

The Value of a DNP Degree: Translating Your Knowledge into Nursing Practice

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The Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) degree has gained traction in the United States over the last twenty-two years. Nurses who specialized in clinical practice and held an advanced practice license supported the development of the DNP degree as an alternative to a terminal degree specialized in research science and academia, the Ph.D. The first DNP academic program was started at the University of Kentucky under the leadership of Dean Carolyn Williams in 2001 (Melander et al., 2023). The vision for the development of this degree was precipitated by many discussions across the country between nursing academia and nursing practice settings. Dialogue focused on the profession of nursing being a practice science supported by scientific evidence and research. While the traditional Doctor of Philosophy degree produced competent nurse researchers and scientists, a gap was identified in the profession's ability to apply research and evidence to nursing practice. Hence, the Doctor of Nursing Practice degree evolved. In 2004, the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) released a vision statement in support of the DNP degree, stating that "these programs should prepare nurses to become experts in specialized advanced practice and/or prepare nurse leaders at the highest level of nursing

practice to improve patient outcomes and translate research into practice" (Melander et al., 2023).

Fast forward to 2017, as I began researching doctorate programs in nursing, I was surprised by the overwhelming number of programs offered throughout the country. The sheer quantity of program options and the enrollment statistics to support the exponential growth of DNP programs spoke to the nursing profession's desire for a doctorate focused on the practice of nursing. As a director of a prelicensure hospital-based RN program and a member of the leadership team in an acute care hospital, it was my professional responsibility to pursue development at the highest level of nursing practice. The DNP degree brought an opportunity to my career development plan, which supported all my professional passions: implementing research science into nursing practice, quality improvement initiatives focused on improving patient care, data analysis and manipulation, leadership and business acumen, and nursing advocacy.

While the DNP credential is well-respected in my academic role, the benefit this degree has brought to the development of my leadership role has surpassed my expectations. Coursework in managing a healthcare system, data analytics, and healthcare finance has given me the ability to not only understand the big picture in the business of healthcare but also to contribute to the conversation and question the status quo. DNP-prepared nurses are well-equipped to identify system-level problems and propose new models of care (Beeber et al., 2019). Having a broader perspective related to the business of healthcare while understanding the clinical challenges nurses face at the bedside gives

a DNP-prepared nurse opportunities to present information and solutions through a different lens. Opportunities on boards, advisory committees, and professional organizations have become vast, not simply for having a doctorate but because of the ability to contribute to professional dialogue through a broader perspective, which creates opportunities for collaborative work and contribution to the nursing profession. Networking is important, but only as important as your ability to contribute meaningfully to the conversation.

Academic-Clinical Partnerships have always been important in healthcare. However, during the pandemic, these relationships became vital. When healthcare organizations needed "all hands-on deck" to support patient care, hospital-based nursing education programs were a model of education that removed barriers in order to get nursing students at the bedside in real-time. As a Director of a hospital-based nursing program with expertise in academia and executive healthcare leadership, the ability to collaborate and support patient care during an unprecedented time in history was certainly unique. Change management, nursing policy, and strategic planning all played an important role in my organization's ability to pivot successfully during a crisis. That point in time demonstrated the immense value academic-clinical partnerships have and how these two entities can support one another in multiple ways. Soon after I completed my DNP degree, I was assigned to lead the Clinical Professional Development team within the hospital while still leading the School of Nursing. This collaboration and alignment have been such a gift. The ability to create a vision and plan for nursing education, the graduate's transition to practice, and

nursing professional development have allowed me to support the nurses and nursing students along the continuum of novice to expert within the organization. The richness of my DNP journey has allowed me to see beyond what I thought was possible and has given me the ability to create innovative solutions that support the professional development of nurses.

Nurses who are academically prepared at the doctorate level are faced with multiple expectations (Dobrowolska et al., 2021). Knowledge and support of state and federal regulations that impact nursing practice is another sector where DNP-prepared nurses can have an impact. Expertise in nursing policy and the ability to communicate successfully with legislators was an integral part of my DNP curriculum. As the Director of a prelicensure nursing program, which receives federal support, this knowledge has become essential to my job responsibilities. Just like healthcare business, healthcare policy and the ability to navigate the political infrastructure are essential. Working on both the state and

federal levels, lobbying for legislative support has enhanced my knowledge of bills, regulations, statutes, and nurse leaders' credibility in politics. I continue to support nurse advocacy efforts through the Delaware Nurse's Association's Advocacy Committee, and I bring issues and concerns back to my organization.

The motivation to pursue higher nursing education is typically both intrinsic and extrinsic. While external circumstances such as advanced career opportunities may be a nurse's initial motivation to pursue a DNP degree, the curriculum should enhance the nurse's ability to translate research into practice. Lifelong learning is a requirement of the nursing profession. Miambo and colleagues (2021) reported that graduates of DNP programs have even reported decreased anxiety in the workplace due to their increased knowledge and confidence. The skills and knowledge acquired through a DNP degree give nurses the tools to critically appraise literature, provide nurses with competencies essential for leadership, and, in turn, shape a nurse's professional

conduct and commitment (Miambo et al., 2021). Professional competency benefits the nurse, the organization, and ultimately our patients. ■

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the educational foundation of DNP nurses, which makes them perfectly suited to provide the necessary advocacy, support, and effective communication required to ensure patients receive true holistic care.

Individuals diagnosed with any form of cancer or patients in specialized programs like palliative care or survival may all be managed by ONNs. Based on the requirements of a particular program or system, each ONN may operate differently. However, the basis of each program is to facilitate the removal of barriers to care (Temucin & Nahcivan, 2018). The development of training and educational models for navigation has to be grounded in core competencies, with the aim of augmenting role comprehension and guaranteeing the fulfillment of crucial patient objectives, which can lead to improved clinical outcomes. Furthermore, it is critical to ensure that the ONN

possesses the expertise in oncology nursing needed to address the needs of this population (McMullen et al., 2018).

Having DNP-prepared ONNs in place can greatly improve cancer treatment outcomes by providing support, evidence-based education, and guidance to patients and their families. These navigators help patients overcome barriers to care and ensure adherence to treatment guidelines, ultimately enhancing clinical outcomes. The role of Nurse Navigators is based on trust and patient-centered care, and their presence throughout the healthcare continuum is crucial for optimal patient outcomes. Additionally, the development of navigation programs, inspired by Dr. Harold Freeman's initiative, has led to the implementation of patient support programs in oncology settings, with nurse navigators playing a key role.

DNP-prepared nurses are seen as implementation specialists who possess the knowledge and skills to serve as change agents to improve the quality of care received by their patients and their families (Baileys et al., 2018). The core competencies outlined by the Oncology Nursing Society provide a framework for the necessary knowledge and abilities of an ONN, and training and educational models should be based on these competencies to ensure the fulfillment of patient objectives and improved clinical outcomes. The DNP-prepared nurse, with their advanced knowledge and skills, is well-suited to fulfill the role of an Oncology Nurse Navigator and contribute to improving healthcare outcomes. ■

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