1.5: Nursing Education and the NCLEX

Nursing Education and the NCLEX

Everyone who wants to become a nurse has a story to tell about why they want to enter the nursing profession. What is your story? Perhaps it has been a lifelong dream to become a Life Flight nurse, or maybe you became interested after watching a nurse help you or a family member through the birth of a baby, heal from a challenging illness, or assist a loved one at the end of life. Whatever the reason, everyone who wants to become a nurse must do two things: graduate from a state-approved nursing program and pass the National Council Licensure Exam (known as the NCLEX).

Nursing Programs

There are several types of nursing programs you can attend to become a nurse. If your goal is to become a Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN), you must successfully complete a one-year nursing program, pass the NCLEX-PN exam, and apply to your state board of nursing to receive a LPN license.

If you want to become a Registered Nurse, you can obtain either a two-year associate degree (ADN) or a four-year baccalaureate of science in nursing degree (BSN). Associate degree nursing graduates often enroll into a baccalaureate or higher degree program after they graduate. Many hospitals hire ADN nurses on a condition they complete their BSN within a specific time frame. A BSN is required for military nursing, case management, public health nursing, and school-based nursing services. Another lesser-known option to become an RN is to complete a three-year hospital-based diploma program, which was historically the most common way to become a nurse. Diploma programs have slowly been replaced by college degrees, and now only nine states offer this option. [1] After completing a diploma program, associate degree, or baccalaureate degree, nursing graduates must successfully pass the NCLEX-RN to apply for a registered nursing license from their state’s Board of Nursing.
NCLEX

Nursing graduates must successfully pass the National Council Licensure Examination (NCLEX) to receive a nursing license. Registered nurses must successfully pass the NCLEX-RN exam, and Licensed Practical Nurses (LPNs) or Licensed Vocational Nurses (LVNs) must pass the NCLEX-PN exam.

The NCLEX-PN and NCLEX-RN are online, adaptive tests taken at a specialized testing center. The NCLEX tests knowledge, skills, and abilities essential to the safe and effective practice of nursing at the entry level. NCLEX exams are continually reviewed and updated based on surveys of newly graduated nurses every three years.

Both the NCLEX-RN and the NCLEX-PN are variable length tests that adapt as you answer the test items. The NCLEX-RN examination can be anywhere from 75 to 265 items, depending on how quickly you are able to demonstrate your proficiency. Of these items, 15 are unscored test items. The time limit for this examination is six hours. The NCLEX-PN examination can be anywhere from 85 to 205 items. Of these items, 25 are unscored items. The time limit for this examination is five hours.\(^2\)

In 2023, the Next Generation NCLEX (NGN) is anticipated to go into effect. Examination questions on the NGN will use the new Clinical Judgment Measurement Model as a framework to measure prelicensure nursing graduates’ clinical judgment and decision-making. The critical thinking model called the “Nursing Process” (discussed in Chapter 4 of this book) will continue to underlie the NGN, but candidates will notice new terminology used to assess their decision-making. For example, candidates may be asked to “recognize cues,” “analyze cues,” “create a hypothesis,” “prioritize hypotheses,” “generate solutions,” “take actions,” or “evaluate outcomes.”\(^3\) For this reason, many of the case studies and learning activities included in this book will use similar terminology as the NGN.

There will also be new types of examination questions on the NGN, including case studies, enhanced hot spots, drag and drop ordering of responses, multiple responses, and embedded answer choices within paragraphs of text. View sample NGN questions in the following hyperlink. NCSBN’s rationale for including these types of questions is to “measure the nursing clinical judgment and decision-making ability of prospective entry-level nurses to protect the public’s health and welfare by assuring that safe and competent nursing care is provided by licensed nurses.”\(^4\) Similar questions have been incorporated into learning activities throughout this textbook.

Use the hyperlinks below to read more information about the NCLEX and the Next Generation NCLEX.

Note

Read more information about the NCLEX & Test Plans.


Nurse Licensure Compact

The Nurse Licensure Compact (NLC) allows a nurse to have one multistate nursing license with the ability to practice in their home state, as well as in other compact states. As of 2020, 33 states have implemented NLC legislation.
Advanced Nursing Degrees

After obtaining an RN license, nurses can receive advanced degrees to expand their opportunities in the nursing profession.

Master’s Degree in Nursing

A Master’s of Science in Nursing Degree (MSN) requires additional credits and years of schooling beyond the BSN. There are a variety of potential focuses in this degree, including Nurse Educator and Advanced Practice Nurse (APRN). Certifications associated with an MSN degree are Certified Nurse Educator (CNE), Nurse Practitioner (NP), Clinical Nurse Specialist (CNS), Certified Registered Nurse Anesthetist (CRNA), and Certified Nurse Midwife (CNM). Certifications require the successful completion of a certification exam, as well as continuing education requirements to maintain the certification. Scope of practice for advanced practice nursing roles is defined by each state’s Nurse Practice Act.

Doctoral Degrees in Nursing

Doctoral nursing degrees include the Doctor of Philosophy in Nursing (PhD) and the Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP). PhD-prepared nurses complete doctoral work that is focused on research. They often teach in a university setting or environment to conduct research. DNP-prepared nurses complete doctoral work that is focused on clinical nursing practice. They typically have work roles in advanced nursing practice, clinical leadership, or academic settings.

Lifelong Learning

No matter what nursing role or level of nursing education you choose, nursing practice changes rapidly and is constantly updated with new evidence-based practices. Nurses must commit to lifelong learning to continue to provide safe, quality care to their patients. Many states require continuing education credits to renew RN licenses, whereas others rely on health care organizations to set education standards and ongoing educational requirements.

Now that we have discussed nursing roles and education, let’s review legal and ethical considerations in nursing.

1. NCSBN. (2019). 2018 NCLEX examination statistics 77. [link]
2. NCSBN. (2019). NCLEX & Other Exams [link]
3. NCSBN. (2021). NCSBN Next Generation NCLEX Project [link]
4. NCSBN. (2021). NCSBN Next Generation NCLEX Project [link]