

Your Roadmap to Certification: 8 Tips for MS in Nursing Students

Strategies to Tackle Test Prep with Confidence

What is a certification exam?

A certification exam is a national, board-certified exam for students who have earned their MS in Nursing to become a nurse practitioner or an advanced practice nurse.

Each specialty has its own certification exam, and requirements may vary. It is recommended that students visit the certifying body's website [more details below] to obtain the most up-to-date information on eligibility, exam details, and recertification standards, as these may change over time.

It's typically a computer-based, multiple-choice test, similar to the NCLEX. It's a proctored exam taken at a testing location.

Taking the exam is essential for your career

Taking the exam brings you, as an advanced practice nurse, credibility, professional growth, and broader career opportunities. It helps verify that you have received foundational knowledge, skills, and judgment to be considered a safe and competent APRN.

Typically, many states require you to have certification to get licensed as a nurse. Your employer will usually require you to be certified, too.

Four organizations offer the exam

You can register for a certification exam through these four main organizations:

- American Nurses Credentialing Center (ANCC)
- American Academy of Nurse Practitioners Certification Board (AANPCB)
- Pediatric Nursing Certification Board (PNCB)
- National Certification Corporation

(NCC)

The ANCC and AANPCB are the two biggest organizations offering certification exams. In some specialties, only one certifying body exists; however, in most cases, students have a choice between at least two.

Take the exam once you graduate

You can register to take it before graduation, but you must wait until you have earned your MS in Nursing degree to sit for it (degree conferred and transcripts finalized). It's recommended you take the exam as soon as possible after graduation, when you feel ready. Most graduates take it within the first 1-3 months after graduation.

You can retake the exam if you don't pass

Failing the exam is a setback, but it's not a career-ender. Most people will succeed in retaking the exam because if they don't pass, they receive a score report that shows them what areas they need to work on. Depending on which organization you go through, they have different requirements for re-taking it (for example, waiting 60 days or requiring continuing education credits).

There are requirements to keep your certification current

If you complete certification renewal requirements from the organization that administered your exam, you won't need to retest. You may need to complete a certain number of continuing education hours, clinical hours, or similar requirements.

One of the biggest things I tell students is that when considering who to certify through, read about their recertification standards so you're prepared. This deci-

sion is important, as the recertification process will set expectations for the remainder of their professional career.

Preparation starts early

As graduation approaches, particularly during the final semester, the student should consider taking a certification review course. These are available in multiple formats, including in-person, self-paced, and webinar-based options. Everyone learns differently, so aligning preparation strategy with the student's individual learning style is key.

CU Anschutz Nursing prepares students from the very beginning in their courses and curriculum. Our tracks are intentionally designed to prepare students for success in certification. We integrate certification-style practice questions, case studies, and other applied learning strategies throughout the curriculum, ensuring that exam preparation is seamlessly integrated into the educational journey.

Have the right resources

I recommend investing early in a certification review resource, such as an exam review book or an online program, and developing a realistic study plan that the student can engage with throughout their education. Whenever possible, select resources created by or endorsed by your certifying body, as these are most likely to reflect the exam's structure and content. In addition to core review materials, other study modalities can be beneficial, including:

- Apps
- Flashcards
- Certification prep questions
- Practice tests
- Online programs

A predictor exam can also be useful. Sim-

ulating testing environments provides a more realistic experience, highlights strengths, and identifies content areas that require further focus.

Throughout the preparation process, it is essential to prioritize self-care, including rest, adequate sleep, a balanced diet, and regular exercise. Over-preparing without balance can diminish effectiveness and increase stress.

Breakout –

Certification v. licensure: What's the difference?

Licensure is state-based and allows you to practice as a nurse or a nurse practitioner. Your license comes from a state board. Certification is nationally recognized as a demonstration of competency and is valid in all 50 states.

Breakout #2 –

Top Pass Rates

These MS in Nursing specialties at CU Anschutz Nursing boast a 100% certification exam pass rate:

- Adult-Gerontology Acute Care NP
- Adult-Gerontology Primary Care NP

- Family Nurse Practitioner
- Nurse-Midwifery
- Psychiatric Mental Health NP

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. ■

Nurses Furthering Knowledge

Norma Tubman MScN RN

In lieu of a December Holiday Meeting ten of us met at First Watch Restaurant (Belmar) for breakfast on November 15. We were honored to have Nan Morgan from Nurses in Action join us. Food and diapers were collected and donated to the Action Center for our holiday community outreach project.

Our November Meeting presenter was Darci Martinez DNP, RN, FNP-C, Nursing Division Director, Adams County Health Department. She presented on "From Patients to Planet: Public Health Nursing at the Frontlines of Climate Resilience". Dr. Martinez spoke on the importance of nurses understanding how climate change affects human health and their role in climate change.

Robin Bruce FN, BSN, RN, past President of the Colorado Council of Black Nurses, Inc, and Chair of its Aerospace Department, was our January speaker. Robin's presentation "Why Space Health Care Education and Training in Nursing Can't Wait" addressed nurse licensure and health care implications that may come with commercialization of space and everyday travel to the inner and outer limits of our orbit. On February 18, Natalie Everson, MSN, RN, SANE-A, SANE-P, IVSE-C

will give a talk titled "It's Not Just Fun and Games: The Forensic Nurse's Role in Responding to Patients Victimized by Online Extremist Groups" educating us on nefarious groups targeting marginalized children and teens via technology.

Congratulations to our 2025 \$1500 scholarship recipient Bridget Hollen. Bridget is a Junior in the BSN Program at Front Range Community College. In addition to being a member of the Colorado National Guard where she is a Second Lieutenant in charge of the Patient Administration section, she is employed at PAM Rehabilitation Hospital.

NFK will be holding a scholarship fundraiser on March 30 at the Lakewood Cultural Center where we will attend the musical The Chorus Line. Tickets are available through Treasurer, Allison Windes at allison.windes@gmail.com. Members who cannot make the event can donate directly to the NFK scholarship through the Colorado Nurses Foundation website. Our goal is to raise \$1500 for our 2026 scholarship. Thank you to NFK members Kathy Crisler, Norma Tubman and Betsy Woolf for serving on the CNF Scholarship Selection Committee, coordinated by Betsy.

Thank you to Annette Cannon and Rita Beam for representing NFK at CCBN's Soiree, Awards and Movie 2025 where its next generation of nurses were introduced. Annette and Irene Drabek attended CCBN's 2025 Holiday Gathering. Kudos to Annette for designing an NFK Logo to show our support for this event.

Congratulations to Rita Beam who was appointed by the Board to fill the vacant NFK Board Member at Large position vacated with Susan Moyer's resignation. Thank you to Susan for serving in that position for several years.

Annette continues her inspiring and monthly President's Messages which are posted on the CNA website. As Jefferson County Coroner, Dr. Cannon chairs the SIG: Death Investigation through the Academy of Forensic Nursing where she has given presentations on death investigation guidelines covering such topics as documenting and reporting guidelines, following laws and statutes and establishing probable location of injury or illness. ■