



A Guide to Careers in Nursing

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The Benefits of Pursuing an Advanced Degree in Nursing

The field of nursing offers endless opportunities for those who are drawn to the healthcare profession. As technology and patient populations evolve, nurses are increasingly the face of high-quality care for patients across all health settings. Because of the increased reliance on nursing expertise, nursing has become a complex and varied field with more and more opportunities to advance into specialized or leadership positions.

The evolution in the field means increased incentive for all nurses to continue their education at the graduate level, either through a master's or doctoral program or through a specialized certification program in addition to a master's degree.

Why Nurses Get Graduate Degrees

Most nurses who get a graduate degree in nursing do so because they want access to greater opportunity. While it can be tough to contemplate going back to school if you are already working as a nurse, the long-term options that are available to someone with a BSN vs. an MSN vs. a DNP are very different.

BSN: Nurses with a BSN are eligible for all entry-level nursing roles across areas of specialty. With time and experience, nurses with a BSN may become eligible for nursing roles with increased responsibility like charge nurse or care coordinator, but their options for career growth are more limited.

MSN: Nurses with an MSN are eligible for certification in a wide range of leadership and specialized nursing roles like clinical nurse leader or advanced registered nurse practitioner (ARNP). The degree allows nurses to move out of generalized nursing care and into jobs with more ownership and focus.

DNP: Nurses with a DNP have the highest possible degree for clinical nursing. Nurses with a DNP are eligible for all leadership roles and ARNP certifications as well as for roles in research, administration, and policy. In some states, a DNP qualifies you for unrestricted practice autonomy as a nurse practitioner.

A Nursing Graduate Degree Could Prepare You to Work in These Kinds of Roles

Nurse Practitioner
Clinical Nurse Specialist
Clinical Nurse Leader
Certified Registered Nurse Anesthetists
Certified Nurse Midwives
Health Policy Nurse

Family Nurse Practitioner

Public Health Nurse

Nurse Informaticist

Nurse Educator

Nurse Administrator

Nurse Researcher

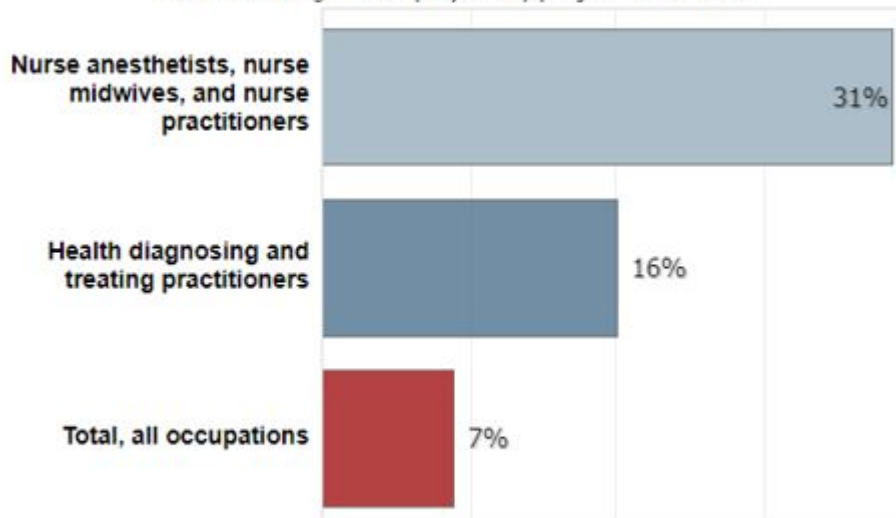
Psychiatric Mental Health Nurse Practitioner

Pediatric Nurse Practitioner

Let's Take a Look at the Nursing Numbers

Nurse Anesthetists, Nurse Midwives, and Nurse Practitioners

Percent change in employment, projected 2016-26



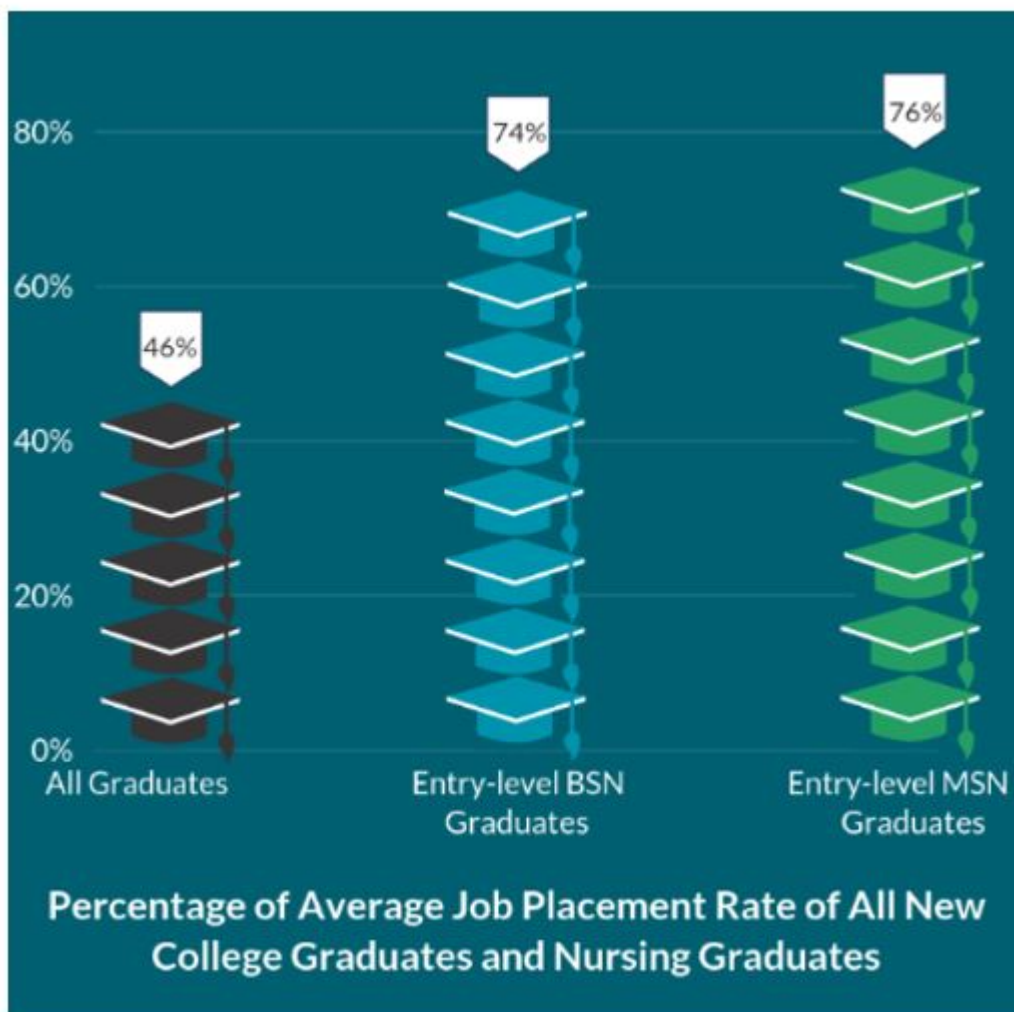
Note: All Occupations includes all occupations in the U.S. Economy.

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Employment Projections program

2. [Research indicates that 76% of graduates from entry-level MSN programs](#) have been offered a job by graduation. Four to six months out from graduation, 95% of graduates have been offered jobs.
3. The ongoing nursing shortage and the [projected retirement of over 1 million experienced nurses by 2030](#) means that nurses who gain higher levels of education and experience now will be well-poised to lead the next generation of nurses in all settings: research, education, and practice.

There's strong evidence that nursing is a top career option and that nursing graduate degrees are worth it. Here are three key reasons (backed by numbers) why you should embrace the field of nursing for your career and pursue an advanced degree that opens up your opportunities for growth within the field:

1. Nursing and other healthcare related professions are currently some of the [fastest growing occupations in the United States](#), with the need for [nurse practitioners in particular growing at 36%](#), far above the average for all occupations.



What is the Career Outlook for Nurses with Advanced Degrees?

Now that you understand the enormous opportunity and need for experienced nurses, especially those with graduate degrees, let's take a look at the salary expectations and types of roles available to nurses with advanced degrees.

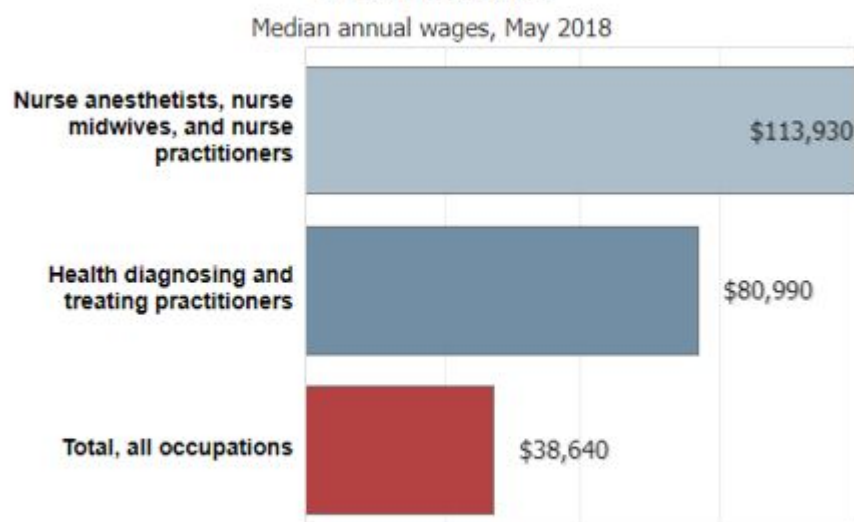
Here's What You Could Make as a Nurse with a Graduate Degree

Although salaries for nurses vary from state to state and are dependent on levels of experience, nurses with graduate degrees who work in specialized roles like that of nurse practitioner make on average over \$100,000 a year according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

[According to Nurse Journal](#), "the average salary of someone who holds a BSN degree is between \$42,343 and \$81,768" while the average salary of a nurse with an MSN is "between \$62,281 and \$195,743."

Nurse practitioners with a doctor of nursing practice (DNP) degree [make on average \\$5,000 more](#) annually than their counterparts who only have a master's degree.

Nurse Anesthetists, Nurse Midwives, and Nurse Practitioners



Note: All Occupations includes all occupations in the U.S. Economy.

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Employment Statistics

Understanding the Graduate Degree Options that Will Develop Your Nursing Career

The Master's of Science in Nursing (MSN)

A master's of science in nursing is a graduate degree program that offers students courses in evidence-based practice generally, leadership in a nursing setting, courses in the chosen area of specialty, and clinical experience in the chosen area of specialty. As part of the completion of the master's program, students become eligible to pass state-based exams and certifications so they can practice as nurse practitioners, clinical leaders, and more.

There are many different types of MSN programs available, including RN to MSN, BSN to MSN, and entry-level MSN program options. Most MSN programs can be completed in 2-3 years and offer graduates an immediate return on investment if they are able to fulfill their state-specific requirements for licensing and certification upon completion of the program.

Fun Fact: 90% of Pacific Lutheran University's MSN graduates have a 3-year first-time pass rate for their clinical leader certification. 98% of PLU's entry-level MSN students pass the NCLEX-RN on their first attempt.



The Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP)

The doctor of nursing practice degree (DNP) is designed for students who are seeking a degree at the highest level of nursing practice. While it is possible to get a Ph.D. in Nursing, a Ph.D. is for those who are interested in academia, research, and theory, while DNP graduates serve as leaders in the health profession and implement the best, most recent research into the practice of nursing to improve health outcomes.



According to the [American Association of Colleges of Nursing \(AACN\)](#), a majority of nursing schools are advocating for the DNP degree to be required for all nurses who are interested in taking on one of the four APRN roles. Increasingly, nurses who want to lead or teach across the profession are choosing to pursue graduate education all the way through the DNP level.

Fun Fact: Historically, 100% of graduates from PLU's DNP program pass the national certification exam for Family Nurse Practitioners (FNPs).

Note: Requirements for certification and licensure vary from state to state and may not be transferable. If you receive your MSN or DNP in a specific state and pass your exams, you will be immediately qualified to work in that state, but may need to pass a different exam to practice elsewhere.

A Closer Look at PLU's Graduate Nursing Programs

Pacific Lutheran University's School of Nursing is a professional school that combines nursing science with a strong foundation in natural sciences and the liberal arts. Since 1990, our graduate nursing programs have been providing outstanding, diversified clinical experience and instruction to students in the Seattle/Tacoma area.

PLU's School of Nursing offers two types of graduate degrees: an MSN and DNP.

PLU's Master of Science in Nursing

[PLU's Master of Science in Nursing](#)

Ranked as one of the top 150 graduate nursing programs in the US by US News and World Report, the PLU MSN program is designed to equip nurses with the knowledge and skills to lead change, promote health, and elevate care in various roles and settings.

At the MSN level, we offer both a BSN-MSN track and an [entry-level MSN track](#) for students with a non-nursing bachelor's degree. We are the only school in Washington state that offers an entry-level MSN program. We offer students the opportunity to specialize as Advanced Generalists or as Clinical Nurse Leaders.

Advanced Generalist: As frontline caregivers, the generalist nurse plans and provides direct care to patients, interacts with families, coordinates patient care that requires regular interface with other members of the health care team (nurses, physicians, and others), and participates in organizational activities that promote safe, quality and efficient patient care.

Clinical Nurse Leader: The Clinical Nurse Leader (CNL) is a nursing role developed by the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) in collaboration with an array of leaders from the practice environment. The CNL is an advanced generalist clinician with education at the master's degree level.

PLU'S Doctor of Nursing Practice

[PLU'S Doctor of Nursing Practice](#)

The PLU DNP program prepares students to develop and evaluate quality care within a health system, collaborate with inter-professional teams to improve health outcomes, and be leaders in the nursing profession.

At the DNP level, we offer a BSN-DNP track, an MSN-DNP track, and an MSN-APRN-DNP track for students who are already working in a specialized nursing role but want to complete their doctorate. We also offer two different concentrations within the DNP program: Family Nurse Practitioner (FNP)

and Psychiatric Mental Health Nurse Practitioner (PMHNP).

Alumni Story

The DNP program trains nurse practitioners for lives of leadership. Learn about how graduates improved patient outcomes through partnerships with major health care organizations: [Shaping Health Care](#).

Shaping Healthcare

[Molly Martin \(DNP\)](#)

“It’s one thing to think about it, it’s another to do it,” Teri Woo said of the workload for Doctor of Nursing Practice students. The former associate dean for graduate nursing programs mentored the first DNP cohort. “Faculty push them out of their comfort zone, while also supporting them. They can’t envision what they’ve not done. I could see it. They’ve exceeded my expectations.”

The School of Nursing kept luring Molly Martin back. By the time she earned the university’s highest degree, she left with more than a shiny new title.

The nurse practitioner for Providence Medical Group already earned her bachelor’s and master’s degrees in nursing at Pacific Lutheran University.

“PLU makes sure you’re in there and you’re getting your hands dirty, by experience not just by reading it in a textbook,” she said. “That’s what kept me coming back over and over again.”

Molly Martin (DNP)

So, it was a no-brainer for Martin to return to the university as part of the first cohort of the new Doctor of Nursing Practice Program. It connects students to health care providers all over the Puget Sound region, typically primary care providers, as they navigate their pathways to leadership in nursing.

“The doctorate is more than being a nurse,” said Teri Woo, associate dean for graduate nursing programs. “It’s been really fun to be a part of watching their growth. I’m really proud of them.”

Nurses who enter the DNP program with a master’s degree can earn a doctorate in two years; nurses with a bachelor’s degree complete the program in three years. Current nurse practitioners may attend part time, earning their doctorates in two years.

The most important component of the program — the first doctorate offered by PLU — is the scholarly research project, Woo said.

“I was already working as a family nurse practitioner,” said Martin, one of six students to graduate with a doctorate in May. “I knew PLU would allow me to work on my doctoral project at my place of work, so I could find a problem that I had identified and then create my project around that problem.”

The practice-improvement or program-development projects offer practical and immediate application. They must aim to improve patient care.

“This group has done amazing work on their projects,” Woo said. “Their projects have had or will have positive impacts on patient outcomes.”

Collectively, the cohort worked closely with three heavy-hitter medical organizations in the region: Providence, Kaiser Permanente (formerly Group Health), and Valley Medical Center.

Woo said the quality of the projects directly relates to the intimacy of the doctoral program. “A lot of other programs are large and don’t have as much involvement from faculty,” she said. “That’s what’s needed, someone has to teach it to you and support you. Just like any other field, they need mentorship. You need someone committed to them and their progress.”

And my, do they show progress. The cohort has a perfect pass rate on the national boards, the process by which they become certified to practice. Additionally, all of them submitted their scholarly projects for publication or presentation at a national conference.

“That’s unheard of,” Woo said. That’s key to the DNP program, she stressed — preparing leaders to influence the future of nursing.

Long before launching its first doctoral program, PLU was nationally renowned for its rigorous nursing school and post-graduate success.

In 2003, the Institute of Medicine released a report about health care education and recommended increasing the competencies of health care provider education in a number of areas.

In response, the member schools within the American Association of Colleges of Nursing — the voice for nursing programs nationwide — formally agreed on moving the level of preparation required for advanced nursing practice from the master’s to the doctoral level in 2006.

PLU, a member of that association, already touted a successful family nurse practitioner master’s program. It built upon the strong program to develop a Doctor of Nursing Practice degree. Woo said this next step, which was the centerpiece of her work upon coming to PLU in 2012, was pivotal.

“It takes more than a master’s degree to be a nurse practitioner,” she said, noting that patients are increasingly more complex to treat. “This is what I was hired to do.”

Woo stressed the monumental effort that launched PLU’s DNP program. The process required collaboration from stakeholders across the university. “What has been really amazing is how the university community has embraced a doctorate program,” she said.

The result of the new addition: an even stronger reputation for PLU in the world of nursing, Woo said.

“Someone hiring a graduate of the DNP program is not only getting a quality nurse practitioner,” Woo said, “but also someone to improve safety and quality outcomes for patients.”

Moving forward, Woo said the goal is to graduate 12 nurse practitioners per cohort — double the size of the first group who walked across the Commencement stage this year. “We want to have a high-quality, small program,” she said.

Just as she did throughout the two previous nursing programs, Martin received a lot of support from Woo and other PLU faculty members. As she worked on her program-development project — in which she streamlined enhanced Medicare wellness visits — she confided in them to build and sustain her confidence, as well as assist with troubleshooting issues along the way.

“It’s almost like they help you identify your weaknesses before you know they’re weaknesses,” Martin said.

The mentorship, research and community partnership that’s built into the DNP program offers nurse practitioners a well-rounded education, Martin said.

“I love direct patient care and I never want to get away from that,” she said. “But the DNP program allows me to think beyond just the one-to-one patient care.”

In other words, it places nurse practitioners at the center of innovation. Although the accomplishment opens doors to leadership positions in the industry, Martin said she plans to always focus on care for the whole patient — care for their health and their spirit.

“There are just those times that you can see instantly that you’ve made a difference in their lives,” she said. “They come back to see you for a follow up and they’re getting better. That’s the whole reason for doing this.”

Fortifying Health Within Prison Walls

[Eric Larsen \(ELMSN\).](#)

Every week, about 150 inmates file off buses at the Washington Corrections Center in Shelton.

Newly convicted, the men begin the process of transferring to the resident facilities where they will serve their sentences.

Before they disperse across the state, though, they must pay a visit to the infirmary. With care and compassion, Eric Larsen '09 and his team address the inmates' health care needs: building medical charts, sorting out prescriptions, checking for communicable diseases, and much more.

“We don’t know who they are, we don’t know anything about them,” said Larsen, an advanced registered nurse practitioner who earned his Master of Science in Nursing at Pacific Lutheran University. “And we have to get a handle on their medical situation.”

That work is in addition to monitoring the health of the resident population, roughly 600 inmates who live at the Shelton facility.

“All of that keeps us pretty busy,” Larsen said.

Busy is an understatement. Inmate populations often run the gamut of health care needs: men ages 18 and beyond — some who have never seen a doctor in their lives, Larsen said — who require everything from treatment for chronic conditions and medical emergencies, to inpatient services and psychiatric care.

"We see things there that you wouldn't normally see in the community very often," Larsen said.

Adequate medical care for inmates is a constitutional right. But for Larsen, it's more than that.

"I get a direct, daily sense that I make a difference," he said. "What I do now is right in front of me, it's almost immediate all the time."

And that feeling was precisely what Larsen was after when he made a midlife career change more than a decade ago.

Larsen, who studied evolution and avian ecology at The Evergreen State College, worked as a biologist for the state Department of Fish and Wildlife. As he rose through the ranks, his tasks became more and more sequestered.

"The idea of working for the sake of working has never been appealing to me," Larsen said. "I came to a realization that there wasn't a whole lot of making a difference, it was a whole lot of trying."

While he hesitates to say he hit the cliché midlife crisis, "I was at midlife and it was a crisis," he said, chuckling.



Eric Larsen (ELMSN)

After a lot of research and exhausting career development resources, all signs pointed Larsen to nursing. So, he quit his Fish and Wildlife job in 2006, attended a local community college to complete the necessary prerequisites and applied to the entry-level master's program through PLU's School of Nursing.

"I was 46 years old. It was a big change for me," Larsen said. "It involved a lot of risk and a lot of taking chances."

Carol Seavor, interim dean for the School of Nursing, said Larsen's story isn't necessarily unique. In fact, it's a welcome byproduct of the entry-level MSN program.

"It brings diversity and richness to nursing that we wouldn't get otherwise," Seavor said, underscoring the diverse backgrounds and life experiences entry-level students bring to the program, and to their patient care once they complete their degrees. "They really add a lot to the profession."

Like Larsen, Seavor said, many PLU nursing students — entry-level master's and otherwise — are drawn to the field because of an overwhelming urge to serve.

"Many people choose nursing as a career to make a difference in the lives of others," she said. "Nursing care does make a difference in health outcomes."

And that goal — improving inmates' health, no matter how big or small the improvement is — makes the long days and rigid environment inside the prison walls worth it, Larsen said.

"It's not an abstraction like when I was at Fish and Wildlife," he said. "I've been able to develop ways of engaging people that produce results in ways I struggled in the beginning. It's hugely satisfying."

While it isn't necessarily the most popular preceptorship — a supervised clinical experience where nursing students gain hands-on experience in the field — Larsen says the Shelton facility offers a valuable learning environment for aspiring nurses. He's hosted half a dozen students over the past 10 years, mostly nursing students from PLU.

"It's very rich in seeing complexity. It's rich in dealing with very difficult patients," he said, noting the prevalence of psychosocial and mental health issues. "You'll see things you'll see nowhere else. You never know what you're going to find."

With that variety of care, a student leaves equipped with the confidence that they can do just about anything in primary care, he added.

"What I work on a lot is confidence building and getting people to the point where they trust that they are making good decisions," Larsen said.

And, he says, that isn't a tough job with the PLU nurses he works with.

"They are all bright," Larsen said. "They are eager, they are willing, they're gung-ho. I've never had a student who was questionable. I'm sure it has to do with the incredibly competitive selection process."

The nurses in training bring that passion to partner providers in surrounding communities, where they often help underserved patients in areas facing health care shortages. Tracy Pitt — associate director of advising, admission and student support in the School of Nursing — said that by the end of the 27-

month program, each individual has completed more than 1,000 clinical hours.

Seavor said the community-based experience graduate students gain increases their confidence and makes for a smoother transition from theory to practice after graduation.

“That’s building the lifelong learning process,” Seavor said. “We couldn’t do it without our practice partners.”

Seavor says the entry-level master’s program is intense: within 15 months students complete the equivalent of a rigorous undergraduate nursing education, and are eligible to sit for the national licensure exam; then, for the second half of the program, the registered nurses begin their graduate-level studies.

It’s not lost on Larsen how far he’s come since his 46-year-old self decided to embrace the intensity.

“Nursing school was probably the most humbling thing I’ve done,” he said. “Working in a prison can be very similar.”

Working in a prison means sacrificing personal freedoms just to show up to work every day, and a rigid system that complicates access to patients in need of care. It’s a new kind of intensity that can bring a lot of angst, Larsen acknowledges.

But, he says, all the trouble is worth it:

“It’s hugely satisfying. I’m 58 years old now. I’m not going to be able to pull this off forever. It’s a young person’s sport to put in 12-hour days. But as long as I can deal with it, I will.”

The Advantages of Pursuing Nursing as a Career in Washington

The demand for nurses and for high quality nursing care exists across the country, but some states are especially good places to build your career as a nurse.

A combination of economic, legal, and cultural factors make Washington state a highly desirable place for nurses to work and grow their nursing careers long-term.

- Washington nurses and nurse practitioners [make significantly more than the national average](#) in annual salary.
- Washington is expected to see [a 39.5% growth in registered nurse positions](#) by 2030.
- Earning a DNP degree in Washington gives you [independent full practice autonomy](#), an important legal right that increases opportunity and growth potential for aspiring nurse practitioners. Most states do not offer NPs full practice autonomy.
- The [top ranked Washington healthcare system](#) means that nurses are surrounded by other highly qualified nurses and doctors who are committed to excellent patient care.
- Washington is consistently ranked as one of the best places to live in the country. It took the top spot in the [2019 rankings by U.S. News and World Report](#) based on criteria like healthcare, education, economy, and opportunity. It was also named the [second best state for jobs](#) in a study done by WalletHub.

If you are considering developing your nursing career, Washington could be the perfect state for you.

Why Study Nursing at Pacific Lutheran University?

If you are considering a graduate degree in nursing, Pacific Lutheran University could be the perfect place to grow into a leader in the nursing profession.

- Pacific Lutheran University has an excellent reputation in the Washington area and beyond, [ranking in the top 120 schools](#) nationally for excellence in both our master's and doctoral nursing programs. Our graduates are easily able to find work they love because healthcare centers know and trust the PLU education.
- PLU's graduate programs include a guaranteed practicum placement, which ensures our students get the clinical experience they need to excel.
- PLU's programs feature small cohorts, in-person classes, and a focus on highly experiential learning. This focus on the personal helps our students become excellent nurses, ready to lead others and care for patients with an experienced, empathetic hand.

The Next Steps Toward Your Advanced Nursing Career

Now is the time to immerse yourself in an experiential, top-ranked graduate nursing program that will give you the skills you need to thrive in the nursing profession long-term. An advanced degree in nursing will allow you to take the next step in your nursing career and prepare you to provide high-quality care to those who need it most.

Now that you understand what nursing career paths and degree options are available to you, we invite you to get in touch with us and ask your specific questions about advanced nursing degrees and how you can get started on your next academic journey!

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