



The Working Nurses Guide to Career Advancement



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What it Means to be a Nurse

A Day in the Life

Nursing is a dynamic, diverse profession where no two days are ever the same and where every day makes a difference in many lives. Depending on the environment in which the nurse works, he or she may work with new patients every day or established patients who return to the practice for care.

A traditional registered nurse will help with general patient care while monitoring progress and communicating vital information to colleagues regarding patient treatment. Nurses in administrative and leadership roles interact with other nurses and health care professionals to address overarching patient care needs. These nursing leaders have additional responsibilities including arranging schedules, coordinating activities for the organization, strategizing budgets, and planning educational outreach activities.

There are multiple career tracks nurses can pursue in a variety of healthcare settings – private practice, clinics, home health care, insurance companies, corporations, and hospitals, to name a few.

The nurse's level of education plays a significant role in the types of positions for which he or she is eligible. With a [Bachelor of Science in Nursing](#) (BSN) or a [Master of Science in Nursing](#) (MSN), nurses are eligible to advance into highly refined and specialized fields of clinical practice, leadership and management positions. Thus, the career interests and goals of the nurse determine the type of degree to be achieved.

Why Should I Advance My Nursing Career?

Professional and advanced nursing degrees enable nurses to specialize in their desired career path, advance within their organizations, earn higher salaries and remain marketable.

What a BSN and MSN Means for Your Nursing Career

Ultimately, the decision to pursue a BSN or MSN should be dictated by the type of career you wish to pursue. For example, if your aspirations are exclusively to work with patients, then a BSN will (usually) be satisfactory.

If your interests align with the pursuit of leadership positions beyond the bedside, learning more about the administration side of nursing, or becoming an educator to prepare future nurses, then an MSN will typically be required.

If you aspire to specialize in advanced areas of clinical practice and become a nurse practitioner, clinical nurse specialist, or nurse leader you will need a master's degree with a specialty focus.

An advanced clinical degree offers the ability to specialize and work with individuals and families, as well as local, regional and global communities with all different types of patients:

- Infants
- Children
- Elderly
- Women
- Special Needs



A licensed RN has a few options available for pursuing a degree.

- RN to BSN – Typically takes two to three years to complete depending on credit transfers
- MSN (for those who already hold a BSN) – Typically takes two years to complete
- Bridge program (RN to BSN to MSN) – Length of program completion varies depending on transfer credits, and consolidates the BSN and MSN studies into one continuous program.

The RN to MSN program is especially advantageous because students earn concurrent degrees (BSN and MSN) while enrolled in one program.

What Students Study in BSN and MSN Programs

The BSN curriculum will add to the knowledge and skills acquired for the RN license and provide new learning opportunities that translate into the expertise required for professional practice. Coursework topics include:

- Leadership
- Information technology
- Care management
- Public health
- Global health
- Health care information systems
- Quality care
- Evidence-based practice

These skills along with those gleaned during specialized studies (for example, the MSN curriculum to become a nurse educator varies from the executive leader program) prepare nurses to become leaders in a variety of healthcare settings.

Working in Magnet Facilities

Another advantage to a BSN and a MSN advanced degree is that it makes nurses more marketable

to healthcare organizations that are working towards obtaining Magnet status or those already designated as Magnet facilities by the standards set forth by the American Nurses Credentialing Center (ANCC).

To qualify and be recognized by the Magnet Recognition Program, 75% of an organization's nurse managers must hold at least a BSN (ideally an MSN), and when renewing Magnet status, 100% of their [nurse leaders must have at least a BSN or higher](#).

The [ANCC reports](#) that employees in Magnet settings report higher job satisfaction, fewer staff injuries, higher employee retention rates and improved patient outcomes. These organizations set a gold standard for all healthcare institutions.

They are reported to provide better overall patient care, to be safer, and to have lower mortality rates. Importantly, entities with Magnet status do not consider an MBA or other advanced public health degrees to satisfy the magnet requirements; only an advanced degree in the field of nursing is accepted.

Current & Future Demands for Educated Nurses

Studies conducted by the [American Association of College Nursing \(AACN\)](#) show that by the year 2020, the goal is for 80% of nurses to hold at least a BSN. Achieving this goal will meet the demand for employers who state MSN degree holders are their preferred applicant by a rate of 76.6%.

The same study showed that 74% of new MSN graduates received a job offer before they've graduated. For new BSN graduates that job offer rate was 56%.



In addition to being more competent and professionally competitive, an added benefit to earning a BSN or MSN degree is compensation. The salary information below was compiled from the Bureau of Labor and Statistics (BLS), Payscale.com, and job search sites Indeed.com and SimplyHired.com. Salaries vary based on geographic location, experience, and type of organization.

- Nurses with BSNs can earn \$56,000 to \$65,000 annually.
- On average, MSNs will earn \$20,000 more than those with BSNs; the average MSN salary is \$83,000.
- MSN salaries vary depending on the specific role, though salaries tend to be between \$65,000 and \$91,000.
- BLS reports that nurses in medical and health services management positions average at the top of that range with salaries of \$88,580 to \$93,910.

A Look at Specialties and Certifications

Nurses who hold BSN and MSN degrees can transition into specialty and leadership roles, which enable them to work with specific patient populations.

- [Clinical nurse specialist certifications](#): Nurses who choose to specialize in gerontology, psychiatric medicine, home health, pediatrics, and community health – without becoming nurse practitioners – can take one of the ANCC’s Clinical Nurse Specialist Certifications.
- Nurse practitioner certifications: The ANCC offers certification programs in adult psychiatry, acute care, and family practice.
- Specialty certifications: The ANCC also administers exams to certify nurses in specialties that include cardiovascular, forensics, general practice, home health, pain management, perinatal, rheumatology, education and administration.



To prepare nurses for these positions, academic programs specifically concentrate on strengthening:

- Evidence-based patient care
- Communication skills with patients and peers
- Understanding human issues, including cultural diversity
- Research and data collection skills and how to vet information from research results
- How to incorporate ethics, morals, and holistic nursing into decision making
- Budget development and managing organizational finances
- Comprehension and applicability of bioethics

Career Advancement Possibilities for RN-to-BSN and MSN Graduates

Types of Career Settings & Locations for Nurses with Advanced Degrees

Nurses who hold BSN and MSN degrees can work in a variety of settings, most commonly including but not limited to:

- **Hospitals:** The most common workplace for nurses; hospitals employ roughly 66% of nurses around the country.
- **Department of Health:** As a department of the federal, state or local government, nurses in this setting treat and educate people on proper healthcare and preserving the well-being of communities across the country.
- **Correctional facilities:** Nurses in this setting provide care for patients in juvenile detention centers, jails or prisons. These professionals treat inmates for health complications such as physical trauma, chronic health problems like AIDS, substance abuse, and mental illness.
- **Nursing homes:** Nurses working in this setting care for the elderly and ensure that patients receive proper medication, hygiene, and general care.
- **Public / private schools:** School nurses care for students that require care, emergency treatment, and special medication or for those who suffer illness or injury while on the campus.
- **Research labs:** Nurses working in research settings study different aspects of health, illness, and healthcare. These nurses work to discover new ways to improve healthcare by creating and applying scientific studies.
- **Rehabilitation centers:** Rehabilitation nurses assist their patients with long-term physical disabilities, chronic illnesses, recovery from surgery, and addiction. Working in collaboration with onsite doctors and therapists, they help patients work through their limitations and reach their full potential.
- **Government / military bases:** Provide care in a military or government healthcare base. Their patients typically have served in the armed-forces, or veterans who have served in the past and require specialized care.
- **Home health care services:** Working as home-care, palliative-care, end-of-life, or hospice nurses, these professionals care for patients who cannot comfortably leave their home due to illness or injury.
- **Doctors' offices:** As a common setting for nurses, these professionals provide general care for patients during doctor visits.



- **Academic settings:** Nurses may obtain positions as clinical faculty at a university teaching nursing students.

In addition to these common settings for nurses to be employed, nurses are also sought by these less conventional or unique entities:

- Airplanes / helicopters as flight or ambulatory nurses
- Publication companies as a nurse writer
- Courts of law as a legal nurse consultant
- Investigation agencies as a forensics nurse
- Gyms as a nutritional nurse
- Travel companies as cruise ship nurses

Different Fields of Nursing Work

Within the above-listed career settings, there are different fields in which one can specialize. These specializations are often selected during academic studies when you pursue your MSN. Examples of the [different fields and professions](#) nurses can go into include:

Education

- Nursing writer, author, or historian – Write, research, and edit textbooks, training materials, books, etc.
- Professor of nursing – Prepare student nurses to advance their careers; conduct research into areas of healthcare and nursing

Administration

- Nurse manager – Manage nurses who provide patient care, work with patient families, and interact with doctors and other healthcare providers
- Nurse executive – Lead teams, manage finances, and provide continuing education to staff; manage budgets, create strategic plans, collaborate on operational growth

Clinical

- Emergency nurse – Evaluate and treat patients with a variety of potentially high risk or life-threatening conditions in multiple settings
- Cardiac care nurse – Conduct testing and provide treatments to patients with heart disease and heart-related conditions

Practitioner

- Family nurse practitioner - Work with a physician or (in some states, including Connecticut) run their own private practices to diagnose and treat patients
- Pediatric nurse practitioner – Works in settings similar to a family nurse practitioner but focus on babies and children up to age 18

Informatics

- Clinical analyst – Gather and analyze data to improve an organization's use of informatics (data, or information sciences)
- Health informatics director – Train other healthcare professionals to implement and use new healthcare technologies; analyze technology issues and challenges

Research

- Nurse researcher - Work in a variety of settings to conduct research that contributes to the improvement of care provided by nurses or to nurse systems
- Diabetes nurse – Collaborate with scientists to gather and analyze patient data to improve the overall quality of care for diabetic patients or patients at risk of being diagnosed with diabetes

Gerontology

- Geriatric nurse – Focus on diagnosing, treating, and preventing conditions that are most likely to afflict elderly patient populations (such as cancer, Alzheimer's, etc.)



Unique Nursing Careers

As with the above listed jobs and fields, within both common and less common settings, nurses can pursue less conventional or unique careers. These less traditional professional opportunities enable nurses to embrace other passions and interests while fulfilling their dreams of nursing. Examples of [unique nursing careers](#) include:

- **Forensic nursing** – Forensic nurses look for indications of crimes when examining patients and treating injuries; their jobs may include the identification of human remains
- **Nursing informatics** – Technology-driven nurses incorporate the most up-to-date technologies into patient care and nurse management
- **Flight nurse** – Flight nurses work on helicopters or airplanes treating patients (often in intense circumstances) who are being transported to a healthcare facility
- **Hyperbaric nurse** – This high-demand niche branch of nursing involves treating patients with decompression or hyperbaric chambers.
- **Medical esthetics nurse** – Professionals in this specialized branch often work with patients seeking cosmetic procedures for personal or medical purposes.
- **Cruise ship nurse** – This unique work environment takes nursing to the high seas where supplies can sometimes be limited, which can add to the adventure and challenge skills.
- **Holistic nurse** – Nurses wishing to incorporate holistic healing, that is mental and emotional health, into their practice will find great joy.

BSN Opportunities

Nurses who pursue bachelor's degrees in nursing, or an [RN-BSN](#), have the opportunity to go into various fields.

- **Charge nurse** – Charge nurses oversee hospital wards and manage staff nurses on duty during their shifts; this position often leads to higher management roles.
- **Operating room RN** – This highly sought-after nurse provides preoperative, intraoperative, and postoperative care. Procedures begin with an assessment and conversation with the patient about the pending operation. The nurse determines the patient's well being, conditions, medications, and other factors that influence the operation. They are directly involved in the patient's safety throughout the procedure and assists in evaluation and patient transition following the procedure.
- **Patient care manager** – Patient care managers oversee patient care, employee activities and training, and other aspects of organizational management and leadership within a health organization.
- **Hospice nurse** – Hospice nurses work with people who are near the ends of their lives, and their families; they provide health and comfort services as patients prepare for their final days.
- **Oncology RN** – Oncology RNs provide preventative care for those at risk of getting cancer as well as providing care for those with cancer. In addition to monitoring patients, these nurses also administer patient treatment.



MSN Specializations

There are several professional specializations available to MSNs. These include both administrative as well as clinical roles.

- **Director of patient care** – Patient care services directors and chief nursing officers work with all areas within an organization as well as departmental directors to ensure programs and patient care runs smoothly.
- **Clinical department director** – Clinical directors are advanced generalists capable of performing all clinical duties within an organization. They collaborate with others within the organization to improve the quality of patient care.
- **Nurse manager** – On a day-to-day basis, the nurse manager oversees the nurse staff and ensures that they are doing their jobs to the best of their abilities. They arrange staff schedules, plan education and training, ensure compliance with healthcare laws, and ensure families and patients are satisfied and well cared for.
- **Nursing informatics** – Informatics nurses use data to assess healthcare and technology systems and collaborate with other nurse executives to decide which systems are most appropriate for the healthcare setting.
- **Mental health program director** – Similar to a psychiatrist, mental health program directors diagnose mental illness and prescribe medications as well as counseling.
- **Nurse faculty** – Nurses who teach in a clinical or academic setting stay abreast of the most current research, practice, and nursing pedagogy to prepare classes and skills training for students and staff advancing their careers in nursing. Nurse educators plan lessons, advise, assess student work, and publish articles and research that contribute to a larger body of knowledge related to nursing practice and education.

How Online Nursing Degrees Can Ease a Nurse's Work & Life Schedule

The Flexibility of Earning an Advanced Degree with Online Learning

With the availability of accredited online nursing degree programs, current RNs and BSNs can earn their RN to BSN, MSN, or RN to BSN to MSN with little to no disruption to their current personal and professional lifestyle. Some of the advantages to online learning include:

- The ability to attend classes on your own schedule in an online learning environment
- Complete practicum and clinical hours locally, with no required campus residency
- Flexibility to manage and prioritize work/life balances; great for nursing professionals who have families
- No time spent commuting to and from school

The conveniences afforded by online education make it easy to pursue a career-boosting degree. Many experts, including DiscoverNursing.com reported an [anticipated deficit](#) of 800,000 nurses by the year 2020, and the majority of those positions will need to be filled by nurses who hold higher degrees, making the decision to return to school for higher learning as one all RNs should seriously consider. Given, too, that nurses with BSNs and MSNs tend to earn higher salaries and have more opportunity for professional growth and to specialize in nursing fields, attending a convenient online degree program to earn your next degree will be the most effective way to advance your nursing career.



Accredited Institutions and Accredited Nursing Degrees

Obtaining a BSN or MSN degree that is accredited by a national nursing accreditation agency at an institution that is regionally accredited is vital to your nursing career as it validates the quality of the program, as well as the knowledge and skills you have completed. It also assures your employer of the consistency and standards used to further your nursing education. Most importantly, attending an accredited nursing school is important if you plan to continue your

education in pursuit of advanced nursing degrees. There are two national accrediting nursing bodies:

- The Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education (CCNE)
- The Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing (ACEN)

The online nursing degrees offered by Sacred Heart University are all CCNE-accredited and Sacred Heart University is a regionally accredited institution by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC).

Would you like to learn more about how to pursue the diverse and unique paths available to advance your nursing career? Consider the online nursing programs at Sacred Heart University.

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