

The Research Doctorate in Nursing: The PhD

David Rice, PhD, RN, NP

Rice is the director of Professional Practice and Education at City of Hope National Medical Center in Duarte, CA.

No financial relationships to disclose.

Rice can be reached at drice@coh.org, with copy to editor at ONFEditor@ons.org.

Key words: research doctorate; PhD; nursing education; nursing science; leadership

ONF, 43(2), 146–148.

doi: 10.1188/16.ONF.146-148

When nurses are considering an advanced degree beyond the master's level of educational preparation, a number of considerations may direct the decision-making process. The doctorate of philosophy (PhD) in nursing is a research degree that will well serve nurses who have the desire to apply theory and develop formal programs of research, become faculty of nursing, combine clinical practice with formal research, and advance through professional leadership in the ranks of hospitals and health systems organizations.

The research-focused doctorate in nursing prepares nurse scientists to lead the field and to advance the science of nursing. In addition to conducting independent research and developing their own programs of research, nurse scientists will also likely work in multidisciplinary and interprofessional teams to achieve broad research outcomes. They design and conduct studies to answer certain aims. These aims can be in response to theoretical questions, as well as to questions that derive from clinical practice or focus on individual, group, or population characteristics and behaviors—to name only a few prompts for inquiry. The findings of the inquiry are disseminated through scholarly publication and presentation, are likely to prompt additional research, and will ultimately inform an evidence base for practice, policy, and advocacy.

Background

Historically, before doctoral degrees in nursing were available, nurses who pursued doctoral degrees did so in fields related to nursing (e.g., health education, public health, psychology, economics). However, the first doctorate that was available to nurses was established in 1924. This was the doctor of education (EdD) degree, awarded by the Teachers College of Columbia University in New York, New York. The EdD degree continues to this day, and it is a research-focused doctorate with an emphasis on education.

PhD programs in nursing began toward the end of the 20th century. However, in the 1970s, Boston University began the doctor of nursing science (DNS) degree. Further complicating the matter, Margaret Newman of New York University later promoted a purely practice-focused nursing doctorate (ND) (Schneckel, 2009). The first of these ND programs was offered in 1979 by Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio (Reid Ponte & Nicholas, 2015).

The intent of the DNS or DNSc degree was to combine research with clinical practice rather than research with theory development and application (Loomis, Willard, & Cohen, 2006). Ultimately, the DNSc degree was considered to be equivalent to the PhD degree. The curricula, program design and expectations, and dissertation and research

requirements were nearly the same across programs. For that reason, many colleges and universities have changed their DNSc programs to PhD programs, and many have allowed recipients of the DNSc degree to convert those degrees into PhDs. At the close of the 20th century, the vast majority of research-focused doctoral programs were PhD programs (79%), with the remaining shared among DNSc, DNS, or DSN programs (17%) and ND programs (5%) (American Association of Colleges of Nursing [AACN], 2001). As of 2013, the most recent year for which data are available, 132 research-focused doctoral programs, with 5,145 enrolled students, existed in the United States (AACN, 2014).

As of fall 2014, 81 U.S. colleges and universities also offer baccalaureate to research-focused doctoral programs (AACN Research and Data Services, 2015). These programs, designed for those who

hold a bachelor's degree in nursing, do not confer a master's degree. Instead, they combine master's and doctoral level course content, culminating in a PhD degree in nursing. Completion of these programs typically requires 85–90 hours of course and dissertation work.

Program Considerations

Nurses should commence the decision-making process by considering their professional goals, among other issues (see Figure 1). They should also search online for PhD programs in nursing, pull up the program web pages for several schools, and take a careful look. Many pages will include the program's curriculum or a sample course of study. For programs that have specific foci of research, the program home page likely will offer details about research topics of interest and current work. In

addition, faculty profiles will often provide details about each professor's particular research interests, current work, grant funding, and publications. Programs will typically have coordinators and faculty contacts with whom potential students can talk. Many programs will have similar curricula (see Figure 2). Interested nurses should also seek out PhD-prepared nurses in their organizations and professional circles for their advice, guidance, and mentorship. Like most aspects of a nursing career, the opportunities for education are many, and the research-focused doctorate in nursing may lead nurses in directions they cannot begin to imagine.

Educational Technology

All research-focused doctoral programs will use some elements of technology (e.g., message boards, interactive whiteboards, chat rooms, email, computers). However, some programs are delivered entirely online. Much or all of this content may be asynchronous and computer-based learning. This approach and type of learning requires that students be disciplined, focused individuals who can commit to computer-based learning without significant human interaction.

Some schools have leveraged advanced technologies to deliver real-time classroom experiences via live teleconferencing and the use of program sharing via web-based systems. These programs are synchronous and bring together a cohort of students with like interests. This style of presentation and learning, in which learning involves live engagement with faculty and other students either in person or via videoconferencing technology, is many times more engaging than that which is asynchronous and the student is alone with only non-live, computer-based interaction. The College of Nursing at the University of Utah offers one example of

FIGURE 1. Considerations When Evaluating Doctoral Programs

When contemplating the type of program to pursue, nurses should consider the following questions and information:

PROFESSIONAL GOALS

- Do you want to use theoretical and conceptual frames to generate new knowledge?
- Do you want to test theory and generate knowledge to inform healthcare delivery, health systems, and health policy, and support the evidence base for nursing practice?
- Do you want to identify gaps in existing knowledge and become an expert in a field of inquiry?
- Do you want to advance the science and the profession of nursing?
- Do you want to develop as a leader in your chosen area of scholarship?

SCHOOL AND FACULTY ALIGNMENT WITH ACADEMIC INTERESTS

- What are the programs of research at the schools you are considering?
- Who are the faculty at the schools, what area(s) in nursing are of particular research interest to them, and what are their programs of research?

- If your interest is in a subspecialty of nursing (e.g., oncology, gerontology, women's health, palliative care), seek out programs that focus their training and research efforts on it.
- Are your professional goals in alignment with these programs and these faculty interests?

PROGRAMS

- Is the program offered fully online, fully in place, or as a hybrid?
- If online, what is the residency requirement? How many days, weeks, or weekends will you be required to spend on campus?
- Note that programs typically require the completion of 50–65 credit hours.
- The pace of programs can vary, but completing the degree in four to six years is a reasonable estimate.
- Does the school offer programming that allows you to continue to work full-time or part-time, or does it require a full-time commitment of study?
- Is financial support available (e.g., teaching assistant or research assistant positions, scholarships, stipends)?

- Philosophy of science, theoretical foundations, and theory development in nursing science
- Integrative literature review and synthesis
- Health services and health policy
- Health promotion and disease prevention
- Disease and symptom management
- Research ethics
- Statistical methods
- Measurement in healthcare research
- Quantitative and quantitative research design and methods
- Mixed-methods research design
- Elective courses
- Qualifying or comprehensive examinations
- Proposal development and dissertation reading and writing
- Dissertation defense

FIGURE 2. Typical Coursework Included in Research-Focused Doctoral Study

a research-focused doctoral degree program that has delivered its content successfully via these methods. Several of the cohorts have been oncology focused.

Conclusion

The pursuit of a research-focused doctoral degree is intensive, rewarding, sometimes challenging, and always self-revelatory. Imagine the changes that can occur during the span of four to six years. Now, imagine those changes with the added context of experience and growth in a particular field of inquiry; exposure to the minds, works, and support of faculty, advisers, and dissertation chairs and members; and the shared learning with peer students. Picture the networks that will be built, the collaborations that will be fostered, and the body of work that will be produced and contribute to the science of nursing. Earning a research-focused doctorate in nursing is an amazing experience that will consistently inform the personal lives, interpersonal relationships, and the professional journeys and achievements of those who pursue it.

References

- American Association of Colleges of Nursing. (2001). Indicators of quality in research-focused doctoral programs in nursing. Retrieved from <http://bit.ly/20tdKF7>
- American Association of Colleges of Nursing. (2014). *Annual report 2014: Building a framework for the future*. Retrieved from <http://bit.ly/1VQKiIS>
- American Association of Colleges of Nursing Research and Data Services. (2015). *Schools offering baccalaureate to research-focused doctoral programs, fall 2014 (N = 81)*. Retrieved from <http://bit.ly/1nPAaiL>
- Loomis, J.A., Willard, B., & Cohen, J. (2006). Difficult professional choices: Deciding between the PhD and the DNP in nursing. *Online Journal of Issues in Nursing, 12*, 6.
- Reid Ponte, P., & Nicholas, P.K. (2015). Addressing the confusion related to DNS, DNSc, and DSN degrees, with lessons for the nursing profession. *Journal of Nursing Scholarship, 47*, 347–353. doi:10.1111/jnu.12148
- Schnecker, M. (2009). Nursing education: Past, present, future. In G. Roux & J.A. Halstead (Eds.), *Issues and trends in nursing: Essential knowledge for today and tomorrow* (pp. 27–62). Sudbury, MA: Jones and Bartlett.