

Where Does the DNP Stand?

Since its inception, the Doctor of Nursing Practice degree has seen tremendous growth

By Catlin Nalley

RECENT YEARS have seen significant changes in nursing practice, including an ongoing push for a highly educated workforce.

With the 2010 release of the Institute of Medicine's (IOM) "The Future of Nursing: Leading Change, Advancing Health," report the nursing community has united to improve the state of nursing education. Among the issues addressed was the need to double the number of doctorally prepared nurses by 2020.

But even before this report, terminal nursing degrees were in the spotlight, specifically the Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP). "Practice doctorates prepare the expert clinicians who are focused on a very specialized area of nursing practice," Eileen Breslin, PhD, RN, FAAN, president, American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) previously told *ADVANCE*. "It is designed to help nurses reach the highest level of nursing practice and advance the discipline as a whole."

So, where does the DNP stand today?

Evolution of the Degree

Since its initiation more than 10 years ago, the DNP has seen tremendous growth. To date, 243 DNP programs are now enrolling students nationwide, and from 2012 to 2013 the number of DNP graduates increased from 1,858 to 2,443, AACN reports.

"Witnessing the growth of DNP programs and enrollment numbers is very exciting," said Shannon Reedy Idzik, DNP, CRNP, FAANP, director of the DNP Program, University of Maryland School of Nursing, Baltimore. "Initially there were some concerns that the DNP would decrease enrollments in PhD programs, but if anything we have seen the opposite to be true."

"The DNP has sparked a renewed interest in doctoral education among nurses, which is critical to both our profession and the

entire healthcare system," she continued.

The AACN has led the charge when it comes to implementing the DNP nationwide. In 2004, the AACN and its affiliated schools endorsed the "Position Statement on the Practice Doctorate in Nursing," which called for the education standards for advanced nursing practice to move from the master's degree to the doctorate-level by 2015.

A recent study, conducted by the RAND Corporation, examined the progress of this initiative. The results revealed "near universal agreement among nurse educators about the value of the DNP degree in preparing individuals for advanced nursing practice," according to AACN.

While the AACN has acknowledged that not all schools will be able to fully transition to the practice doctorate by this year, great strides continue to be made. And the nursing community's commitment to advancing education has never been stronger.

"AACN now recommends that all advance practice nurses be educated at the doctorate level, and I think that is a critical step for nursing and healthcare as a whole," noted Idzik. "Advance practice nurses provide a significant portion of the care in our country and outcomes for master's prepared nurses have always been terrific. Research shows that the outcomes of our care are equivalent or better than our physician colleagues. Imagine the positive impact on healthcare having all of these nurses educated at the doctoral level provides. We could change the world."



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“The DNP is the perfect tool for this change,” she added. “The degree gives APRNs and RNs alike the knowledge and skills to lead healthcare into the future.”

Unique Opportunities

A nurse who earns a DNP is in the perfect position to step into numerous leadership roles. “We see our students take on leadership positions in both practice and management,” noted Idzik. “For example, they may become the director of quality improvement or chief informatics officer.”

“And they excel in these positions because they understand nursing and healthcare, but now they can utilize the doctoral level leadership and interprofessional skills they have,” she added.

While many nurses with DNPs take on roles beyond day-to-day clinical practice, there are also those who choose to remain at the bedside. “This is just as vital to quality care as doctorally-prepared leaders,” said Idzik. “We need experts at the bedside to ensure positive outcomes, and with a DNP nurses have the strong, evidence-based foundation they need to do just that.”

Other nurses choose to furthering nursing education. For Idzik, the DNP offered the perfect blend of practice and teaching. “A faculty role appealed to me because it gave me the ability to practice and teach,” she explained. “I use knowledge from my DNP every day at the school or in practice. I have the essential knowledge and skills to work collaboratively with my PhD colleagues to inform or implement their research into the academic or patient care setting.”

No matter the career path, the DNP is essential to providing exceptional patient care and maintaining an environment of success.

Impacts on Healthcare

Healthcare is in a constant state of change and it is up to practitioners to ensure that these changes are positive ones.

“Today’s healthcare arena is much more complex than it was even a few years ago,” noted Idzik. “With a dynamic healthcare environment, there is an array of new challenges as well as significant room for improvement, which is why cultivating a workforce of doctorally prepared nurses is just what this healthcare system needs.”

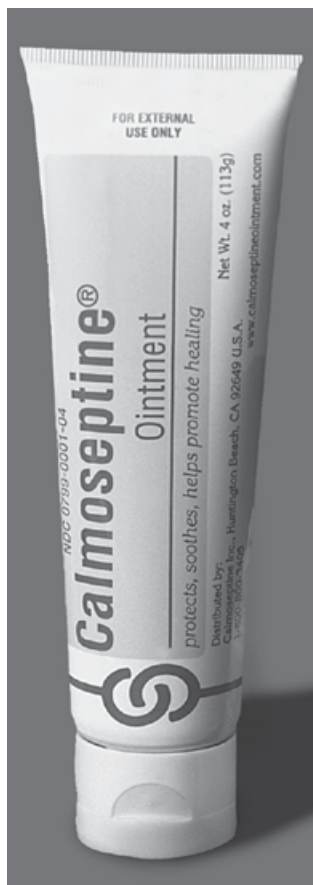
The practice doctorate provides a different level of thinking and greatly influences how nurses look at healthcare problems, according to Idzik. “I see the DNPs steadily becoming the leaders in how we change healthcare,” she said. “We want nurses on every board and involved in every major healthcare decision ... I think our DNPs are the clinicians who will pave the way for success.”

“Nurses are the largest workforce in healthcare, so if we can increase the number of nurses with doctoral degrees we will, without a doubt, advance not only the profession, but also the healthcare system at large,” she concluded. ■

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