

## The PhD in Nursing: Defining the Degree and Shaping the Next Generation of Nurse Scientists in Hawai'i

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### Introduction

Nursing is a complex discipline, defined by the American Nurses Association as “[integrating] the art and science of caring and focuses on the protection, promotion, and optimization of health and human functioning; prevention of illness and injury; facilitation of healing; and alleviation of suffering through compassionate presence. Nursing is the diagnosis and treatment of human responses and advocacy in the care of individuals, families, groups, communities, and populations in recognition of the connection of all humanity.”<sup>1</sup> While nursing is typically only conceptualized within the roles of the bedside nurse and the advanced practice nurse practitioner, the nursing profession is much more expansive, including roles encompassing community and public health, school health, hospital administration, policy work, education, and research.

The Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) is the highest degree offered within nursing, building a workforce of scientists and scholars to advance nursing knowledge through research and scholarship.<sup>2</sup> PhD-prepared nurses not only advance nursing-specific research, but as the definition above indicates, expand across all areas and levels of health, wellness, prevention, and advocacy to build evidence and promote innovative solutions to many health related topics affecting our communities. PhD-prepared nurses are important within the research setting and also within education as faculty for our future nursing workforce and within health care institutions as administrators and leaders.<sup>3</sup> Hawai'i faces a significant state-wide faculty shortage and a lack of research tailored to the state's unique communities and populations. For instance, in Hawai'i less than 3% of nurses hold PhDs<sup>4</sup> highlighting a critical need for more PhD-prepared nurses within our state.<sup>5</sup>

The demand for PhD-prepared nurses persists, especially with the faculty shortage, which is poised to grow in the coming years with much of existing faculty nearing retirement age.<sup>5</sup> Fortunately, there is a new opportunity for nurses to attain their PhDs locally.

The University of Hawai'i at Mānoa School of Nursing and Dental Hygiene has relaunched its PhD in Nursing pro-

gram with a new, exciting curriculum and opportunities for students to delve into how nursing research can intersect with Native Hawaiian culture to address key needs within communities.<sup>6</sup> The program starts in 2026. The curriculum focuses on conducting community-based research, implementing research using a multitude of methodologies and approaches, and understanding how best to address key health issues and problems with scientific rigor. It was developed with success in mind, supporting the growth and development of independent researchers and scholars upon graduation, with a focus on meeting needs in Hawai'i and the Pacific Basin. As the only PhD in nursing program at an Indigenous-serving institution, this program has the potential to be the cornerstone for centering the needs of Indigenous communities here and across the world.

### History and Evolution of the PhD in Nursing

The PhD in Nursing degree has been in existence in the US since the mid-20th century, with growth in the number of programs in the 1980s, when the National Institutes of Health established the National Institute of Nursing Research (NINR).<sup>7</sup> Since then, PhD in Nursing programs have often aligned their program learning objectives with NINR priority areas,<sup>8</sup> supporting a concerted national effort to advance nursing and health care science to transform clinical practice and improve health outcomes. As of 2023, there were 148 PhD in Nursing programs across the United States.<sup>9</sup> However, there remains a relative lack of racial diversity among PhD students,<sup>10</sup> particularly among American Indian/Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander students.<sup>11</sup> This disparity persists, despite 38 of these programs being at Minority-Serving Institutions, of which 22 are at Asian American and Native American, Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions.<sup>12</sup> Ensuring accessibility and appropriate support for PhD learners from underrepresented backgrounds is key to diversifying the nursing workforce through racially concordant education and research (through diverse faculty and researcher representation),<sup>13, 14</sup> which may help reduce many of the health disparities that exist today. The new PhD in Nursing program will build in these structures and support to maximize success for students.

### PhD vs. DNP

A common question within the nursing discipline is how the PhD and the Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) degrees differ, and the relative benefits to both. The PhD in Nursing

is akin to other PhD degrees in rigor and status, with clear preparation to be a scientist developing new scientific knowledge within its respective field. Around 2004, the DNP degree was created by the American Association of Colleges of Nursing to elevate advanced practice nursing to a doctoral level,<sup>15</sup> similar to the pathways seen within pharmacy (PharmD), physical therapy (DPT), public health (DrPH), medicine (MD), and dentistry (DDS/DMD).<sup>16</sup> These clinical doctoral degrees are focused on the advancement of clinical practice expertise and on the application and translation of evidence into practice (also referred to as evidence-based practice).<sup>17</sup> Evidence-based practice typically relies on evidence developed by PhD-prepared scientists, ensuring evidence is used to improve outcomes within clinical practice.<sup>3</sup>

While some DNP graduates conduct research studies similar to what is often expected from PhD-prepared scientists, it is not the expectation within the degree structure. PhD-prepared nurses typically focus on research and academia, while DNP-prepared nurses focus on incorporating science in organizational, clinical, and policy settings. Further, DNP education programs are often integrated within advanced practice nursing training, such as family nurse practitioner, psychiatric mental health nurse practitioner, and adult/gerontological nurse practitioner education,<sup>18</sup> all of which are offered at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa School of Nursing and Dental Hygiene.<sup>19</sup> Given the different focus for the DNP and PhD programs, it is not uncommon for individuals to strive to have both degrees, or a PhD with a Masters of Science in Advanced Population Health Nursing or Nursing Education and Leadership, lending to unique skill sets and knowledge to address today's biggest issues.

## PhD-Prepared Nurses in Hawai'i

PhD-prepared nurses are working in numerous settings and environments within Hawai'i, with opportunities for expansion within the state. PhD-prepared nurses fill roles as faculty in nursing education programs, from community colleges to public and private universities. PhD-prepared

nurses serve as researchers and clinicians within hospital systems and health care organizations. They are leading centers and organizations promoting public policy and advocacy. PhD-prepared nurses are supporting philanthropic organizations and funding institutions at the state and national levels. Lastly, a PhD in Nursing is not only for nurses. Those with other health care backgrounds may benefit from developing research competency from a nursing perspective (the largest health care profession), which focuses on understanding health from a local to planetary perspective using prevention, wellness, and advocacy as key drivers of health. Although PhD-prepared nurses can serve a plethora of roles, the percentage of nurses who have PhDs is limited, an issue the new PhD in Nursing program will address.

## Conclusion

PhD-prepared nurses can help fulfill critical roles in academia, providing not only nursing research, but also educating future local nurses. While the nursing workforce in Hawai'i has grown since 2021, the proportion of resident nurses is decreasing.<sup>4</sup> For instance, as of 2023, 44% of RNs working in Hawai'i were out-of-state residents, while in 2013 only 33% were from out-of-state.<sup>4</sup> These out-of-state nurses could be providing telehealth services or working as travel nurses. Educating future local nurses has become even more crucial. The Hawai'i State Center for Nursing states that efforts to mitigate challenges related to shortages in workforce as well as nursing education capacity "are necessary to ensure that local schools of nursing can continue to educate local students who will eventually provide care to the local community."<sup>4</sup> Ensuring opportunity to increase the number of PhD-prepared nurses in Hawai'i is a key driver to addressing workforce shortages and supporting health and health care across the state.

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