

# How to Choose a Graduate Nursing Specialty

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You have mastered the clinical skills and proven yourself as a registered nurse—but with over 100 graduate nursing specialties beckoning, how do you choose the next educational path that is truly meant for you? Will you find your calling in pediatrics or in working with older adults? Behind hospital walls or in the outpatient setting? The abundance of possibilities can feel both exciting and overwhelming.

The American Association of Colleges of Nursing encourages registered nurses to embrace lifelong learning. Whether you plan to grow through continuing education or return to the classroom for a graduate degree, here are some questions to consider to get you started.

## What are your goals for your nursing career?

Consider what you want to accomplish throughout your career. Do you see yourself doing any of the following?

- Educating future nurses
- Holding leadership roles
- Delivering care without direct supervision
- Conducting research
- Using technology to improve efficiency

## Should I pursue a graduate degree?

A graduate degree will allow you to pursue leadership and education roles, provide care as an advanced practice nurse, and contribute to scientific research. If you answered “yes” to any of the following roles above, there is a graduate degree that can help you achieve your career goals.

With many nursing graduate programs available, nurses can choose to specialize in a variety of areas including acute care, primary care, mental health, midwifery, leadership and informatics. Many formats including hybrid and online allow nurses to continue working while pursuing a degree.

## What are your interests and strengths?

What in nursing interests you? What drew you to the profession? Determine what interests you in your current role and what you can see yourself doing long-term.

“As a research nurse, I see the data, I see it being published and how it makes a difference,” said Kareem Bechnak, a graduate from the Master of Science in Health Care Informatics program at the University of Colorado College of Nursing.

## What do you like about being a nurse?

Do you like to interact with patients and their families? Or do you prefer working behind the scenes? Do you want to help patients struggling with a cancer diagnosis?

Find what interests you and what drove you to become a nurse. Reflect on which clinical rotations interested you the most during your training, as well as what interests you now while on the job.

“I noticed a gap between the gynecological side and menopausal transition,” said Melissa Sanchez, a graduate from the Master’s in Women’s Health program at the University of Colorado College of Nursing. “Women are not just childbearing bodies. I want women to feel beautiful throughout their entire lives.”

## What is your ideal practice setting?

Do you prefer to work with a team, or on your own? Do you prefer a fast-paced work environment? Do you prefer a role in acute care or primary care?

Pursue a nursing specialty that will put you in a work environment that you will find fulfilling and challenging.

## Where is your empathy?

If you are unsure which specialty to pursue, consider the following question: where is your empathy? For some, the answer may be with veterans. For others, the answer may be pediatrics. Maybe you connect with patients navigating high-risk pregnancies. Determine your population focus, then determine how you can pursue a nursing career that will help you care for those patients.

“I have compassion and empathy for people because I’ve been through what veterans have gone through,” says Chauvonne Foston, a military veteran who

served in Afghanistan and recent graduate from the CU College of Nursing Psychiatric Mental Health Nurse Practitioner program.

## Connect with Mentors

If you are leaning toward a specific specialty, reach out and connect with a nurse in the field or, research mentorship opportunities. Ask a former faculty member or current supervisor about your strengths and where they think you will succeed. You may also want to take an [online self-evaluation test](#) that identifies your professional strengths. Develop an understanding of your abilities to help you find where

you will thrive.

Meet with a mentor and ask specific questions to make sure that the specialty you are considering aligns with your interests and personality. Conduct research to gain more insight into the specialty. Some example questions to ask a mentor include: What is your work/life balance like? Are there advancement opportunities?

- What is the most challenging aspect of this specialty?
- Why did you choose this specialty?
- What is it like working with this patient population?

The decision is personal and ultimately, only you can decide which specialty is the

right fit for you. Do your research, make connections, assess your strengths, and set career goals to help you make this exciting decision. ■

*About the author:*

Dr. Krista Estes serves as the Assistant Dean of Master's Programs and is an Associate Professor at the University of Colorado College of Nursing. She actively practices as a Family Nurse Practitioner and previously held the role of Family Nurse Practitioner Specialty Director for eight years.

# CA – Nurses Furthering Knowledge

Norma Tubman MScN, RN

Pat Barrow BSN, RN, co-founder of the Mile High Nurses Honor Guard, was our April Speaker. Ms. Barrow discussed the founding of the Honor Guard, what services it entails, how to contact them, and how to become involved. Nurses Furthering Knowledge (NFK) were so moved by her presentation that members donated \$200 to defray their costs.

Our May Board Meeting was open to all CNA members to discuss the future direction of the newly formed NFK Constituent Association. Besides continuing our monthly speakers, we are committed to funding an NFK Scholarship annually administered through the Colorado Nurses Foundation (CNF). Our annual fundraising event through tickets purchased for a theater performance will continue. With the discontinuation of district membership dues which helped support previous scholarships, donations from members are needed to support future scholarships and should be sent directly to the CNF with the notation that monies are for the Nurses Furthering Knowledge Scholarship. Thanks to donations over the past five years and \$500 in matching funds from CNA, NFK will award a \$1500 scholarship in 2025.

Applicants should demonstrate leadership through volunteering for school, community and work activities and agree to attend one NFK meeting in 2026.

We were pleased to receive a text from our 2024 scholarship recipient Maya Lindgren informing us that her research has been accepted for a poster presentation at the 2025 National Nurse Practitioner Symposium July 15-19 in Keystone. The poster topic is "Surgical Guidelines for GLP-1 Receptor Agonist Medications (Ozempic)". Maya will present her research at our October meeting.

NFK has filled all its Board and Nominating Committee positions for 2025-26. Thanks go to Irene Drabek, Rita Beam and Barbara Pederson, members of the Nominating Committee, for completing the slate. Congratulations to the reelected and returning Board members – President, Annette Cannon; Vice President, Betsy Wolfe; Treasurer, Allison Windes; Secretary, Irene Drabek; and Board Members-at-Large, Kathy Crisler, Susan Moyer, Jean Schroeder, and Norma Tubman. Elected to the Nominating Committee are Rita Beam, Barbara Pederson, and Irene Drabek.

Appreciation goes out to members who attended Healthcare Appreciation Nights at the Rockies. A portion of ticket sales will go directly to the NFK Scholarship Fund. Appreciation also goes to Norma Tubman and Betsy Wolfe who attended the Excellence in Nursing Awards held May 18. Profits from this event support Colorado Nurses Foundation nursing scholarships.

Members attended the CNA Legislative Debrief Town Hall Meeting May 14 and the Southwest CNA Constituent Association presentation "Everybody's Work: Healing What Hurts Us All" April 17. Members responded to an appeal from The Action Center in Lakewood asking for donations of diapers donating over 100 diapers.

Continue to read Annette Cannon's NFK's President's Messages posted monthly on the MyCNA website. April's message was associated with rebirth, renewal and new beginnings. May's message was about growth as spring arrives and the many May holidays, especially those honoring service veterans alive and deceased, are celebrated. ■