

Fact Sheet:

Degree Completion Programs for Registered Nurses: RN to Master's Degree and RN to Baccalaureate Programs

Quality patient care hinges on having a highly educated nursing workforce. Research has shown the lower mortality rates, fewer medication errors and quality outcomes are all linked to nurses prepared at the baccalaureate and higher degree level. The American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) supports the career ladder concept for nursing and understands that education enhances both clinical competency and patient care.

To facilitate a better educated workforce, degree completion programs provide additional education to registered nurses (RNs) who received their initial nursing preparation in diploma and associate degree (ADN) programs. These bridge programs build on previous learning, prepare nurses for a higher level of nursing practice, and provide RNs with the education necessary to move forward in their nursing careers.

RN to Master's Degree Program

Currently, there are 198 programs available nationwide to transition RNs with diplomas and associate degrees to the master's degree level (MSN, MS or Master of Science in Nursing degree). These programs prepare nurses to assume positions requiring graduate preparation, including roles in administration, teaching, research, and as Clinical Nurse Leaders. Master's degree-prepared nurses are in high demand as expert clinicians, nurse executives, clinical educators, health policy consultants, and research assistants. For a listing of RN to MSN programs, use the online [AACN member program directory](#).

- RN to MSN programs generally take up to 3 years to complete with specific requirements varying by institution and the student's previous course work. Though the majority of these programs are offered in traditional classroom settings, some RN to MSN programs are offered largely online or in a blended classroom/online format.
- The baccalaureate level content missing from diploma and ADN programs is built into the front-end of the RN to MSN program. Mastery of this upper level basic nursing content is necessary for students to move on to graduate study. Upon completion, many program award both the baccalaureate and master's degree.
- The number of RN to MSN programs has nearly tripled in the past 27 years, from 70 programs in 1994 to 198 programs today. According to AACN's 2021 survey of nursing schools, 28 new RN to MSN programs are in the planning stages.

Talking Points

- Nursing degree completion programs provide an important bridge for creating a more highly educated nursing workforce and enhancing patient care. Hospitals and other employers are encouraged to support nurses interested in completing these programs and strengthening their nursing practice.
- There is a misperception that RN to MSN programs can circumvent baccalaureate level nursing content which is not the case. In fact, the baccalaureate course work embedded in these programs must provide a sufficient bridge to graduate study in order to prepare students to complete graduate level courses and to meet the accreditation standards set by the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education.
- For nurses interested in teaching careers, RN to MSN programs can be an important first step in their education en route to doctoral preparation. AACN recognizes the doctoral degree as the appropriate and desired credential for a career as a nurse educator. Though master's level nurses with additional course work are prepared to teach in clinical capacities and entry-level nursing programs, the doctoral degree is necessary to fulfill the full nurse faculty role in senior colleges and universities and to achieve parity with faculty in the other health professions.

RN to Baccalaureate Programs

RN to Baccalaureate (BSN, BS, or Bachelor of Science in Nursing) programs provide an efficient bridge for diploma and ADN-prepared nurses who wish to develop stronger clinical reasoning and analytical skills to advance their careers. RN to BSN programs build on initial nursing preparation with course work to enhance professional development, prepare for a broader scope of practice, and provide a better understanding of the cultural, political, economic, and social issues that affect patients and influence care delivery. These programs are growing in importance since many professional practice settings, including Magnet hospitals and academic health centers, now require or prefer the baccalaureate degree for specific nursing roles. For a listing of RN to BSN programs, use the [online AACN member program directory](#).

- Currently 781 RN to BSN programs are available nationwide, including more than 650 programs that are offered at least partially online. Program length varies between 1 to 2 years depending upon the school's requirements, program type and the student's previous academic achievement.
- Despite calls for a more highly educated nursing workforce, enrollment and graduations from RN to BSN programs have dipped in recent years. From 2020 to 2021, enrollments decreased 9.6 percent, and graduations were down by 1.5 percent. This recent downward trend follows an enrollment surge in RN to BSN programs, which saw a rapid increase from 30,684 students in 2002 to 139,587 enrolled students in 2018 (a 355% increase).
- Hundreds of articulation agreements between ADN and diploma programs and four-year institutions exist nationwide, including some statewide agreements, to facilitate students seeking baccalaureate level nursing education. Before enrolling in diploma and ADN programs, students are encouraged to check with school administrators to see what articulation agreements exist with baccalaureate schools and to determine which course work will be transferable.

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