2017

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Selecting a Graduate Degree in Informatics

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Carolyn’s BIO: Carolyn’s greater than 20 years of experience in health care includes mid-level and executive leadership, quality management, nursing informatics, clinical transformation, higher education, and data analytics. She is currently the Director of the MSN in Nursing Administration with a focus in Organizational Leadership at the University of South Carolina with teaching assignments in informatics, leadership, and evidence-based practice. She is also in the process of implementing a MSN in Nursing Informatics at the University of South Carolina. She serves as the Education Director on the board for the American Nursing Informatics Association (ANIA). Prior to becoming the education director, she served as the president of the South Carolina ANIA chapter.

She received her Doctor in Nursing Practice with a focus in Executive Leadership and a research interest in nursing informatics from the University of Alabama at Birmingham. Dr. Harmon has disseminated a variety of nursing informatics topics via local, regional, and national conference presentations as well as publications. She is also ANCC Board Certified in informatics nursing as well as certified as a Six Sigma Green Belt. In 2011, Dr. Harmon served as an item writer for the American Nurses Credentialing Center’s informatics nursing exam.

Cheryl’s BIO: Cheryl is the chief nursing informatics officer for PatientSafe Solutions and is on faculty for Walden University, Texas Woman’s University and Rutgers University. She has over 35 years’ experience in the healthcare industry including clinical nursing, management, nursing informatics, and education both corporate and academic. She serves as a member of the Board of Directors for the American Nursing Informatics Association and is a lead instructor for the ANIA Nursing Informatics Certification Review course. She is Fellow of Healthcare Informatics Systems Society (HIMSS) where she is a section editor for the Clinical Informatics Newsletter, belongs to the American Nurses Association/Texas Nurses Association where she served the Scope & Standards of Practice for Nursing Informatics revision workgroup and to Sigma Theta Tau International (STTI), the international honor society for nursing, where she is the president for Phi Nu Chapter at Walden University. Her special interests are clinical workflow improvement using technology and educating the next generation of informatics nurses.

Dr. Parker is board certified in nursing informatics and is a Certified Nurse Educator. She is a frequent speaker, educator, and author on nursing informatics topics.
Abstract

Entry into nursing informatics as well as career advancement may require a graduate degree. Frequently, the graduate degree program selection process overwhelms the prospective informatics student. Utilizing a selection checklist with factors of consideration assists in this selection process.

Key Words: graduate degree, informatics, and career goals
Selecting a Graduate Degree in Informatics

Graduate-level nursing informatics education is an option for nurses interested in entering the nursing informatics workforce as well as practicing informatics nurses who are interested in advancing their career options. According to the American Nurses Association ([ANA], 2015) Scope and Standards of Practice in Nursing Informatics, the difference between the informatics nurse (IN) and the informatics nurse specialist (INS) is formal graduate-level education in informatics or an informatics-related field. The INS often has more opportunities and responsibilities within his or her career.

The Nursing Informatics 2017 Workforce Report (Health Information Management Systems Society [HIMSS], 2017) stated informatics nurses holding a graduate degree reported higher salaries than those without a graduate degree. Additionally, informatics nurses who held a certification also reported higher salaries. With 57% of the nursing specialty reporting to have a masters or doctorate degree in any field and 31% stated they hold a masters or doctorate in informatics (HIMSS, 2017), the informatics nursing specialty is a competitive field in regards to formal education. The findings from the workforce report further validate the interest in formal education among newcomers and practicing informatics nurses.

Nurses have many options to consider when contemplating formal education in informatics. Therefore, a nurse’s decision in selecting a formal education program can be challenging and daunting. Table 1 outlines the many factors and considerations regarding making a final decision to obtain a graduate degree.
Table 1

Graduate School Selection Checklist

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<th>Selection Checklist</th>
<th>Factors of Consideration</th>
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<td>2. Am I interested in a clinical informatics focus or a technical focus?</td>
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<td>3. What is my passion that brings me joy within my career and profession?</td>
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<td>4. Program accreditation</td>
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*Note.* Table 1 provides a checklist with factors of consideration for the nurse seeking to select an informatics graduate school and program.

**Overarching Career Goal**

The personal goal of achieving a graduate-level degree needs to be both realistic and include a timeframe. Most often, this timeframe is a long-term goal. When devising a long-term professional goal, one must thoughtfully reflect upon his or her overarching career direction to include concepts of professional passion and joy. In nursing informatics, the career has many opportunities such as technical programming, clinical transformation, leadership, entrepreneurship, consultant, researcher, and educator. Career direction may make the difference in degree specialty focus. The prospective student has choices in the following formal education
foci: nursing informatics, health information technology, computer programming, nursing science, etc.

**Personal Factors**

Graduate-level coursework completion requires flexibility, responsibility, and time. Prospective students must allow enough time to achieve academic goals and have flexibility to change goals if needed. Depending on the school, degree and length of class, estimates vary from 6-17 hours per week of class time and studying per 3-hour course. Keep in mind that a 3-credit hour course over a 3-week period is very different than over a 16-week period.

Juggling personal responsibilities such as family and work necessitates time-management skills especially with the additional demands of graduate-level coursework. Everyone has 24 hours in a day and few have 6-17 hours per week that are unscheduled before returning to school, so have a game plan for how you are going to free up the hours needed. And please don't give up sleep!

Investigate financial options early in the decision-making process. Does your employer offer assistance and what are the expectations for that assistance? Do a search for "finding grants and scholarships for nursing" and you might be surprised at what you can find - even a $500 grant will buy two or three textbooks!

Do you have a strong social support network for your return to school? If so, remember to keep it active during your schooling (Butler & McClain-Meeder, 2015).

**Program Evaluation**

During the selection of an informatics school and program, the program evaluation is one of the most important items on the selection checklist. The prospective student will assess
institution and instructor quality, program accreditation, program format, program length, cost, and outcomes. Prior to evaluating a program for selection, the level of degree is determined.

Graduate degree programs award masters or doctoral degrees. The master’s degree typically requires one to two years of courses. Some programs require a thesis or a project with a mentor in a health care or technology focused setting and may require practicum hours. Nurses interested in informatics have the option of a Masters in Nursing Informatics (MSN) or a Masters in Health Information Technology (MHIT). The MSN has a nursing informatics focus and often prepares the INS for the nurse informatics certification exam. The MHIT has a health informatics focus and may or may not prepare the student for a certification exam upon completion of the program.

The doctoral degree usually consists of the Doctor in Nursing Practice (DNP) or Doctor of Science (PhD). Depending on the institution, program entry may accept nurses at the bachelors or masters level. These programs usually take two to seven years to complete, depending on the nurse’s entry level, with the requirements of a capstone or a dissertation. The PhD emphasizes nursing science through research methodology whereas the DNP applies evidence-based practice to executive leadership, advanced practice nursing, or nursing informatics.

Quality and Accreditation

The nurse has the option of attending an informatics graduate program at a college or a university. The difference between a college and university is the size of the institution. Universities have multiple schools within their educational system that offers a full range of undergraduate and graduate programs (Wellman, 2017). The college-wide or university-wide accreditation is acquired via regional accrediting organizations approved by the federal
Department of Education (Scheetz, 2000). The college or university voluntarily completes the regional accreditation, however, they will not receive federal funds such as financial aid without this accreditation (Scheetz, 2000). The regional accreditation examines the general education requirements of the institution, but they do not evaluate each individual unit (Lewallen, 2015).

Determining faculty qualification may include specialty education and/or experience in informatics, experience in a particular area of informatics, or certification.

Program accreditation is a specialized accreditation that evaluates a specific program such as nursing (Lewallen, 2015; Scheetz, 2000). Nursing programs are accredited by one of the following national nursing accrediting bodies: Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing (ACEN) or Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education (CCNE) (Lewallen, 2015). ACEN and CCNE accreditation require programs conduct a systematic evaluation related to standards and outcomes (Lewallen, 2015).

**Program Cost, Outcomes, Length, and Format**

Program cost is an essential factor when selecting a graduate informatics program. The prospective student will investigate the institutions cost per credit hour, clinical or lab fees, estimated cost of books, cost of new technology, travel expenses, and applicability of out-of-state tuition. In addition to the cost per credit hour, the number of required credit hours to complete the degree influences the overall cost of obtaining a graduate degree. Many institutions are waiving out-of-state tuition; however, this is a checklist item when comparing programs. Educational institution or the prospective students workplace may offer scholarships to fund graduate education. Another option includes financial aid.

The key is to find a quality education within a reasonable budget that is determined by the personal cost-benefit analysis of the prospective student. A cost-benefit analysis includes the
comparison of the return on investment received post-graduation via career advancement to the overall cost of obtaining the degree. When completing this cost-benefit analysis, the career advancement in number of years left in the prospective student’s career is calculated.

Program outcomes are rigorously examined during the regional and nursing accreditation process (Lewallen, 2015; Scheetz, 2000). These outcomes entail graduation rates, employment data, pass rates of national examinations, and satisfaction data. Graduation rates may encompass both quantitative and qualitative data such as failure, voluntary withdrawal, and successful graduation. Employment data consists of the number of graduates that have changed employment to a job that requires a graduate informatics degree. Another program outcome for nursing informatics includes the informatics nurse certification. This is a national nursing certification offered through the American Nurses Credentialing Center (ANCC). The final program outcomes comprises of student and employer satisfaction data.

Program length and format are included in the selection criteria of an informatics graduate degree to meet the needs of the prospective student. Currently, program length is influenced by total number of required credit hours for degree completion as well as the number of weeks each course is offered. Course offerings are on a traditional semester or an accelerated schedule. For example, a traditional semester will start in August and end in December. The traditional semester program offers courses two to three semesters per year. Conversely, the accelerated schedule does not align with the traditional calendar, courses are less than 14 weeks, and the program will offer four or more semesters per year.

In addition to length of time to completion, the prospective student will explore the program format that best meets his or her personal needs. Degree programs are offered in traditional, hybrid, and online formats. Traditional and hybrid program formats requires some
amount of time spent by the student on-site in a synchronous academic setting. However, online formats allow the student to work around his or her schedule and complete their academic requirements without traveling to the academic setting. Although many graduate nursing programs offer online courses, the graduate-level project is completed in a health care setting with a face-to-face mentoring component. All formats offer pros and cons to the format offering; therefore, the prospective student will select the best format that meets his or her learning style, personal responsibilities, financial situation, and lifestyle.

**Conclusion**

The nursing informatics specialty has a competitive workforce in relationship to formal education. Therefore, nurses interested in entering or advancing within this specialty are tasked with seeking formal graduate-level education. After reaching the decision to obtain a graduate degree, selecting a graduate degree program can be daunting. Hence, the prospective student will consider overarching career goals and personal factors. Then, a thorough program evaluation will be completed to make the final determination in degree selection.
References


