice nurses are needed for quality-improvement efforts, health policy development, healthcare leadership, and evidence-based practice implementation.
Doctor of education	\$20,000 to \$40,000	3 to 7 years	\$40,000 to \$100,000+	Fair to good. Needed in academia and other education positions.

ASN: Associate of Science in Nursing
BSN: Bachelor of Science in Nursing

Advanced nursing practice roles

The table below summarizes educational requirements, focus, salary ranges, and job prospects for advanced nursing practice roles.

Role	Focus	Education required	Salary range	Job prospects
Nurse educator (clinically based)	Uses educational methods to present current information in patient-care settings and communities	Bachelor's or master's degree in nursing	\$30,000 to \$75,000	Good, especially as educator with medical equipment or pharmaceutical company.
Nurse educator or faculty member	Uses educational methods to present current information in colleges and universities	Master's degree or doctorate	\$30,000 to \$100,000+	Excellent. Nursing shortage and aging of nursing faculty ensure long-term need for nurse faculty.
Manager or administrator	Coordinates use of human, financial, and technological resources to provide patient care	Master's degree or doctorate	\$40,000 to \$110,000	Good. Job responsibilities are increasing due to impact of healthcare reform on resources and demands, downsizing, and restructuring.
Nurse researcher	Uses the research process to create new knowledge and support its dissemination	Doctorate	\$40,000 to \$75,000	Good. Researcher will remain an important function, but role may be combined with others, such as director of nursing quality
Clinical nurse leader	Provides scientific, psychological, and technological knowledge in care of patients and families	Master's degree	\$45,000 to \$65,000	Varies. This emerging new role will see regional differences in use.

Advanced practice registered nurse roles

The table below summarizes advanced practice registered nurse roles, including education, focus, salary range, and job prospects.

Role	Focus	Education required	Salary range	Job prospects
Nurse practitioner	<i>In primary care:</i> Provides direct care for patients in acute, long-term, and community-based settings. <i>In acute-care:</i> Diagnoses and manages diseases and promotes health of patients with acute, critical, and complex chronic health conditions across the continuum of acute care services.	Master's degree or doctorate	\$40,000 to \$100,000+	Very good. Future trends favor primary care, specialty care, underserved populations, rural areas, geriatrics, health promotion, and community settings.
Clinical nurse specialist (CNS)	Promotes attainment of optimal patient-care outcomes and quality of care using evidence-based practice, and serves as expert clinician for a specialized area of nursing practice (such as a population, setting, type of care, or type of problem). CNS practice occurs across three spheres—patient/client, nurses/nursing practice, and organizations/systems.	Master's degree or doctorate	\$40,000 to \$100,000+	Very good. Future trends favor gerontology, health promotion, quality-improvement initiatives, patient-safety initiatives, evidence-based practice use, outcomes research, underserved populations, and rural and community settings.
Nurse anesthetist	Renders patients insensitive to pain with anesthetic agents and related drugs for procedures, including diagnostic, therapeutic, and surgical procedures	Master's degree or doctorate	\$40,000 to \$150,000+	Very good. Future trends favor chronic pain management, rural and underserved populations, and collaboration with anesthesiologists for best anesthesia practices.
Nurse midwife	Assesses, diagnoses, and treats women's health issues and complex responses of women during pregnancy, labor, childbirth, and postpartal period.	Master's degree or doctorate	\$40,000+	Very good. Future trends favor gynecologic care, infertility treatment, free-standing birth centers, and home birthing.