

12 Things to Know About Earning Your Master's Degree in Nursing

Tips to Help You Prepare and Succeed While Earning an Advanced Degree

Choosing to continue your nursing education and earn a master's degree is a big decision. Earning a higher degree allows you to expand your nursing knowledge and scope of practice. And, depending on what type of master's degree you earn, you'll become an advanced practice nurse and an independent provider if you choose to practice in Colorado. It's critical to understand the expectations of a master's degree program and how it's different than earning a bachelor's degree.

1. You're Building on What You Already Know

A master's program builds upon the foundations you learned while earning your bachelor's degree. A bachelor's degree provides you with a foundation for nursing practice and prepares you for entry-level nursing roles.

Master's degree programs focus on advanced practice, oftentimes leadership, nurse practitioner, or certain specializations.

2. Classes Are More Advanced

Graduate-level courses are going to be more rigorous, and they require a much deeper level of critical thinking compared to a bachelor's program. As a student, you'll have to rely on your existing nursing knowledge and be a more independent thinker.

Undergraduate classes teach you to deliver nursing care safely and effectively; graduate courses teach you to evaluate, interpret, and make complex clinical decisions to advance care.

3. Stay Proactive

Remember to reach out to faculty and preceptors early in your program. Ask for clarification on assignments if you're not

understanding something. And don't wait until you're really struggling to ask for help. Graduate nursing education is demanding, but if you take initiative, you'll succeed.

4. Prepare for Online Learning

Most of the University of Colorado Anschutz College of Nursing's master's programs are hybrid, meaning there is a combination of online and in-person learning [except iLEAD, Veteran and Military Health Care, and Health Care Informatics master's programs, which are 100% online].

It's important you treat online classes with the same seriousness as in-person classes. It takes the same commitment, so you must have strong organizational and time management skills.

5. How to Succeed in Online Classes

There are three things to embrace when it comes to online courses.

First, it's helpful to read through the entire syllabus and put dates of assignments and exams in your calendar so you can visualize the class. This will also help you with organization and time management.

Secondly, be actively engaged. Introduce yourself to your faculty before the class begins and maintain that open communication throughout the semester. It's important you check in with faculty, attend any office hours, or participate in any optional online learning opportunities. Many times, these classes have online discussion boards and group work, so stay connected to your classmates. Many students have told me they have group chats with their classmates for support and to talk about the class.

And finally, if any challenges come up, it's important to let faculty know early. They are here to support you and want to see you succeed.

6. Have a Supportive Environment

Re-entering an academic setting can feel overwhelming for a lot of people, no matter how much time has passed since being in school. It's important to have a supportive environment of friends and family to help you set expectations and priorities. Communicate with them that you're in this transition of going back and attending school, so they understand your priorities or commitments might change.

7. Block Out Times to Study

It's also critical to re-establish study habits with a consistent routine. That could look like blocking out time on your calendar and gradually building up more time to study. Many universities, including CU Anschutz Nursing, offer great study resources and support.

8. Preparing for Clinicals

Clinicals are a core part of a master's program, but they're different than ones you experienced as an undergraduate student. Since you're already a nurse, the expectations are higher. There are also different levels of competencies to meet and achieve as you work through clinical rotations. You'll have to demonstrate more advanced reasoning and how to integrate evidence-based practice into clinical decision-making.

You'll still be paired with a preceptor, but your clinicals will match with a specialty. For example, an acute care nurse practitioner student will be put in an in-patient setting like the ICU or trauma, while a family nurse practitioner student will have their clinicals in a primary care clinic.

9. Changing Your Mindset

Master's program clinicals emphasize advanced assessment, diagnostic reasoning, and treatment planning.

One area where we see our students have difficulty during clinicals is shifting their mindset from an RN to an Advanced Practice Nurse role. Some students feel imposter syndrome because they are moving from carrying out orders to making those care decisions and directing patient management.

10. Know What You're Not Understanding

You'll be taking classes like advanced pharmacology or advanced physical assessment. And you already took those classes at an undergraduate level, so you already understand the material at a more basic level. But you need to self-identify what you're not understanding at a more advanced level and realize, "I don't quite remember this." You'll want to open up old

textbooks and reread your notes to help refresh your brain on that foundational knowledge.

11. Having a Work-Life-School Balance

Working while earning a master's degree varies by your circumstances and program. Working full-time can be very challenging, especially once you start your clinical rotations. It also depends on your employer. They might be flexible, or you might have an agreement with them that allows you to work a certain number of hours per week.

Many students reduce their work hours or transition to part-time, especially when starting their clinical rotations. It takes a lot of planning, so it's important to set expectations between you, your family, and your employer.

12. Think About Your Why

Pursuing a master's degree is a personal decision. You applied for the program, and you're making this commitment, and you'll likely face some challenges. But it's important to remember to keep your eye on the prize and remember your why. Stay focused, knowing you're working toward achieving a graduate degree and the positive impact you'll make with it. ■

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 Anschutz 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.

Region 4 Updates

The San Luis Valley in south central Colorado is lucky to have two local nursing programs. Trinidad State College (TSC) in Alamosa, CO offers Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA), associate degree Nursing (ADN), the Practice Nurse exit option (allowing a short course and exam after the first year for LPN), and an on-line RN-BSN program. TSC is accredited by the Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing. Adams State University (ASU) in Alamosa, CO offers a Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) program. The ASU BSN program is accredited by the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education. The two programs combined graduate approximately 25 new nurses per year.

At the Colorado Nurses Associations 2025 conference, region 4's CNA team was inspired by Amanda Skenandore's break out

session on "Read, Relax, and Renew". The session discussed the need for nursing self-care and demonstrated how books and reading can be used as a tool to help. The team decided to use the concept and covered gently used books with basic descriptions on them, added homemade bookmarks, stickers, and delivered them to the local nursing faculty to read during their winter breaks. The goal of the project was to give back to other nurses, but it was also a great team-building opportunity! ■

**Roberta Bean, MSN, RN
CNA Region 4 Director**

