

# DOCTOR OF NURSING PRACTICE PROGRAMS ACROSS THE UNITED STATES: A BENCHMARK OF INFORMATION. PART II: ADMISSION CRITERIA

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The adoption of the doctor of nursing practice (DNP) degree by the American Association of Colleges of Nursing has led to the exponential growth of DNP programs across the United States. This article is Part II of a 2-part series exploring DNP program information. The purpose of this research was to create a benchmark of information that can be used to compare and contrast programs throughout the United States. Part I discussed DNP program characteristics. Part II consists of DNP admission criteria that include graduate record examination (GRE) requirements, grade point average (GPA), national certification, degree requirements, specialty foci, clinical hours, and prerequisite courses.

A cross-sectional, descriptive design was used to explore 137 DNP programs across the United States. Data were collected exclusively via university Web sites. Descriptive statistics were calculated and presented in report, table, or figure format.

As we move forward with the DNP, effective selection of students is of critical importance because admission and retention of outstanding candidates will ultimately strengthen the field of nursing. The data generated by this research provides programs with a starting point for discussion regarding admission criteria for the DNP degree. (Index words: DNP; Doctor of nursing practice; Admission criteria; DNP information) J Prof Nurs 28:274–283, 2012. © 2012 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

THE ADOPTION OF the doctor of nursing practice (DNP) degree by the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) has led to the exponential growth of DNP programs across the United States. From 2005 to 2011, DNP programs have increased by 85%, with a 66% increase over the past 3-year period (Udlis & Mancuso, 2012). Enrollment numbers indicate that from 2008 to 2009, the number of students entering DNP programs increased from 3,415 to 5,165, and from 2009 to 2010, enrollment jumped to 7,034 with the number of DNP graduates increasing

to 1,282 from 660 (AACN, 2010, 2011a). Rapid expansion and enrollment of students in DNP programs begs the question as to what are the attributes and requirements of such programs.

This article is Part II of a two-part series exploring DNP program information. The purpose of this research was to generate a database and create a benchmark of information that can be used to compare and contrast programs throughout the United States. Part I discussed DNP program characteristics that included type of program, delivery, plan of study, program length, number of credits, cost, practice course name, and a review of programs still offering the master's degree for the advanced practice nurse (APN) and a nursing education elective. Part II consists of DNP admission criteria that include graduate record examination (GRE) requirements, grade point average (GPA), national certification, degree requirements, specialty foci, clinical hours, and prerequisite courses. Understanding the overall characteristics and regional trends will help universities better plan for

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their specific needs when developing, amending, and evaluating their DNP programs. As we move forward with the DNP, effective selection of students is of critical importance because admission and retention of outstanding candidates will ultimately strengthen the field of nursing.

## Background

As applicants for DNP programs proceed at a furious pace, it is crucial that the admission process be capable of assisting to select prospective students of the highest caliber to meet advancing health care demands. There is limited existing research on the graduate student selection process that indicates what will predict success (Crech & Aplin-Kalisz, 2011); however, a scant amount of literature was found within the nursing continuum. The GRE correlated with first-year and overall GPAs but was a weaker predictor of performance than undergraduate GPA (Rhodes, Bullough, & Fulton, 1994). On the contrary, Katz, Chow, Motzer, and Woods (2009) found that only 5% to 8% of the variance in cumulative GPA was explained by graduate students' GRE scores. Hansen and Pozehl (1995) found that nonnursing undergraduate GPA was the only significant predictor of clinical success in graduate nursing.

Other research indicated that there was no significant differences found among nonnurse college graduates, bachelor of science in nursing (BSN), and nurses with a nonnursing baccalaureate degree in a 2-year master's program on clinical or theoretical grades at the end of the first and second year of the program (Munro & Krauss, 1985). Further, for master's degree students, higher prerequisite statistics grades were not associated with higher research grades (Grace & D'Aoust, 2006). Without a substantial amount of evidence-based literature that indicates predictors of success among graduate nursing students, determining the appropriate admission criteria for DNP programs is even more of a challenge. A look at what current programs are using is a step in the right direction.

## Methodology

### Design

A cross-sectional, descriptive design was used.

### Sample

DNP program listings were retrieved from the AACN DNP program Web site (AACN, 2011b). As of January 2011, AACN listed 136 DNP programs across the country. Of this list, 5 programs were not included because Web site information was not available at the time of data collection. An additional 6 DNP programs, found via Internet searches, were included into the sample resulting in a final sample size of 137 DNP programs.

### Variables

Data collected from university Web sites were categorized by GRE requirements, GPA, national certification, degree requirements, specialty foci, clinical hour requirements, and prerequisite courses.

**GRE Requirements.** The GRE is a standardized test that is intended to measure an individual's reasoning skills, critical thinking, and ability to communicate effectively in writing. The categories for the GRE requirement were labeled as *yes*, *no*, *yes if GPA not met*, *yes if master of science in nursing (MSN) outside of the United States*, *yes if certified RN anesthetist*, *yes if not certified*, and *unclear*.

**Grade Point Average.** GPA is a quantitative measure of a student's academic achievement over a given period usually on a scale of 1.0 (*lowest*) to 4.0 (*highest*) that is calculated by dividing the grade points earned by the number of credits taken. This number was reported from the actual number listed on the Web site. When no actual number could be located, this variable was left blank.

**National Certification.** National certification is the professional certification obtained in advanced nursing practice roles such as APNs and sometimes nurse administrators (NAs) that indicates competency in the specified role. Schools either specified *yes*, *no*, *preferred*, *recommended*, or *1,000 hours in the past 3 years or certification*. Other categories were *unclear* or *not applicable*.

**Degree Requirements.** Degree refers to the specified level of education, bachelor's or master's, that one must have completed to be eligible to apply for DNP admission. The degree may or may not be specified to be in the field of nursing. Classification for degree ranged from MSN, non-MSN, non-bachelor, and other bachelor's. Some Web sites were *unclear* regarding this requirement.

**Specialty Foci.** Specific to the MSN-to-DNP programs, specialty foci indicated the type of specialty or advanced practice focus required of the applicant. These were labeled as *APN*, *NA*, *any MSN*, *clinical nurse leader (CNL)*, or *unclear*.

**Clinical Hour Requirements.** Clinical hours, the time spent in actual nursing practice, is the specified number of hours one must obtain prior to entering into the DNP program. For BSN-to-DNP programs, results were labeled *yes*, *no*, *unclear*, *preferred*, or *not applicable*. For the MSN-to-DNP program, results were listed as *predetermined*—a specified number of hours required; *verification*—verification of a specific amount of clinical hours from a prior program of study or the clinical setting; *verification/predetermined*—a set number of hours required in addition to some form of verification of previous clinical hours from a prior program of study or the clinical setting; *predetermined/clinical experience*—either *predetermined* and/or a specified amount of time in clinical practice after degree completion; and *unclear*—either unable to determine from the information given or not specified.

**Prerequisite Courses.** Prerequisite courses are the named courses or equivalent content that are required to be completed in a specified or nonspecified period for entrance into the DNP program. Prerequisite courses identified on Web sites were listed for both BSN/MSN-to-DNP programs and labeled with a specified time frame if indicated.

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