

Creating a Place for Perioperative Nursing in Graduate Programs

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- Graduate education • Certification • Advanced practice
- Preceptors • Faculty

Perioperative nurses, as with those who work in any area of nursing, need advanced education if they are to advance in their careers. The term *graduate* is sometimes used to describe students who graduate from nursing school. In this article, “graduate student” means one enrolled in higher education in a formal academic setting, such as a university. In most hospitals and health care institutions today, nurses holding diploma certificates, associate degrees, and baccalaureate degrees provide most of the bedside or direct nursing care. These nurses are the front line of care and are invaluable. In the operating room, they most frequently serve as registered nurse (RN) circulators or they run a product line, such as orthopedics or neurosurgery. Many institutions, however, now require the Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) degree for lower management positions, depending on the size and state in which the institution is located; further, such institutions now require the Master of Science in Nursing (MSN) or a similar graduate degree for higher level or unit leadership. More and more, hospitals now also require the MSN or an equivalent degree for management positions.

Further, hospitals and health care institutions now often require an area of specialization for advanced practice. These nurses are generically called advanced practice registered nurses (APRNs). Specific APRN roles include clinical nurse specialist (CNS), nurse practitioner (NP), and certified registered nurse anesthetist (CRNA). An even newer role that now requires an MSN or equivalent master’s degree is that of the clinical nurse leader (CNL). The CNL is a generalist but is not considered to be an advanced practice nurse.

GRADUATE PROGRAMS

Graduate nursing programs usually impose the prerequisite of an undergraduate degree for entrance. There are some exceptions for RNs who lack the baccalaureate degree in nursing. For example, some universities offer a “fast track” program in which

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a student with a degree other than in nursing can matriculate to secure an MSN degree. Still other institutions offer the option of RN-to-MSN or even RN-to-Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) programs. In these programs, the core undergraduate nursing degree is built into the program and the BSN or MSN degree is given on graduation. Other options may be available at select schools.

All schools that offer credible graduate degrees must be accredited by recognized bodies, normally as a requisite of state law. The main organizations that accredit graduate nursing programs are the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education (CCNE) and the National League for Nursing Accrediting Commission (NLNAC). The CCNE is the accepted accrediting body that normally accredits graduate nursing programs, whereas the NLNAC is the recognized entity that usually accredits undergraduate, associate, and diploma programs. Between the two, more than 330 master's degree programs have achieved accreditation.¹ There are other approval groups under which nursing schools must work, including regional, professional, and state agencies for higher education. Some are highly prescriptive as to the nursing curriculum needed for each program, and these bodies must approve any new offerings. For example, to offer an approved new major, such as perioperative nursing, in a graduate program at universities in Texas, a detailed proposal and full curriculum must be approved by no less than three, and possibly four, separate bodies: (1) the school's graduate curriculum committee; (2) if associated with a health science center, the graduate school; (3) the state's Board of Nursing; and (4) the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board.

This complex process of programmatic approval can take up to a year and a half to secure full approval, plus perhaps another full year to advertise and to enroll enough students to begin the program. A private school may not have as many of the processes to negotiate as does a public one and can offer more flexibility, but a private program must still obtain full accreditation by a recognized body and other entities as well.

The new program's proposed curriculum must contain specific content, a required number of credit hours, and a specific time within which full-time students must complete all requirements. Graduating students must also pass national certification examinations at the end of their schooling. Depending on the state in which the desired program is located, entrance requirements necessarily vary somewhat. Past academic grades are usually a determining factor for acceptance to a program, with an average of B or higher. Generally, graduate program entrance requirements include all previous schools' course transcripts in addition to scores from the Management Aptitude Test, the Graduate Record Examination, or both. Minimum required scores on these examinations vary from school to school and from year to year. Other than all national, state, and school requirements, each school may have additional or waiver requirements so that the interested student needs to research requirements for his or her school(s) of choice. For example, if one were to apply to enroll in an acute care nurse practitioner (ACNP) program, the applicant might need to have a minimum of 2 years' experience working in a critical care environment (note that work in the operating room ordinarily does not count toward meeting such an experience requirement).

MAJORS THAT CAN INCORPORATE PERIOPERATIVE NURSING CONTENT

The most common majors that perioperative nurses seek are advanced practice, administration, and CRNA. A new major now offered more throughout the country is the CNL. The CNL, as mentioned previously, is a generalist but is not considered to

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