



Education and Training: Family Physicians versus Doctors of Nursing Practice

The Doctor of Nursing is a new degree designed to replace the master's of nursing awarded to Nurse Practitioners. The Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education (CCNE), the leading accrediting agency for baccalaureate- and graduate-degree nursing programs in the U.S., began the process for accrediting DNP programs in Fall 2008. There are 92 DNP programs currently enrolling students at schools of nursing nationwide (6 in Illinois), with over 100 more planned. Candidates must pass a certification exam for the degree of "Doctor of Nurse Practice." However, this exam, while cribbed from the United States Medical Licensing Exam (USMLE) Step 3 exam that is required of physicians and only one component of physician licensure, is smaller in scope and uses discontinued questions. Only 50 percent of the first cohort to take the DNP exam earned a passing grade.

To date, the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) has not recommended any curriculum for DNP programs. The only requirements is that candidates receive at least 1000 hours of supervised clinical experience; NPs with a masters degree only need achieve 500 hours of supervised clinical experience. In another measure, only 12 – 24 weeks of full-time experience reinforce the doctoral curriculum. No recommendations are made on the type of clinical hours, either (e.g. inpatient vs. outpatient).

Family Physicians receive their education typically through a four-year degree program at one of the 130 accredited medical schools in the United States. Students must pass the Medical College Admissions Test for entrance into medical school. In 2005, the average score of matriculants was 30.2 of a possible 45. Medical students spend nearly 9,000 hours in lectures, clinical study, lab and direct patient care. The overall training process begins with medical school and continues through residency. During their time in medical school, students take two "step" exams, called the United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE), and must take core clerkships, or periods of clinical instruction. Passing both exams and the clerkships grants students the Medical Doctor (MD) degree, which entitles them to start full clinical training in a residency program.

Family physicians are trained in one of the 450 family medicine residency programs, which are accredited by the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME), and require three years of training. As with other specialties, family medicine residency programs have specific requirements with certain numbers of hours that must be completed for board certification. They are designed to provide integrated experiences in ambulatory, community and inpatient environments during three years of concentrated study and hands-on training.

The first year of residency, called the internship year, is when the final "step" of the USMLE (Step 3 exam) is taken. During their three years of training, family medicine residents must meet the program requirements for both residency education in family medicine and certification by the American Board of Family Medicine (ABFM). Specific requirements for family medicine residency training may vary by program, based on community need and the population served. After three "program years" of training are completed and all requirements are met, residents are eligible to take the certification exam by the ABFM. Toward the end of residency, physicians also apply for licensure from their state medical boards. Although each state is different in their requirements for initial medical licensure, it is a necessity that physicians pass Step 3 of the USMLE. Following the completion of their family medicine residency, graduates are eligible to sit for their board examination from the American Board of Family Medicine

The below tables offer a side-by-side comparison of the education and training involved in becoming a family physician versus the requirements to become a doctor of nursing practice.

Degrees Required and Time to Completion

	Undergraduate Degree	Entrance Exam	Post-Graduate Schooling	Residency and Duration	TOTAL TIME FOR COMPLETION
Family Physician (MD or DO)	Standard 4-year BA/BS	Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT)	4 years, doctoral program (MD or DO)	REQUIRED, 3 years minimum	11 years
Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP)	Standard 4-year BA/BS*	GRE and NCLEX required for MSN programs. No entrance exam for DNP programs.	1.5 – 3 years, master’s program (MSN) + 2 years, doctoral program (DNP)	NONE	7.5 – 9 years

Medical/Professional School and Residency/Post-Graduate Hours for Completion

	Lecture Hours (Pre-Clinical Years)	Study Hours (Pre-Clinical Years)	Combined Hours (Clinical Years)	Residency Hours	TOTAL HOURS
Family Physician	2,700	3,000**	6,000	9,000 – 10,000	20,700 – 21,700
DNP	1,000 – 2,000	1,500 – 2,250**	1,000 – 1,800***	0	3,500 – 6,050
DIFFERENCE	700 – 1,700	750 – 1,500	4,200 – 5,000	9,000 – 10,000	15,650 – 17,200

*While a standard 4-year degree, preferably a BSN, is recommended, alternate pathways exist for an RN without a bachelor’s degree to enter some master’s programs.

**Estimate based on 750 hours of study dedicated by a student per year.

***Only 500 hours additional clinical experience recommended following the 500 – 1,500 hours of clinical training typically received during completion of an MSN program.

Sources:

Vanderbilt University Doctor of Nursing Practice Program, Family Nurse Practitioner Program, and the *Vanderbilt University School of Nursing Student Handbook 2009-2010* information retrieved from http://www.nursing.vanderbilt.edu/dnp/study_plan.html, http://www.nursing.vanderbilt.edu/msn/fnp_plan.html, and <http://www.nursing.vanderbilt.edu/current/handbook.pdf> [Accessed January 2010].