

On-campus or online: Which educational format fits your needs?

Deciding between a traditional classroom education or an online program requires some research.

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If you've been thinking about a return to school, you're not alone. The options for nursing education today are greater than ever, and the internet has made discovering the possibilities easier than ever.

Whether you're an associate-degree nurse seeking an undergraduate degree or you're ready to pursue a master's or doctoral degree, you can choose among a variety of options, including traditional on-campus programs that are synchronous (face-to-face interactions), online programs that can be asynchronous (no face-to-face interaction), or a combination of synchronous and asynchronous (hybrid).

How do you know which learning experience is right for you? You'll need to consider several factors, including location, cost, time, and learning style. Let's explore some of the pros and cons of each.

Location, location, location

Are you close to a school of nursing that offers on-campus classes for the degree you want to pursue? If so, maybe that's your best choice. But if you work full-time and can't always attend scheduled on-campus classes, find out if the school offers an online alternative. Many academic institutions offer both on-campus and online options. If you don't live near a school of nursing and you can't afford the time or costs associated with relocating or commuting to school, the online option may be your only feasible choice.

Cost

Don't assume online programs are cheaper than on-campus programs. In many cases, the cost of online courses is comparable to what you'd pay if you attended classes on campus.

Whether you're going on-campus or online, do a cost-benefit analy-

sis. Will the incurred costs lead to greater benefits in the long run? For example, will furthering your education lead to increased salary, opportunities for advancement, or adherence to your organization's educational requirements? Determine the cost for the on-campus or online programs you're interested in and whether you have the ability to pay via loans, scholarships, or personal funds.

Many healthcare organizations provide tuition reimbursement, so talk to your supervisor or human resources department to find out what your organization offers. Keep in mind that the reimbursement may not come to you until after you've completed a course or program; you still have to be able to pay the tuition up-front. One consideration may be whether you have to pay for several classes by semester (typically 12-14 weeks),

term (often 5-10 weeks), or one class at a time. For example, if you have to pay for multiple classes upfront, before you receive your tuition reimbursement, you may find your finances strained. The key is determining what best fits your budget. You don't want financial stress to hamper your ability to successfully complete the degree.

Interaction

Some people prefer the face-to-face communication they get with on-campus programs. And many students find the assignment and project due dates associated with on-campus courses to be more motivating to get things done. After all, not too many of us want to say, in person, "The dog ate my homework." However, some students prefer to communicate via online discussion posts, similar to interacting on social media. Keep your preferred mode of communication in mind when choosing an education program.

Flexibility

Online programs offer the most flexibility for working nurses. Whether you work days or nights, weekdays or weekends, online programs typically offer the best opportunities to complete work on your schedule. Fully asynchronous online courses don't require students to be present at any specific time. You'll still have due dates for assignments (late submissions are typically penalized by some loss of points), but you don't usually have to answer for your tardiness. And an asynchronous environment allows you to think before you "speak." However, online programs grade participation, which is easily tracked in this environment; you can't hide in the back row hoping not to be called on.

Self-discipline

Both on-campus and online programs require self-discipline, but as an online student, you'll have a greater responsibility for your own learning. You'll need good time-management and organizational skills, so

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Questions to ask

On-campus or online: No matter what you decide, be sure to ask these questions before choosing a nursing program.

What is the NCLEX pass rate?

Although you won't be taking the NCLEX because you already have your license, the pass rate gives you a sense of the overall quality of the curriculum and faculty.

What are the faculty qualifications?

If you want to become a nurse practitioner, for example, you'll want to be sure the faculty related to your specialty maintains an active practice.

What are the admission requirements?

Make sure you meet the requirements, such as undergraduate GPA.

Is the program accredited?

Most organizations, whether clinical, academic, or both, require degrees from accredited institutions. It's generally recommended that the nursing program be accredited by the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education, the National League for Nursing Commission for Nursing Education Accreditation, or a state or regional higher-learning commission.

Does the school offer the degree you need to meet your career goals?

Many schools are now offering a variety of degrees in innovative fields, such as population health management.

Will the school help you find sources of financial assistance?

This is particularly important if your employer doesn't offer tuition assistance.

What kind of support does the school offer online students?

You want your personal technology (computer, tablet) to meet the requirements of the school's online educational system. You also want to know if the school provides technical assistance if needed and has an easy way to reach faculty and administrators if you have questions.

tural empowerment and is an indicator of a healthy practice environment. In addition, sharing the workload of schedule creation with employees or scheduling centers can lead to healthier nurse managers. Delegating this time-consuming task may leave more time for managers to be present on the units.

Regardless of the degree to which managers and employees contribute to a unit's schedule, rules offer structured guidance that ensure the healthiest possible schedule is developed.

The present and future of scheduling

Moving toward a rule-based system that keeps nurses healthy may help enhance work-life balance, improve quality of care, and decrease fatigue and accompanying errors. Workforce researchers should consider exploring the influence of both scheduling rules and total work demands (for example, nurses working in multiple organizations) on empirical changes in nurse and patient outcomes. Studying these associations is essential to developing policies and regulations that keep our nation's nurses as healthy as possible.

Eliminating the negative effects of fatigue will require additional interventions, such as providing education to prevent fatigue, detecting fatigue, and creating systems that are fatigue-proof, but these may be signifi-

cantly more challenging to implement and enforce. As the healthcare profession develops these holistic approaches to fatigue management, improved scheduling practices can be implemented immediately, making them the first step toward reducing patient errors and improving nurse health. ★

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you don't fall behind on your workload. Make an objective assessment of your own self-discipline. Are you self-motivated? Do you know how to budget your time so that you can take care of all of your responsibilities (school, work, home)? If you need regular outside influence to stay on task, an online program may not be the best fit for you.

Clinical sites, preceptors, and immersions

Consider requirements for clinical hours, preceptors, and immersion experiences, particularly if you plan to enroll in a nurse practitioner program. Online programs typically require students to secure their own clinical sites and preceptors, both of which can be difficult to find. If you live in a rural area, you may have to travel several miles to complete clinical hours. Most on-campus programs, on the other hand, have arrangements with local

clinical sites and agreements with individuals to serve as preceptors.

You'll also want to factor in costs. Some sites and preceptors charge for their services, which usually are absorbed by institutions when participating in on-campus education but may not be covered by online programs. In addition, many online programs require students to attend immersion experiences, which may require travel to the institution's campus at least once per term or semester to interact face-to-face with faculty and demonstrate competencies. So, in addition to tuition and other fees, you'll need to factor in travel and lodging costs.

The best of both worlds

Some online programs feature asynchronous work coupled with once-per-week synchronous sessions, held via Skype, Adobe Connect, or some other similar platform. These programs bridge some gaps if you prefer the flexibility of online work

but still want to connect with others. The hybrid programs require you to be present at a particular day and time but still offer the flexibility of working on your own schedule.

Decision time

The decision to go back to school requires considering several factors, including the type of degree you want and the kind of program that best fits your needs and lifestyle, as well as costs, clinical placements, supervision, and travel. With all the options available today, this isn't a one-size-fits-all process, so you'll need to put in some time and work. Make a list of your wants and needs, then start looking for the program that's right for you. ★

Visit americannursetoday.com/education-on-campus-or-online for a list of selected references.

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