SURVIVAL GUIDE to GETTING STARTED WITH THE NURSE PRACTITIONER CAREER

Is the nurse practitioner career right for you?

© MidlevelU, LLC
Are you interested in becoming a nurse practitioner? Are you unsure if the nurse practitioner profession is a good fit for you? If you are considering becoming a nurse practitioner but still have questions, you are in the right place!

As a nurse practitioner myself, I had similar questions before beginning my career. I wasn’t quite sure what becoming a nurse practitioner would look like. The application process and cost of nurse practitioner programs seemed daunting. Ultimately, I decided to take the plunge into the nurse practitioner career and haven’t looked back since.

Let this eBook guide you through the thinking process of becoming a nurse practitioner. In a compilation of posts, I will discuss what the NP career path looks like so you can decide if it is the right profession for you. Then, I will take a quick look at the costs and time commitment associated with becoming a nurse practitioner to help you manage your expectations.

If you have any further questions in your quest to becoming a nurse practitioner, don’t hesitate to contact me and other members of the nurse practitioner community by commenting on my blog.

Enjoy and good luck in your decision making process!

Erin Tolbert, RN, FNP-C
PART 1: WHAT’S IT LIKE TO BE A NURSE PRACTITIONER

Before you enroll in a nurse practitioner program, it is important you know exactly what you are getting into. These posts will give you a glimpse into the day to day life of a nurse practitioner so you can determine if the NP career is the right choice for you.
I am thrilled I chose a career as a nurse practitioner and recommend it to almost everyone! My career provides me a flexible schedule, an interesting and challenging workday and a pretty good paycheck...all with just two years of schooling following my bachelor's degree.

As a nurse practitioner, I have worked in Family Practice, Urgent Care and Emergency Medicine. One of my favorite things about being a nurse practitioner is the flexibility the career provides. I am not tied to one type of practice or specialty. As a certified Family Nurse Practitioner, I am free to practice in specialty clinics, primary care clinics and in the hospital setting. When I no longer feel challenged by my work or my interest in a certain area wanes, I can move on.

The nurse practitioner career also allows me freedom with my schedule. Most jobs I have held provide rather unconventional scheduling. Some clinics have allowed me to work just four weekday shifts to be considered full-time while others have scheduled three, twelve hour workdays (my favorite!). Whether you are seeking flexibility to raise children, work a second job, travel or just have some free time, you should be able to find a work environment as a nurse practitioner that fits your scheduling needs.

Nurse practitioners are paid very well, especially for the amount of schooling they receive. The median salary for nurse practitioners in the United States is $90,600. With the right job, you can earn well over $100,000. To personally earn such a salary, I completed just a two year accelerated program following my bachelor's degree. I can't think of another career with such a high starting salary in return for so little schooling.

Finally, I enjoy working as a nurse practitioner for the challenge of continued learning. I cannot imagine sitting behind a desk for eight hours each day doing mundane paperwork. My job is active. No two days are exactly alike. I learn more everyday. When I don't know how to diagnose a certain problem I do further research- I am constantly learning.

If you have an interest in healthcare and especially if you are a nurse, the nurse practitioner profession might be the perfect fit for you. It is a growing field with endless opportunities for all different areas of interest.
I wake up early, take my dog for a jog and then sip a cup of coffee while I watch the morning news. I write a post for my the blog, MidlevelU of course, which helps aspiring nurse practitioners choose a nurse practitioner program. I don’t have to be at work today until 10am which is nice. I shower, throw on some scrubs and drive to the hospital. I work in an emergency department in Nashville, TN.

Once at work, I hit the ground running. There is rarely a slow day in the ER and today is no exception. I pick up two charts and immediately begin seeing patients. My first patient is a 31 year old male with nausea, vomiting and diarrhea. My second is a 65 year old female with chest pain. Good start, these are very routine patients, I know exactly what to do. I head back to my desk and begin putting in orders; a chest X-Ray, EKG, labs, nitro and aspirin for the woman with chest pain, IV fluids and zofran for the patient with vomiting. I pause to review an EKG as the nurse slides it onto my desk.

As I start to document my history, physical and exam findings, I hear another chart being placed in the rack and leave my desk to get the chart and see the next patient. A 29 year old male with shortness of breath. Should be straightforward; usually males in their 20’s are fairly healthy and not complex patients.

As I enter the room, I see that I am wrong. This guy looks sick, but why? His chest X-Ray looks terrible; extensive right sided pneumonia and developing pneumonia in the left lower lung. After questioning him further, I find he is an IV drug user which could be the reason for the extensive infection. A CT scan of his chest shows he may have septic pulmonary emboli and there is also concern for endocarditis. An interesting case to say the least.

I am at my desk catching up on some charting and eating a quick snack when one of the nurses asks for a provider (MD, NP or PA where I work) to quickly see the patient in room 3. An ambulance has brought in a patient with abdominal pain, vomiting and a blood pressure of 75/35. Not good. I quickly get up and go see the patient. I order IV fluids and labwork. I also notify my supervising physician that I have an unstable patient
and ask him to go take a look. He confirms I have the right treatment plan and asks me to keep him updated on the patient's condition.

Finally, 6 p.m. arrives. I have had a busy, but good day. I've seen 18 patients and have sutured two lacerations, drained two abscesses and admitted four patients to the hospital. This has been a pretty typical day in my life as a nurse practitioner.
Working in the ER, my shifts are usually at odd hours. Today I work from 6pm to 2am which I actually enjoy as it leaves the morning and afternoon free. I spend an hour at the gym, return home to have breakfast and do a few chores around the house. Then, I meet a friend for lunch, read a book on my porch and get ready for work. Already a great day and my shift at the hospital hasn't even started.

I arrive at work a few minutes early and immediately start seeing patients. The ER seems to be constantly busy. My first patient is a 40 year old male with abdominal pain. I pick up his chart, go into the room and observe him writhing in pain. Kidney stones. After two years in the ER I can usually diagnose them within seconds. I order him pain medication along with a CT scan and some lab work to verify my initial diagnosis.

My next patient is a 25 year old female involved in a rollover MVA (Motor Vehicle Accident). She is complaining of right wrist pain. I remove the rudimentary splint the paramedics have placed to examine her wrist more closely. Her wrist is swollen, bruised and deformed. I suspect a fracture and order pain medications and an X-Ray.

Then, I move on to my third patient, a 42 year old male who was doing construction on his home and has gotten a nail lodged in his index finger. He was unable to remove the nail on his own and suspects it is stuck in the bone. I order an X-Ray to confirm his suspicions and find they are correct. I then attempt to remove the nail by pulling it with hemostats. It is stuck so far into the bone, I have to enlist the help of a male physician. After successfully removing the nail, I write the patient a script for antibiotics, update his tetanus vaccine and send him home with strict instructions to return immediately if signs of infection develop.

In the ER, I never know what each day will bring. I see patients with chest pain, abdominal pain and orthopedic problems. I do procedures such as drain abscesses and suture lacerations. I enjoy the variety and challenges my job provides. I learn new things everyday. I love my job and highly recommend the nurse practitioner career.
A Day in the Life of an Urgent Care Nurse Practitioner

Urgent care clinics love to hire NP's. The urgent care realm is perfect for new NP grads as well as NP's with years of experience. It provides a lot of routine along with a touch of unpredictable excitement. To get an idea of what life is like in urgent care, I have asked FNP Kala Sims to share her experiences.

One of the benefits of working as an urgent care NP is that I only work three days a week. Although my days are long, 7am to 7 or 8 pm, I enjoy the flexibility of the three day work week. Being that my clinic is open everyday except Christmas, I do however have to work every other weekend and some holidays. I work with two different doctors who rotate shifts. As an NP with only six months of experience, this has helped me learn because I am exposed to physicians with two very different methods of practice. On weekends I work alone in the clinic alongside two medical assistants but am able to contact a physician at another clinic by phone if I have any questions.

One day last week I arrived at the clinic a 6:55am to find a short line at the door. Patients often come in before and after work so this is a common occurrence. My first patient presents with a small laceration on her left index finger. She was preparing breakfast and while trying to open a package of bacon with a knife, slipped and cut her finger. I examen the wound thoroughly to make sure there are no signs of tendon involvement and determine the laceration will require a few sutures. I irrigate the wound, place 3 sutures in the finger and make sure the medical assistant gives her a tetanus shot. I discharge her with strict instructions to follow up if signs of infection develop.

Next, I care for two children, three-year-old and five-year-old brothers who present with sore throats and fevers. On exam, their tonsils are enlarged and swollen with exudate. Their other sibling has just been diagnosed with strep so I decide to forgo the strep test and treat them both with amoxicillin.

My third patient presents for a workplace injury. Working in urgent care, I treat a lot of work comp patients for injuries such as sprains, strains and contusions. This patient slipped on an unmarked wet floor and twisted her ankle. I order an ankle X-Ray and
review the film. No signs of fracture. I ask the medical assistant to place an ACE wrap on the affected ankle, instruct the patient to rest, ice, and elevate her ankle for 2 days. I fill out the forms her employer has sent requesting that she be given a sedentary job until her next follow up when I suspect she will be able to return to regular duty.

The pace at the clinic slows in the afternoon and I take a quick lunch break. While in the break room I notice a flourish of activity at the front of the clinic. A 24 year old male was playing paintball with his friends. He was shot with a few paintballs in the leg and immediately began to get hives and severe shortness of breath. Between labored breaths, he is able to tell us that he is allergic to red dye and thinks the pink paintballs have triggered an allergic reaction. The physician I work with orders the receptionist to call 911 and then immediately gives this patient a shot of epinephrine. His breathing begins to improve and the ambulance arrives to take him to the closest ER to be treated for an anaphylactic reaction.

The afternoon rolls on similar to the morning with routine work comp follow ups, sore throats and cases of bronchitis. At 6:50 I begin to watch the clock. We lock the doors at 7 but any patient that arrives up until 7 gets treated. I hate it when 5 patients walk in at 6:58- it makes for a late night! Luckily, tonight I leave on time and head home for dinner with friends.
Are you interested in becoming a family nurse practitioner? We have asked FNP Maryellen to share with us her experiences working in family practice.

I work in a family practice clinic in a suburb of Nashville, TN treating patients of all ages. Working in a primary care clinic I enjoy a regular 8-5 schedule that some of my fellow nurse practitioners friends do not. I work four days a week and take Thursdays off. I do work one weekend a month, half-days both Saturday and Sunday treating patients who walk-in for acute illnesses. My appointments are scheduled in 15 minute increments for routine follow-up visits and illnesses and 30 minute increments for routine physicals and GYN exams. Empty appointment slots will typically be filled by patients calling in for "sick visits". In an average day, I see anywhere from 20-26 patients.

On a typical work day, I arrive at work about 30 minutes early to get ready for the day. I go through any lab results that have come back and mark any abnormalities that will require the patient to be called back for follow up or further discussion. By the time I have completed this task, my first patient has usually arrived. Today is no different.

My first patient is a 46 year old woman who presents for a follow up of hypertension. She has been on two blood pressure medications, hydrochlorothiazide and lisinopril, for the past three years and has recently began walking and trying to eat healthier. She hopes to ultimately lose enough weight to get off of at least one of her blood pressure medications. At her last visit, I was able to decrease her lisinopril dosage from 40mg to 20mg. She has been regularly monitoring her blood pressure at home and shows me her readings. On average, her blood pressure has been about 122/82. She has also lost 4 lbs. since her last visit. I tell her I am proud of her for her continued weight loss but do not think we should decrease her blood pressure medication dosage at this visit as her blood pressure is currently properly controlled. I encourage her to continue her weight loss plan and return in three months for a follow-up.

Next, I see a 56 year old male patient. I know him well as he follows up regularly for management of diabetes, hypertension and hyperlipidemia. He is on multiple medications and has no plans for lifestyle change. As a result, I closely manage his blood pressure, blood sugar and cholesterol levels to keep him as healthy as possible.
Today he presents for an acute gout attack in his left MTP joint. He has had gout once before, about four months ago. I examen the joint and determine its appearance to be consistent with gout. I prescribe him pain medication, colchicine and Indocin and tell him to follow up in three days for a recheck. I also let him know that if he continues to have acute gout attacks, we can consider putting him on allopurinol to prevent further problems but this will be another medication he needs to take on a daily basis.

My third patient is a 5 year old girl with a fever, sore throat and rash on her abdomen. She started kindergarten last week and could have had exposure to illness. I examen her throat and note her tonsils to be swollen with exudate. Her temperature is 102.1 and she had a fine, erythematous rash on her chest and abdomen. I do a strep test which comes back positive and treat her with a prescription for amoxicillin.

Next, I see a 32 year old woman who presents for a routine physical including her yearly GYN exam. She has no health concerns today, but would like to be sure to get her cholesterol and blood sugar checked as diabetes and heart disease run in her family. I order a CBC, CMP and lipid panel. I complete a full physical exam including a GYN and breast exam. I inform her she has gained five pounds in the last year and recommend that she begin a daily walking routine to prevent further weight gain. I write her a prescription for a refill on her birth control and let her know I will contact her later this week with her lab results.

I love my job in family practice as I really get to know my patients. I see multiple patients from the same family and treat patients of all ages. Patient's visits are more enjoyable with this relationship as they are comfortable with me and the clinic. I enjoy managing chronic illness and encouraging my patients to make lifestyle changes in order to be healthier. This can be discouraging, as many of my patients seem not to care about their health and rely on medication for chronic management but the few success stories are very encouraging. I highly recommend the FNP career!
PART 2: WHAT TO KNOW BEFORE YOU ENROLL

Choosing a nurse practitioner program is an important decision. It will affect the next few years of your life. How much will it cost? How long will your nurse practitioner program take to complete? Are there any accelerated program offerings? The following posts will help you address these kinds of questions.
How to Become a Nurse Practitioner

So, you have decided you are interested in becoming a nurse practitioner. What are the next steps you should take?

Start now! There is discussion that a doctorate degree (DNP) will be required for graduation from nurse practitioner schools in 2015. While not all schools plan to require the DNP by 2015, many will so your education options will become increasingly limited for getting a nurse practitioner degree at the master's level. If you complete your nurse practitioner degree before this change you can get the same job and make the same amount of money with less schooling and therefore a much lower cost!

One of the best things about the nurse practitioner career is the flexibility of options for your education. You can become a nurse practitioner if you are already a nurse or you can enroll in a school with a 'bridge' program allowing an individual with a degree in a field other than nursing to complete a nurse practitioner program. Most schools offer both full-time and part-time education options and are eager to accommodate working students with online courses and courses that are held on evenings or weekends.

How do you get started on your nurse practitioner degree? First, research nurse practitioner programs. If you do not have a nursing degree, find out which schools offer bridge or accelerated programs. If you are open to relocating, in which areas of the country would you be interested in attending school? Taking classes online can be very convenient especially if you plan to work while you complete your nurse practitioner program (also convenient if you like to avoid traffic, stay at home in your pajamas, browse Facebook while simultaneously listening to the professor etc.).

Secondly, figure out what requirements for admission you will need to complete. What prerequisite classes do you need to take? Make sure your school of interest will accept credits from the school where you plan to take your prerequisite courses. Community colleges and online schools are an inexpensive and convenient way to complete your prerequisite coursework. Get a GRE book and start studying! Many nurse practitioner programs require that you take the GRE before applying. I highly recommend purchasing a study book as it has likely been a while since you have done any SAT-like math problems.
Third, apply. Most schools require letters of recommendation, a basic online application and official transcripts. Also, if you are already a nurse you will need to be licensed in the state in which you plan to attend school.

Lastly, enjoy school and look forward to your new career!
A major factor in your nurse practitioner program decision should be cost. Will a career change make sense financially? Which schools offer a quality education for a reasonable tuition? Using data collected from 200 nurse practitioner programs, I will outline about how much it will cost you to get a nurse practitioner degree (assuming you are pursuing an MSN degree, not a DNP).

**Nurse Practitioner Program Costs**

NP Programs are quite pricey. Most nurse practitioner programs require students to complete 30-54 credits (an average of about 45) depending on program and specialty. In-State tuition can cost anywhere from $225 to $665 per credit with an average of around $400 a credit for schools we surveyed. In-State tuition totals about $18,000 to complete a nurse practitioner program. Out-of-State tuition is even more expensive at $570 to $1300 per credit with an average of about $700 per credit. Paying out-of-state tuition a nurse practitioner student can expect to spend about $31,500 on their education. Online programs run somewhere between $400-$800 per credit ultimately averaging about $22,500 for a nurse practitioner degree. Private universities cost anywhere from $500 to $1,500 per credit. If you attend one of these institutions you can expect to pay about $45,000 or more for your NP program.

**Unanticipated Costs of Nurse Practitioner Programs**

Tuition is not the only cost you must consider when planning for your NP education. Living expenses must also come into play. Nurse practitioner programs take 1 1/2 to 2 1/2 years to complete on a full-time basis or 3 to 4 years to complete part-time. Will you work throughout your nurse practitioner program? NP programs require completion of hundreds of clinical hours therefore it may not be possible to work and participate in a full-time program. I would recommend contacting your school of interest to seek their advice on how many hours a week you should plan on working during your program as many students often over-commit.

**How to Offset Nurse Practitioner Program Costs**
The good news? If you are willing to get creative, you may be able to find a less expensive option for your nurse practitioner program than simply attending the university closest to where you live. When looking for an NP program, perform a nationwide search. Many universities offer online or distance programs that allow you to come to campus only a few times each year, and maybe not at all. If these programs are significantly less expensive than the ones you are considering, it may be worth the extra time and travel to complete a distance program. Online programs offer increased flexibility and may allow you to work additional hours so you can continue to pay for your own living expenses while completing your education. For example, the University of Central Arkansas offers a four year part-time online program costing just $358 per credit.

**Nurse Practitioner Program Financial Aid**

Financial Aid for Nurse Practitioner Programs is widely available through loans and scholarships. Often, employers will contribute to the cost of your nurse practitioner education. If you are a nurse, find out if your employer will pay for part of your NP program.

Yes, NP programs are expensive. Taking out a large loan can be intimidating, but it will be worth it...as an NP you can expect to make over $90,000 a year after graduation!
Your clinical experience and clinical preceptor can be one of the most important parts of your nurse practitioner program. You will learn more during your hands on clinical experience than you will in the classroom. Preceptorships are, however often a great source of frustration among students and must be considered even during the process of searching for a nurse practitioner program and applying to NP schools.

Some NP schools require that students find their own clinical preceptors. Unless you know a nurse practitioner or physician who is willing to train you, this can be very difficult. Many cities are saturated with nurse practitioner students and not all nurse practitioners are willing to host students creating a shortage of clinical preceptors. If you are unable to find someone to precept you, it can significantly delay your NP degree.

Some schools assign clinical preceptorships. If you do not have a preceptor in mind, these could be the best schools for you. Make sure your nurse practitioner schools of interest guarantee clinical site placements so that your degree is not put on hold.
It can be difficult to know which nurse practitioner specialty you should choose, especially if you have limited nursing experience. Your decision on a specialty will directly influence your choice in nurse practitioner schools as some schools offer a wide variety of nurse practitioner specialties while at others options are limited. What specialty should you choose as a nurse practitioner student and how?

First, evaluate your nursing experiences. What type of patients do you like? Do patients on ventilators freak you out? Well, then maybe the ICU is not the place for you. Do you enjoy children or does the thought of a kicking, screaming two-year old send you running for the door? If you identify with the latter, do not specialize in pediatrics. Compile a list of positive and negative experiences you have had in your medical career. What commonalities do you see in each list? You will want to choose a specialty that encompasses your positives and minimizes your negatives.

Second and most importantly, think about which specialties will help you easily find a job...that is the reason you are pursuing a nurse practitioner degree, right? A current trend among nurse practitioner schools is to offer more and more specialized nurse practitioner degrees- think cardiology, dermatology. I am not a fan. I recommend going general. Even if you dream of mole removal and cannot wait for your career as a Derm NP, I would recommend family. Most nurse practitioner students do not get their dream job after graduation as employers are looking for experience. Wouldn't you rather have a family nurse practitioner degree to fall back on for a year than be an unemployed dermatologic nurse practitioner? Most employers will also hire FNP’s to work in specialty practices. I have friends who work in cardiology, dermatology, oncology and emergency medicine and they are all family nurse practitioners.

Talk to nurse practitioners in your area to get their advice. Look online to see what kind of job postings you can find so you know which specialties are in demand. Think about what you like to do and what specialty you will enjoy. Choosing a specialty will be important so put careful, researched thought into the decision.
Prospective nurse practitioners without a RN degree are rightfully fascinated by the 'bridge' or accelerated nurse practitioner programs offered by many schools. These programs present an excellent opportunity for students seeking a career change. Accelerated nurse practitioner programs offer students the opportunity to attend a two to three year program through which they obtain both an RN and MSN degree. Which schools offer accelerated nurse practitioner degrees? How long do these programs take? Most importantly, how much do they cost?

Check out this list of nurse practitioner schools offering bridge programs; nurse practitioner programs for students without a nursing degree. Through these programs you can become a nurse practitioner without a health care background or nursing experience in just 2 to 4 years.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Program Length</th>
<th>Total Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boston College</td>
<td>2 Years</td>
<td>$80,640</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>California State University</td>
<td>3 1/2 Years</td>
<td>$45,541 In State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>$82,989 Out of State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Carolina University</td>
<td>2 1/2 Years</td>
<td>$15,240 In State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>$44,877 Out of State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johns Hopkins University</td>
<td>3 Years</td>
<td>$99,361</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marquette University</td>
<td>3 Years</td>
<td>$103,405</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metropolitan State University</td>
<td>2 1/2 Years</td>
<td>$26,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MGH Institute of Health Professions</td>
<td>3 Years</td>
<td>$101,556</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seattle University</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>$73,150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Ohio State University</td>
<td>3 Years</td>
<td>$73,632 In State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>$114,692 Out of State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>Program Length</td>
<td>Total Cost</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>----------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Alabama</td>
<td>3 Years</td>
<td>$40,945 In State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birmingham</td>
<td></td>
<td>$96,235 Out of State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Cincinnati</td>
<td>4 Years</td>
<td>$67,450 In State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>$122,075 Out of State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Hawaii Manoa</td>
<td>3 Years</td>
<td>$42,172 In State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>$80,184 Out of State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Illinois Chicago</td>
<td>3 1/2 Years</td>
<td>$94,230 In State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>$154,220 Out of State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Pennsylvania</td>
<td>3 Years</td>
<td>$133,659</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Southern Maine</td>
<td>3 Years</td>
<td>$42,180 In State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>$113,886 Out of State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Texas Austin</td>
<td>3 Years</td>
<td>$49,492 In State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>$80,148 Out of State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Vermont</td>
<td>3 1/2 Years</td>
<td>$51,708 In State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>$130,479 Out of State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vanderbilt University</td>
<td>2 Years</td>
<td>$92,332</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note: All costs and program duration are estimates based on information posted on each program’s website. Actual costs and program duration may vary. Make sure to contact your programs of interest before applying.**
Finding the right NP program can be very overwhelming. There are online programs, campus based programs, part-time and full-time options. Then, there is the unknown. What will you wish you had asked once you are in the program? Here are 3 things you should ask your nurse practitioner program admissions staff before enrolling:

1. **What percentage of your NP program graduates pass the national certification exam on the first attempt?** Once you graduate from your NP program, in almost every state you will need to take a certification exam through the AANP or ANCC in order to practice as a nurse practitioner. By asking this question, you will be able to determine how well your prospective NP program will prepare you for the certification exam. I would recommend only considering NP schools that have a 90% or better pass rate. If your prospective school will not release the pass rate, this is a warning sign!

2. **What percentage of your NP program graduates are working as nurse practitioners within six months of graduation?** You are getting your nurse practitioner degree with the ultimate goal of getting a job so make sure your prospective NP program will prepare you well. Some schools do not track this information but admissions officers should be able to give you some idea of how their graduates fare when looking for employment. One thing to consider- the percentage finding employment may be more reflective of the job market in the city where your school is located rather than the quality of the school itself. Either way, this information should be considered.

3. **Are students required to find their own clinical sites and preceptors or are clinical sites assigned by the school of nursing? Are NP students' graduations ever delayed due to lack of clinical sites?** Clinical hours are a major part of your NP education and in order to complete your clinical requirements, you must have a NP, physician or PA willing to precept you. In many NP programs, students are required to find their own preceptors which can be a very difficult task. In other NP programs, the school does not have enough preceptors willing to teach students so graduations are delayed as NP students wait to complete their clinical requirements. Don't let this happen to you! For the most stress free NP education, find a NP program that finds your clinical placement for you and ensures a timely graduation.
Choosing your nurse practitioner program specialty is important as it will direct your career. Which specialty should you pick?

If you are already working in nursing, think about your experience and what types of patients you like working with the most. Do you like working with children, adults, elderly or a mix? Do you enjoy being really good at one thing or do you like to see a wide variety of patients? Would you rather work in a hospital or in a clinic setting?

If you are not already a nurse, I would highly recommend job shadowing multiple nurse practitioners working in different areas. Ask them what they enjoy about their jobs and most importantly what they do not like.

If you don’t know what you want to do, choose family! The Family Nurse Practitioner specialty is the most flexible as you are trained to see children and adults. If you ultimately decide you would like to work in the hospital rather than a family clinic, you can still do so. Even if you don’t enjoy seeing children, the ability to do so greatly increases your marketability when looking for a job after you graduate. Personally, as a Family Nurse Practitioner I work in the Emergency Department. I have friends who are certified in the FNP specialty who work in primary care clinics, urgent care clinics, oncology practices and cardiology practices.

Here is a quick breakdown of the most commonly offered nurse practitioner specialties.

- **Family Nurse Practitioner (FNP)** Family Nurse Practitioners provide comprehensive care to individuals of all ages. FNP’s work in settings such as clinics and health departments providing care of both acute and chronic illness. They are also involved in illness prevention, disease management and patient education.

- **Acute Care Nurse Practitioner (ACNP)** Acute Care Nurse Practitioners are prepared to assess and treat adults with both acute and chronic illness. ACNP’s work in a variety of settings including the emergency department, specialty clinics (ex. cardiology, oncology), the intensive care unit and the hospital setting. As an ACNP, you will be prepared to diagnose and treat patients with complex medical conditions.
• **Adult Nurse Practitioner (ANP)** Adult Nurse Practitioners are trained to treat individuals age 12 years and older. ANP’s work mainly in primary care clinics treating both acute and chronic disease. They also focus on teaching their patients health promotion and disease prevention.

• **Geriatric Nurse Practitioner** The Geriatric Nurse Practitioner is trained to provide primary care to elderly patients in clinics and skilled nursing facilities. Geriatric Nurse Practitioners diagnose and treat acute and chronic illness in older adults. They are also responsible for educating older adults and their families in areas such as health promotion, maintenance and management as well as disease prevention.

• **Neonatal Nurse Practitioner** Neonatal nurse practitioners treat both preterm and full term infants with acute illness and/ or chronic medical conditions usually within a hospital environment. Neonatal nurse practitioners work with families to develop treatment plans for infants and neonates.

• **Pediatric Nurse Practitioner (PNP)** Pediatric Nurse Practitioners work with children from birth to age 21. They provide services such as diagnosing acute illness, managing chronic health conditions and performing routine check-ups. Most work in outpatient clinics.

• **Psychiatric-Mental Health Nurse Practitioner (PMHNP)** The Psychiatric Nurse Practitioner treats individuals with emotional and behavioral problems as well as psychiatric illness and substance abuse problems. The PMHNP manages mental illness through prescribing medications as well as psychotherapy. Psychiatric nurse practitioners work in a variety of environments including private clinics, community mental health clinics and substance abuse facilities.

• **Women’s Health Nurse Practitioner (WHNP)** Women’s Health Nurse Practitioners provide care to women from adolescence to old age. Their main focus is reproductive and gynecological health. A Women’s Health Nurse Practitioner works in a variety of environments including OB-GYN clinics, prenatal clinics and Women’s Health clinics.
PART 3: WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT NP PROGRAMS

You have a lot of options surrounding the decision of which nurse practitioner program to attend. How do you tailor your application to make sure you get into your school of choice? What are the top nurse practitioner programs in the country?
3 Things Your NP Program Won’t Teach You

After paying thousands of dollars to your nurse practitioner program, spending weekends writing papers and long days completing clinical work, your NP education should be entirely thorough, right? Wrong. I'm sorry to say, your nurse practitioner program won’t teach you everything. What gaps can you expect to find in your NP education and how do you overcome them?

1. How Do You Find a Job as a Nurse Practitioner?

Shocking, I know. Personally, my nurse practitioner program, as well as many others across the country according to students I have spoken with, missed this little detail. I entered my nurse practitioner program with the sole purpose of becoming employed as an NP. Then, once my clinical hours were over, no instruction arrived on how to actually go about becoming employed in my area of interest. Here are a few practical ways you can make connections to help you find a job as a nurse practitioner:

- Create a good working relationship with your clinical instructors. They will know the job market in your area and just may be in-tune to some employment opportunities for new nurse practitioner graduates. If not, at least they can provide a solid recommendation to your future employers.
- Put on your business suit and visit local clinics to hand out your resume in person. Don’t give your resume to the front desk secretary, ask to speak with the physician, NP or clinic manager who hires nurse practitioners. Even if this particular clinic is not currently hiring, when a position opens up your name will be more likely to come up if the employer has met you personally.
- Read my story. As a nurse practitioner, I had a few strokes of luck in finding my first job but also had to work hard to land my ideal nurse practitioner position. These three posts, ‘When Will You Find Your Dream Job as a NP?’, ‘You’ve Finished Your NP Program Now How Do You Find a Job?’, ‘How I Found a Job Within One Week of Graduation’ will offer some insight into finding a job from a nurse practitioner who has had similar struggles.

2. Your First Year of Practice Will be Terrifying

Stress, tears, pulling out one's hair, dread and doubt often mark the first year of nurse practitioner practice for recent graduates. Two years of schooling simply cannot teach
you all you need to know to perform your job well. You've got the basics but now on-the-job learning begins. Not only do you have a lot to learn, but unlike your clinical experience you must also juggle the pressures associated with medical practice- billing, working quickly and efficiently and fitting in four appointments each hour.

The best thing you can do to set yourself up for less stress and ultimate success in your first year as a NP is to work for a helpful, supportive and understanding supervising physician or nurse practitioner. Read the posts ‘4 Characteristics You Should Look for In Your First Supervising Physician’ for a bit more insight. The first year of practice as a nurse practitioner can be tough. But, if you stick it out things will get better. I promise.

3. How You Will Be Paid- And How Much

Most nurse practitioners (and patients) graduate assuming they will be paid a standard salary or hourly rate. Unfortunately, most employment contracts are not quite as clear cut. Some hospitals and clinics pay based on productivity, others a blend of a base rate topped with incentive pay. Others offer a standard salary or hourly rate with a bonus structure. Most employers offer a retirement plan, such as a 401K, with additional employer contributions. Nurse practitioners should also expect a continuing education allowance to help pay for licensure and continuing education credits. Here are a few previously published posts to help give you some direction in contemplating payment structures, salaries and contract negotiation:

• ‘Nurse Practitioner Productivity Payment: How Does it Work?’ The medical unit of productivity, the RVU, can be difficult to understand. If you are offered a position paid based on the RVU read this post and Part 2, for a thorough explanation.
• ‘Top 10 Highest Paying Nurse Practitioner Specialties’ This post will help you determine just how much you should expect to earn in different areas of the nurse practitioner profession.
• ‘7 Things You Should Consider in a Nurse Practitioner Employment Contract’ Exactly what offerings should you expect from your first employer? Read this post before attending your first job interview.
• ‘3 Lowest Earning Nurse Practitioner Specialties’ Not to worry, even if your specialty of interest makes this list of lowest paid NP’s you are still in good shape.

Yes, I too would like to think the practical side of becoming a nurse practitioner- finding a job and getting paid fairly- would be covered more extensively in the NP program curriculum. Unfortunately, in most nurse practitioner programs it is not. I hope these posts help you navigate the gaps in your NP education.
Applying to a nurse practitioner program can be a daunting and stressful process. Are your grades and test scores competitive? Will a NP program accept you despite your lack of nursing experience? Will you ultimately be accepted to a program or be resigned to living in your mother-in-law’s basement for the rest of your life? Not to worry, I think it is safe to say you can come away free from basement-dwelling. There are a few ways you can make your NP program application stand out bettering your chances of success.

If you want to apply to a NP program this Spring, it’s time to start thinking about getting you application together. What steps should you take in your nurse practitioner program application process to set you above other applicants?

1. **Job Shadow a Nurse Practitioner**

If at all possible, shadow a practicing nurse practitioner for one or two days before applying to your NP program of choice. This differentiates you from other applicants for a few key reasons. First, you can refer to your shadowing experience in the essay portion of your application. This lets admissions staff know you are serious about your new career and have taken the time to practically explore it and commit to the nurse practitioner profession. Secondly, if you connect with your NP host, he or she can write you an exceptional recommendation. A recommendation from a practicing medical professional will make your application shine.

2. **Spend Time Volunteering**

Volunteering is the perfect extracurricular addition to your NP application profile. Although not required by most NP programs, students who volunteer catch the eyes of admissions officers. Find an organization serving the population with whom you intend to work as a nurse practitioner and spend a few weeks helping out. This will help you solidify your career plans and give you material for your application essays as well as land your NP program application at the top of the stack in the admissions office.

3. **Personally Meet With Admissions Officers and Program Directors**
Is there a nurse practitioner program you really really really want to be a part of? Take
the time to set up a meeting with an admissions staff member as well as the program
director of the specialty to which you are applying. This helps faculty put a face with a
name making your application package more vibrant and personal. Make sure to come
prepared with a few questions about the program to help the conversation flow.

4. Perfect Your Essays

One of the most dreaded parts of the NP application process, essays, can be used to
your advantage. Typically the only part of the NP program application that is not fill-in-the
blank, essays give you a chance to let your personality shine. Have friends or
family read them before you turn in your app helping edit them to perfection.

5. Get Your App in Early

Some nurse practitioner programs accept students on a rolling basis meaning that they
operate on a first-come, first-serve basis for qualified students. Applying promptly once
an application session opens will increase your chances of getting a well-deserved spot
in their nurse practitioner class. Even if your NP program of choice does not enroll
students on a rolling basis, it never hurts to look well organized by promptly submitting
your application materials.
So, you've decided you want to become a nurse practitioner. Now let the overwhelming process of applying to a nurse practitioner program begin! Before you can apply to almost every nurse practitioner program, you will likely need to take some prerequisite courses. Which courses are most commonly required? Where should you go to complete these requirements?

**Why do nurse practitioner programs require prerequisite courses?**

Well, your background in art history or medieval studies won't help you much in the realm of patient care. NP programs want to be sure all their students are on the same page, that they are all entering the NP program with a similar level of basic knowledge in a few subjects. No need to worry, you can usually complete these required courses relatively quickly and inexpensively. You can also select a nurse practitioner program based on the number of prerequisite courses they require if you are concerned.

**Which Prerequisite Courses Will I Need to Take?**

Every nurse practitioner program has a unique list of required prerequisite courses. These required classes are especially important if you are considering attending a ‘bridge’ or accelerated program as the list of prereq’s will likely be longer. Here are the most commonly required courses:

1. Anatomy and Physiology (2 Semesters)
2. Microbiology
3. Statistics

Some schools require a longer list of prerequisite courses. You may consider taking these additional but not as commonly required courses.

1. Nutrition
2. Lifespan Development
3. Psychology
"Wait, I don't have to take and 'hard' science courses to become a nurse practitioner?"
No, not usually. Some schools require completion of a chemistry and/or a biology course but not all.

Where Should I Complete My Prerequisite Coursework?

Many community colleges and online universities offer these courses in convenient formats so you can complete your prerequisites quickly and easily. You will likely be able to find a school that allows you to complete these courses in evening hours or online so they do not disrupt your other work and school commitments. Community colleges and online programs will also be the most inexpensive way to complete your prerequisite requirements.

Make sure you view the specific prerequisite requirements for the schools you wish to apply. You don't want any surprises after sending in your application! If you aren't sure where you want to go for your nurse practitioner degree, start with the list of most commonly required prereq's above and go from there once you have narrowed down your list of prospective NP programs.
There are endless options for students seeking a nurse practitioner degree. What are the benefits and drawbacks of online nurse practitioner programs? Is an online or campus based nurse practitioner program the best option for you?

Benefits of Online Nurse Practitioner Programs:

- **Flexibility.** Online programs are great for nurse practitioner students with kids, students who work and students who enjoy a flexible schedule. If you are looking for an online nurse practitioner program for the flexibility, make sure the online classes are completed on your own time rather than being completed in "realtime" on your own computer.
- **Save Time.** Completing a nurse practitioner program online will save you hours of time each week. You will not have to commute to campus, you can skip the question and answer portion at the end of each class and do things around the house rather than waste time during classroom breaks.
- **Comfort.** It can be nice to wake up, not have to get ready in the morning and leisurely go through your day in your own home rather than be pressured to wake up early and arrive on time to class.

Drawbacks of Online Nurse Practitioner Programs:

- **Lack of a social network.** If you attend all of your courses online, you will not meet other nurse practitioner students. The social aspect of a nurse practitioner program is enjoyable and also helpful. If you don't know anyone in your nurse practitioner program you will not be able to easily ask questions of other students and may miss the companionship you could have otherwise had throughout the program.
- **Not knowing your professors.** Professors and nurse practitioner faculty members are good references for future employers. If you don't know your faculty members, you won't be able to use them as references.

Is there a way to have the community aspect of a campus based nurse practitioner program while still having the flexibility of an online program? Yes. Many nurse
practitioner schools offer hybrid programs which include a blend of on campus and online coursework. This allows nurse practitioner students some flexibility while still allowing them the benefits of a campus based program.
You have decided you want to become a nurse practitioner. Which nurse practitioner program do you choose? After compiling information from over 200 nurse practitioner programs, we have come up with our Top 5 List of Nurse Practitioner programs for 2012.

1. **University of Virginia** - 100% of graduates from University of Virginia's nurse practitioner programs find jobs within one year of graduation. The admissions staff at University of Virginia are exceedingly helpful and great to work with so contact them with any questions regarding their nurse practitioner programs.

2. **Emory University** - 100% of Emory University's nurse practitioner students pass the national certification exam upon graduation. Emory offers nine nurse practitioner specialties so students are able to pursue specific areas of interest. The admissions staff at Emory are friendly and eager to assist prospective students and will be very helpful if you are interested in the nurse practitioner programs offered at Emory.

3. **John's Hopkins University** - 99.5% of nurse practitioner students at Johns' Hopkins University pass the national certification exam and 92% have a job working as a nurse practitioner within six months of graduation giving it the best stats of almost any nurse practitioner program.

4. **Loyola University** - Loyola University offers more than ten different nurse practitioner specialties including specialties such as oncology, cardiology and emergency medicine making it an excellent program for nurse practitioner students with specific areas of interest. 100% of Loyola's nurse practitioner students pass the national certification exam.

5. **The Ohio State University** - Ohio State University offers online Family Nurse Practitioner and Psychiatric Nurse Practitioner programs along with five other specialty programs on campus. 100% of graduates from Ohio State University's nurse practitioner programs pass the national certification exam.
Becoming a nurse practitioner is a costly decision (but it will be worth it). Avoiding unnecessary expense in getting your NP education prevents the headache of paying off a chunk of loans once you graduate leaving you free to enjoy your new career. If you wish to go about getting your nurse practitioner degree in a financially savvy manner, which schools will offer you a quality education at an affordable price?

I have surveyed over 200 nurse practitioner programs regarding their quality and cost of education. Which schools came out on top?

1. University of Central Arkansas

At just $179/ credit hour (about $7,340 total) for Arkansas residents, University of Central Arkansas’ nurse practitioner program is a steal. The University keeps things affordable for out-of-state students as well. Non-resident students pay just $358/ credit hour (about $14,680 total). But is quality sacrificed by this inexpensive education? No. University of Central Arkansas nurse practitioner program graduates boast a 99% pass rate on the national certification exam. 90% of NP grads from UCA hold a job as a nurse practitioner within six months of finishing the NP program. We think these statistics speak well about the quality of education delivered at UCA. An added bonus: the FNP and ANP specialty programs can be completed online.

2. Indiana Wesleyan University

Indiana Wesleyan University offers an excellent education for the price. Charging $495/ credit hour, students can complete a nurse practitioner degree for under $25,000. Graduating with just $25,000 in educational expenses is not bad considering as a nurse practitioner you can expect to make an average salary of over $90,000 per year. Does Indiana Wesleyan's affordable degree adequately prepare students to find work after graduation? Yes. IWU NP program grads have a 100% pass rate on the national certification exam allowing 100% of them to find work within six months of graduation. The FNP program at IWU is offered at three locations throughout Indiana providing added convenience.

3. Husson University
Although $1 more per credit hour than my previous Best Value pick, Husson University requires fewer credit hours to graduate from their nurse practitioner program. Husson University allows aspiring NP's to complete a degree at just under $22,000. What does Husson offer at this oh-so-affordable price? Husson NP students complete coursework online giving them flexibility and allowing them to earn an income while they complete their education. Students must attend on campus courses Friday afternoons or every other Saturday in addition to their online coursework. Husson's pricing does not sacrifice educational quality. All of Husson's nurse practitioner program graduates pass the national certification exam and find employment as NP's within six months of graduation.

4. Louisiana State University

Priced almost as well as our top pick, Louisiana State University is one of the most cost effective nurse practitioner programs in the country. At just $255/ credit, Louisiana residents can complete a NP degree for a total of $12,240 (primary care specialty). What if you don't live in Louisiana? You are still in luck. LSU offers their NP program to out-of-state residents for $372/ credit allowing nurse practitioners-to-be to complete the program for around $17,850. Completing your nurse practitioner education at these prices is an excellent value considering your post-graduation earning potential. But what about the dreaded national NP certification exam? Not to worry-100% of NP graduates from LSU pass.

5. Clarkson College

Clarkson College completes our Best Value list priced at $477/ credit hour. Nurse practitioner students studying at Clarkson can earn their NP degree at a total cost of $22,420. Does Clarkson College offer any advantages to it's NP program besides the price? Yes! Clarkson's MSN program can be completed online requiring students to visit campus just a few times throughout the program. Upon completing their education, Clarkson NP graduates excel in the working world. 90-100% (depending on year) of Clarkson's nurse practitioner graduates pass the national NP certification exam and 90% hold employment as nurse practitioners within six months of graduation.
Completing your nurse practitioner program online can save you time, money and offers you increased flexibility in your education. Are you a working mom? Changing careers? An online NP program may be right for you. Which program should you choose?

1. **Georgetown University** - Georgetown University boasts an excellent online nurse practitioner program offering online education for Family Nurse Practitioners, Women's Health Nurse Practitioners, Adult Gerontology Nurse Practitioners and Acute Care Nurse Practitioners. The program can be completed in just 1 1/2 years online. 100% of Georgetown University's nurse practitioner graduates pass the national certification exam after graduation and 100% of graduates find employment as a nurse practitioner within six months of graduation. Excellent. FNP Student Melissa Pridemore states she "likes the flexibility of the program" and that it is "very state of the art."

2. **The Ohio State University** - The Ohio State University offers Family Nurse Practitioner and Psychiatric Nurse Practitioner programs online. 100% of graduates from these programs pass the national nurse practitioner certification exam following graduation. The Ohio State University also offers career services for graduates, a rare find among nurse practitioner programs. The career services office assists students in resume development, mock interviews, salary negotiation and overall career strategy. This sounds like an invaluable resource!

3. **University of Colorado at Colorado Springs** - Beth-El School of Nursing at University of Colorado Colorado Springs allow students to complete either the Family Nurse Practitioner or Adult Nurse Practitioner program completely online. 100% of nurse practitioner graduates from UCCS pass the national certification exam on completion of the program and 100% have jobs as nurse practitioners within six months of graduation. The school of nursing’s website could use some updating and does not offer extensive information about the program, contact admissions- they have been very helpful to me in the past.

4. **Gonzaga University** - Gonzaga University offers Family Nurse Practitioner and Family Psychiatric Mental Health Nurse Practitioner programs online. Occasional on campus visits are required. Graduates of Gonzaga’s nurse practitioner programs have
excellent things to say about their education. Gretchen Fowell, an MSN graduate, states "Gonzaga offers a high quality, reputable graduate nursing program with the convenience of distance learning. I was able to be prepared as a family nurse practitioner [in Washington] and continue to work and live at home in Montana. Gonzaga was well worth the financial and time commitments".

5. Samford University - The Ida V. Moffett School of Nursing at Samford University allows FNP students to complete a family nurse practitioner degree online in 18-24 months. Three, four day long on-campus sessions are required. 100% of FNP graduates from Samford's program pass the national certification upon graduation from the program. 100% of Samford's FNP graduates are also employed as nurse practitioners within six months of graduation.
PART 4: HOW MUCH CAN I EXPECT TO EARN AS A NP?

Let's be honest. Part of the reason you are choosing to become a nurse practitioner is to make money. Just how much can you expect to earn in your career as a NP? How much do salaries vary by specialty and work environment?
Despite having the title "nurse practitioner" in common, NP's in different specialties have very different incomes. Who makes the most money?

1. **Emergency Department Nurse Practitioner ($103,722)** Emergency department nurse practitioners work in the fast-paced setting of the ER treating patients of all ages. These NP's deal with varying levels of acuity and therefore often require experience before landing a job in this specialty.

2. **Neonatal Nurse Practitioner ($99,810)** NNP's care for both full-term and pre-term infants and newborns who are critically ill. As an NNP, one must be able to work in high stress situations managing both the patient and family. Most neonatal nurse practitioner programs require at least two years of RN experience before applying.

3. **Retail Health Nurse Practitioner ($96,800)** Retail health is a rapidly expanding business and nurse practitioners in this field are paid accordingly. Retail health nurse practitioners treat minor illnesses and injuries. Many retail clinics are considering offering chronic health management in the near future. NP's in this field must be able to work independently as they usually practice solo at their clinic sites.

4. **Hospital Based Nurse Practitioner ($96,124)** Hospitals are employing nurse practitioners in increasing numbers to manage admitted patients. Nurse practitioners in the hospital setting diagnose, manage and create treatment plans for patients throughout their hospital stay.

5. **Gerontology Nurse Practitioner ($94,485)** Gerontology nurse practitioners assess, manage and treat both acute and chronic medical conditions in the older adult. Most nurse practitioners in this field are employed by nursing homes and assisted living facilities to provide care for their residents.

6. **House Call Nurse Practitioner ($93,785)** As a result of new Medicare legislation, hospitals and independent healthcare companies are currently hiring nurse practitioners in massive numbers to make house calls. These visits are primarily for homebound patients or patients recently released from the hospital. NP's seek to make sure
patients are compliant with their treatment regimens and address concerns or complications that may develop to prevent patients from being re-admitted to the hospital.

7. Psychiatric/ Mental Health Nurse Practitioner ($92,396) Psychiatric NP's provide acute and chronic care to individuals and families affected by mental illness. NP's in this field are able to manage mental illness with pharmacotherapy and methods such as case management and crisis intervention.

8. Surgical Nurse Practitioner ($91,023) Surgical nurse practitioners assist physicians in surgical procedures. NP's may see surgical patients at post-op visits and round on them during their hospital stay addressing any complications.

9. Oncology Nurse Practitioner ($90,862) Oncology nurse practitioners are responsible for managing treatment of various cancers in collaboration with a physician as well as addressing survivorship and wellness issues. This career can be very emotionally taxing.

10. Cardiology Nurse Practitioner ($90,370) Cardiology NP's diagnose, manage and treat heart conditions such as CHF and arrhythmias. These nurse practitioners help patients make necessary lifestyle changes, prescribe medications and manage recovery after cardiac surgery.

It is important to remember that these salaries are averages. Nurse practitioner salaries can vary greatly depending on the state in which you practice and if you practice in a rural or urban setting. These rankings also are not divided by nurse practitioner program specialty. For example, either a family nurse practitioner or an acute care nurse practitioner would be able to practice in a cardiology clinic.

Should you choose your specialty based on income? Income is worth taking into consideration, however these top 10 salaries only vary by about $13,000/ year. It may not be worth sacrificing practicing in a specialty you enjoy for some extra cash.

Note: This data is based on survey results published by Advance for NP's and PA's.
Nurse practitioners working full time can expect to make an average of $90,583. Nurse practitioner salaries, however vary significantly based on practice site and location. Earlier I discussed the highest paying nurse practitioner specialties, but which specialties have the lowest incomes?

1. **Pediatric Nurse Practitioner**

Pediatric nurse practitioners provide care to children from birth to age 21. They perform routine child physicals as well as manage acute and chronic illness among children. PNP's typically work in outpatient specialty clinics, pediatric clinics, health departments and schools. With an **average salary of $82,101**, pediatric nurse practitioners have the third lowest income among nurse practitioners. Bad news? I think not! $82,101 is still an excellent salary. Pediatric NP's also have the joy (usually!) of dealing with children.

2. **College Health Nurse Practitioner**

Nurse practitioners working in student health clinics on college campuses **earn on average $80,521 for a 12 months of work or $60,684 for 9 months of work**. College health NP’s treat students for both acute and chronic illness in the primary care setting. Should NP’s in this field be concerned that they earn the second lowest income among nurse practitioners? No! We see the lower salary as a trade-off for a better schedule. College health clinics are typically closed on holidays and often have significantly reduced hours or are closed during the summer and school breaks.

3. **Elementary School or Secondary School Nurse Practitioner**

An elementary school or secondary school NP can expect to make **on average $69,945**. Similar to our reasoning for the lower college health NP salaries, this is not bad! Elementary school NP's have amazing work schedules; they do not work on evenings, weekends or holidays. They also get the summers off making up for their lower incomes. Working as an elementary school NP is ideal for mothers as it will offer them a work schedule that allows them to be home when their children are not in school. The ability to earn nearly $70,000 a year while having ultimate flexibility is a great opportunity!
PART 5: THE DNP TRANSITION

The educational path to becoming a nurse practitioner is about to change, maybe as early as 2015. How will this transition affect you as a nurse practitioner student?
How did the recent push toward requiring the DNP rather than the MSN degree for nurse practitioners occur? Who is in charge? For those of us not in academia (and maybe some who are), this is a confusing topic as it seems there is not yet a cohesive plan for implementing the DNP requirement.

In 2004, the AACN published a document recommending that by 2015 nurse practitioner programs and state governments require the DNP rather than the MSN (currently required) for entry into nurse practitioner practice. The DNP is intended to further nurse practitioner education on a practical, practice-based level rather than focus on research like the PhD. Nursing organizations believe the DNP is necessary to establish nurse practitioners on a similar level to other health professions. For example, audiologists, pharmacists and physical therapists all hold doctorate degrees.

Realistically, I do not think this transition will occur by 2015. First, schools must begin to offer DNP programs in larger numbers as there are currently not enough DNP programs to educate all nurse practitioner students. Secondly, states must begin to require the DNP for legal practice as a nurse practitioner. If states do not mandate the DNP, master's prepared nurse practitioners will still be allowed to enter into practice.

What about current nurse practitioners? When/If the DNP transition does occur, nurse practitioners currently practicing will not be required to return to school to obtain a DNP degree. They will be allowed to continue to practice with their current level of education. Could this affect your ability to obtain employment if you continue to practice with only a master's degree? Maybe. In my experience, employers place a significant weight on experience. If you have experience practicing as a nurse practitioner, I believe you will easily be able to find employment even without the DNP degree.

Overall, the DNP will likely be implemented as the required degree for practice as a nurse practitioner. I do not believe this will happen by 2015 as there are too many changes that must occur on the university and state government level. The good news for you as a prospective nurse practitioner student- you can still complete your nurse practitioner program with only a master's degree. This will save you time, money and allow you to start your nurse practitioner career more quickly.
Commonly Asked Questions About the DNP Transition

You have likely heard that educators and nursing organizations are pushing for legislation requiring a doctorate degree to practice as a nurse practitioner. Readers frequently ask me about the DNP; both current nurse practitioners and NP students want to know when the DNP transition will take place and how they will be affected. Although the path to rolling out the Doctor of Nursing Practice requirement for nurse practitioners is not yet clear, we can make some assumptions. In this post, I will address the most common questions I receive.

I Am Already a Nurse Practitioner; Will I Have to Return to School to Complete a DNP Degree?

No. Nurse practitioners who are currently practicing will not need to get a DNP degree. When state laws are changed requiring the DNP for advanced nursing practice, they will be written in such a way that NP’s certified and licensed before the transition will not need to get any additional training.

When Will the DNP Requirement Be Implemented?

Nursing organizations are advocating for legislation requiring NP’s to have a DNP degree by 2015. These organizations, however, do not have power to make this decision. Nursing organizations can recommend the 2015 deadline to law-makers but in order for the DNP to be a requirement, states must pass this into law. I believe that this will take much longer than a few years.

Policy-makers have no incentive to make it more difficult for NP’s to become certified for a few reasons (actually, one possible incentive would be if nursing organizations donate to them). First, with the shortage of primary care physicians so prevalent in the news, politicians are aware that NP’s will be necessary to help provide care for Americans entering the healthcare system with the implementation of the Affordable Care Act. Passing a law requiring the DNP for practice would delay the education of new NP’s entering practice and discourage others from becoming nurse practitioners at all potentially affecting access to healthcare. Secondly, (as you are well aware based on any trips you have made to the DMV) the government works slowly. Passing this
legislation in all 50 states will take time. It is unclear which states will fall in line first, but it will be at least a few years before the DNP is required in all 50 states.

**If I Don't Have a DNP, Will I Still Be Able to Find a Job As a Nurse Practitioner?**

Yes. Even as NP's with doctorate degrees enter the job market, you will still be able to find a job, especially if you have experience working as a nurse practitioner. Employers are not as in tune with the push for the DNP as academia and honestly, many of them may not even be aware of the movement. In my experience, employers are looking for hard workers who are willing to learn and excel in their careers. They are looking for nurse practitioners who can do the job they are hired for, not necessarily NP’s who hold additional degrees.

I hope this helps ease your anxiety about the impending DNP requirement. Please contact me with any further questions and I will do some research to find the answers you need.
Still have questions about the beginning stages of becoming a nurse practitioner? Check out www.MidlevelU.com for more information. Feel free to comment on a post and I will answer your questions as quickly as possible.

Thank you for reading and good luck with your NP education and career!