# The Critical Role DNP Preparation Serves in Advancing Population Health

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Nurses have long played vital roles in addressing the nation's health challenges. With growing attention to health disparities, DNP programs offer preparation for nurses to advance as clinical experts, become nurse leaders, and equip them to improve population health. Graduates use systems thinking, evidence-based practice, and equity to meet individual patient care needs and beyond to make meaningful changes in communities and for population health. By cultivating both clinical and academic leaders, DNP programs serve a dual purpose: to further prepare advanced clinical experts and to create a workforce of nurse educators who teach and mentor the next generation. This approach fosters a sustainable impact on population health improvement across healthcare and educational institutions alike.

## Embedding Population Health in DNP Curricula

To effectively prepare DNP graduates to influence individual and population health, programs are embedding social determinants of health and leadership principles throughout their curricula. Students are asked to analyze structural inequalities from access to care to the quality and health outcomes of individuals and populations. Through the use of evidence-based practice and quality improvement, interventions can be identified and developed, then applied to address access, equity, and health outcomes in communities. Utilizing frameworks such as Healthy People 2030, which aims to eliminate health disparities across the United States (US) (Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion [ODPHP], 2020), and integration of advanced practice competencies, prepares graduates to lead initiatives to address complex health challenges at the top of their practice standards.

Furthermore, online programs expand the reach of nurses serving across the US including underserved communities in rural, racially and ethnically diverse, and economically challenged settings (Rideout, 2025). The flexible environment that online programs leverage allows students to stay embedded and practicing in these communities while gaining exposure to national health priorities, resources, and learning from faculty and peers which further adds enrichment in experiences and backgrounds (McCutcheon et al., 2015). Collaborations between health systems, public health entities, and universities further expand opportunities and the scope for students to undertake diverse practicum and project experiences (West et al., 2013).

## Diversity as a Strategy to Improve Population Health

A necessary approach to advancing health equity begins with nurses who proportionately reflect the populations that they serve. Diversifying the student body also helps diversify the healthcare workforce and improve population health, both national goals (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine [NASEM], 2021; National League for Nursing [NLN], 2023). Therefore, population health and leadership-based DNP programs focus highly on recruitment and retention of students from historically underserved, marginalized, racially or ethnically diverse, rural, and economically disadvantaged settings (Noone et al., 2020). Strategic outreach and partnering with veterans, minority-serving, and community-based institutions are methods for identifying potential diverse candidates (American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2023). Online programs extend reach to larger pools of diverse individuals and military personnel who can complete advanced education without leaving their communities or service obligations and can even complete their program from different bases or locations if changes in location are needed (Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support, 2021; Rideout, 2025). Additional methods for support include holistic application review (Glazer et al., 2016), access to financial and academic support (Health Resources and Services Administration [HRSA], 2022a), and fostering inclusive learning environments with zero tolerance policies for any form of discrimination (Halkitis et al., 2020). Overall, a diverse student body strengthens all students through development of cultural humility, through lived experiences, and advocacy for equity in academic settings and healthcare alike (Shah et al., 2024).

## Developing Nurse Educators as Multipliers of Population Health Impact

DNP programs that prepare nurses to address population health needs, focus on development of both clinical and leadership expertise. This expertise establishes a firm foundation for development of quality nursing faculty to teach at all levels of nursing education. Therefore, strengthening nurse educators also aids in sustaining progress in population health and leadership in DNP programs.

The Nurse Faculty Loan Program (NFLP) helps address the national shortage of nurse educators by affording partial loan forgiveness to nursing students, contingent on recipients serving as nurse

faculty upon graduation (HRSA, 2022b). With access to financial assistance, curriculum focused on population health and leadership, and nursing educator specific training, DNP students are well prepared to assume roles as nursing educators. This preparation creates a cascading effect where each DNP nurse educator trains nursing students who, in turn, lead health initiatives.

With healthcare disparities continuing to be of concern, DNP programs have a critical role to serve to advance nurses to be powerful advocates to instill equitable and accessible care throughout the US. By doing so, DNP graduates are prepared to serve in clinical, leadership, and educator roles, further expanding and addressing population health through multiple avenues. ■

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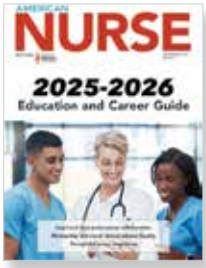


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