

Off to school: A guide for nurses

Preparation, organization, and involvement
are your keys to success.

Going back to school is an exciting—and sometimes scary—endeavor. First, pat yourself on the back: You had the courage to step outside your comfort zone and now have the opportunity to grow as a nurse. You'll likely find your school experience helps you expand your point of view, forge new connections, and move forward on your career path.

We've created two checklists to help you on that journey, both of which were adapted from the article "Returning to nursing school? Keys to success," by Teresa Shellenbarger, PhD, RN, CNE, ANEF, and Meigan Robb, PhD, RN (american-nursetoday.com/returning-nursing-school-keys-success).

You've been accepted!

Your first reaction to your acceptance letter was probably excitement, but you may now be experiencing some worry about how you'll succeed. The best remedy to that worry is preparation. Use this checklist to help you prepare for your return to school.

- ✓ **Improve your basic computer skills.** This might include taking a community-based computer course, enrolling in a workshop hosted by the school you'll be attending, viewing instructional videos such as those on YouTube.com, or asking a tech-savvy friend or family member to give you a quick lesson or two.
- ✓ **Plan where you'll electronically store your documents.** Your school may offer personal electronic storage space on a network drive, allowing you to save files to the campus server. An-

other storage option is a cloud-based service, such as Dropbox, Google Drive, or Microsoft OneDrive. Accessible from any device with Internet access, they offer cost-effective connection convenience, sharing ability, and secure archived storage.

- ✓ **Create a system to organize your files.** This will help you stay organized and find files quickly. For example, you could set up folders for each course to keep related documents together. Consider establishing a naming convention, such as always in-



cluding the name of the course and instructor, as in "Leadership_Smith." Subfolders might include class material (such as the syllabus), assignments, and correspondence (such as related emails).

- ✓ **Be sure your electronic devices are secure.** Install antivirus and Internet security software; your school may offer this software for free or at a low cost. Use caution when downloading material from the Internet; do so only from trusted sources. Set up strong passwords using a mix of letters, numbers, and symbols, and change those passwords regularly.

- ✓ **Become familiar with relevant databases.** You'll be using databases such as the Cumulative Index for Nursing and Allied Health Literature (CINAHL) and MEDLINE. If possible, set up a time to talk with the school's librarian about how to access these databases and available resources for learning how to use them effectively.

- ✓ **Brush up on your writing skills.** You'll be doing a lot of writing in school. If you find that intimidating, find out if your school has a writing resource center. Distance-education programs may have online tutorial tools, such as Pearson Smarthinking service or eTutoring.org. You also can explore apps or electronic grammar checkers, such as Grammarly (grammarly.com), that detect errors. For a handy resource on grammar rules, visit websites, such as Grammar Girl (quickanddirtytips.com/grammar-girl), that give helpful writing tips. Additional resources include the Purdue Online Writing Guide (OWL) at owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/ and online tutorials, such as apastyle.org/learn/courses/index.aspx.

- ✓ **Create a plan of attack.** Consider which tasks at work and home you can delegate to others, and do so before classes start. Decide the best location for studying. Does your schedule allow you to go to a library or coffee shop for uninterrupted quiet time, or will you study at home? If at home, set up a quiet area where you won't be disturbed.

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Success as a student

Success in school requires more than just going to class. You want to use your time wisely and get involved. Use this checklist to help you get the most out of your education experience.

- ✓ **Organize your time.** Be sure to stay on top of assignments. Schedule important dates and deadlines in your calendar, preferably an electronic one, so you can set reminders. Build regular study time into your weekly routine to avoid having to cram for tests.
- ✓ **Consider your preferred learning style.** Use techniques that work best for you. For example, some students use flash cards to help memorize content. And while traditional index cards work well, technology-savvy students may want to use electronic flashcard applications, such as StudyBlue, Cram, Quizlet, or others. Some students find highlighting their notes is helpful, while others like to take notes

about their course readings or rewrite their class notes.

- ✓ **Review the course syllabi and materials.** This information is your GPS for successfully completing the course. Check for assignment guidelines, evaluation criteria, course resources, and due dates.
- ✓ **Understand your responsibilities.** Become familiar with school policies. Many programs provide you with a student handbook or have a website that specifies rules such as an attendance policy, grade requirements, and social media policies. Refer to those guidelines, particularly if you're ill, can't attend class, or need to prepare for a clinical experience. Keep important school phone numbers and email addresses in your contact list, and check school communication daily so you don't miss important class or school announcements.
- ✓ **Get involved.** Strive to get involved with other students and

the campus community as a whole. For example, take part in collaborative learning activities, such as study groups with other students. These activities can boost your motivation and enhance your understanding of materials while offering peer support.

- ✓ **Network.** Getting involved will help you build your professional network. Many nurses find that the connections they make in school are long-lasting.
- ✓ **Tap into resources.** Academic advisors and faculty members can make your back-to-school transition easier. Make an appointment to meet with your advisor when you start your program and periodically throughout your coursework. Remember that faculty want you to succeed.

When you're prepared, organized, and involved, your educational journey becomes much less intimidating. Enjoy your learning experience! ★

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