



Education and Training: Family Physicians versus Nurse Practitioners

Most Nurse Practitioners (NP)—also known as Advanced Practice Nurses (APN) and Advanced Registered Nurse Practitioners (ARNP)—receive their education typically through a one-and-a-half to three-year degree program that confers a Master of Science in Nursing (MSN), depending on the prior education of the student. Approximately 77 percent of NPs hold an MSN degree. Many of the remainder used alternate pathways available in their state to achieve NP licensure without advanced collegiate education. Currently, there are at least 342 institutions in the United States accredited by the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education (CCNE) and the National League for Nursing Accreditation Commission (NLNAC), the two major accrediting organizations. Typically, master's level nursing programs require students for entry at least to have passed the National Council Licensure Exam for Registered Nurses (NCLEX-RN) and satisfactorily completed the Graduate Record Examination (GRE).

Vanderbilt University's MSN program, for example, offers a Family Nurse Practitioner (FNP) specialization program. For registered nurses with a Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN), the MSN program is three semesters of 40 total credit hours, inclusive of didactic and clinical education. According to the program's handbook, MSN FNP candidates receive a total of 805 combined hours of didactic and lab education. Clinical education is estimated to amount to approximately 1,400 hours. For students with a bachelor's degree and no nursing experience, Vanderbilt offers a program of six semesters, or three full-time years, of education and training that leads to an MSN degree.

According to a January 2007 survey in the *American Journal of Nurse Practitioners*, over half of the respondents reported that their NP programs (both master's and certificate programs) had made them, "only somewhat or minimally prepared to practice."

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. Osteopathic family physicians follow a similar pathway, which is accredited by the American Osteopathic Association.

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 nurse practitioner.

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
Nurse Practitioner (NP, ARNP, etc.)	Standard 4-year BA/BS*	Graduate Record Examination (GRE) and National Council Licensure Exam for Registered Nurses (NCLEX-RN)	1.5 – 3 years, master’s program (MSN)	NONE	5.5 – 7 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
Nurse Practitioner	800 – 1,600	1,500 – 2,250**	500 – 1,500	0	2,800 – 5,350
DIFFERENCE	1,100 – 1,900	750 – 1,500	5,500 – 5,000	9,000 – 10,000	16,350 – 17,900

*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.

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

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