

Ep #131: MSN vs DNP for Family Nurse Practitioners: Which Path Is Right for You?



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Hosts

Sarah Michelle and Anna

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Welcome to the *Real Deal NP Club*. Whether you're hoping to become a real deal nurse practitioner or you already are one, this is the place for you to get the resources you need as you tackle this massive transition into practice. We're your hosts, Sarah Michelle, Chief Nursing Officer of Blueprint Test Prep, and Anna Miller, Director of Nursing Content. And we're here to hang out with you each week like your best friends in the NP space. Let's dive in.

Hello everyone and welcome back to the Real Deal Nurse Practitioner Club podcast. Today I'm going to talk about a really common question that prospective and current NP students have a lot and that is what is the difference between an NP with an MSN degree versus a DNP. There's so much information out there about both options that you might not know which one to choose, doesn't matter, what's the difference.

So for today's episode, I'm gonna keep the focus as a family nurse practitioner or FNP because that's what I am and we'll look at that with a master's degree versus an FNP with a DNP degree. So to sum that up FNP is a specialization while master's level or DNP is a level of education.

As a nurse practitioner, you will first choose a specialty area of practice. An FNP is the most common, but there are a ton of other specialties like adult gerontology acute care, women's health, pediatrics, and that's just to name a few. To become a family nurse practitioner, the minimal degree requirement is a master of science in nursing. And then after you complete your MSN program with the focus as an FNP, then you can sit for that board certification exam where you will then become a board certified family nurse practitioner once you pass.

So then what is a DNP? The Doctor of Nursing Practice is a type of terminal degree for nurses. So DNPs can hold advanced practice roles, such as a nurse practitioner or a nurse midwife, but DNPs can also have roles such as nurse executives or nurse educators. The goal of a DNP prepared nurse is really to bridge the gap between research and clinical practice to promote systems leadership and quality improvements.

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And here's something important to remember. Having a DNP degree does not change your scope of practice as a nurse practitioner. So your scope of practice is based upon state licensure requirements and your area of clinical specialization. I think that is probably one of the biggest areas of confusion for a lot of people and there's a big push for the DNP degree to be the entry into NP practice but as it stands now MSN and DNP prepared nurse practitioners have the same clinical scope of practice.

All right, let's go over that again because I know this is a lot. So FNP relates to a specialty area of clinical practice.

You can complete a master's, a post-master's certificate, or a DNP program, all of which could have the specialty focus of an FNP, and then once you graduate, whichever program you're in, you will sit for a national FNP board certification exam. DNP by itself is just a type of degree and there are really three main types of terminal degrees for nurses. So there's the DNP, but there's also a PhD and an EdD.

So DNP really focuses on the application of research to clinical practice to make improvements in patient care, healthcare systems, and nursing education. Now, PhD prepared nurses, they focus heavily on conducting research and they can work as a researcher or as a nurse educator. And then EdD prepared nurses have advanced knowledge of nursing education specifically and curriculum design. And so really they work in different roles within nursing education.

All right, so we just mentioned, you know, scopes of practice for masters or doctorally prepared nurses are the same. So how else can you make your decision about which path would be best for you to pursue? For example, an FNP with a master's degree can care for patients across the lifespan, right? So from newborn infants to older adults in that primary care setting.

However, opportunities for FNPs, right? We know they don't end in a family practice clinic. We can work in other outpatient settings like a long-term facility, home health visit. We can even work in other specialty clinics like

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cardiology or dermatology. There are so so many different opportunities no matter the degree as a family nurse practitioner.

As advanced practice registered nurses or APRNs, we can conduct advanced physical assessments, we can order diagnostic tests, diagnose conditions, we prescribe medications and other treatments, and of course a huge part of our role is educating patients to care for themselves, and we also help supervise staff and do other administrative duties.

Now as a DNP, that's where it's really going to depend on what your specialization area is. If you have a DNP with an FNP clinical specialization, you might do the exact same thing. You might work in clinic administration or even as a faculty member. If you have a DNP with a nursing administration background, you might work in a leadership position for a healthcare organization. And really having that extra DNP degree can open up more opportunities for career advancement and it can give you tools and knowledge that you need to make a positive change or change on a greater scale. And so maybe by now you have some idea of the path you want to take.

So let's talk about how you become an FNP or how you like earn your DNP degree. If you know that you want FNP as your specialization, then again, I'm going to say this again, I said it earlier, the minimum requirement is a master's degree. There are so many options. There's in-person, online, hybrid programs. So find the school that best meets your needs.

And depending on your current RN education, you can earn your MSN degree through RN to MSN programs and BSN to MSN programs. Or if you already have a master's degree in a different field, you can look for programs that offer post-master's certificates. So maybe you have a master's in nursing education and now you're going to get a post-master's certificate as a family nurse practitioner.

All accredited FNP programs allow you to sit for board certification exams after graduation, and for FNP that's either through the AANP or the ANCC.

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Since we've mentioned that DNP is a type of terminal degree, there are a few different paths to get there.

If you have a bachelor's degree in nursing, you can go ahead and just straight complete a program that's a BSN to DNP. Those programs require you to choose a specialization in either an advanced practice role, like a nurse practitioner, or even things like a nurse anesthetist, nurse midwife, clinical nurse specialist, or a non-clinical role. So this would be your nursing education or your nursing administration.

So for example, you can choose to do a BSN to DNP program and choose the specialization as a family nurse practitioner. If you already have a master's degree in nursing, you can enter into a DNP program for there. Some MSN to DNP programs also have non-clinical specializations that you can choose from, including nursing education, leadership, or that administration.

Really a big thing to remember here. A DNP is a terminal degree, and basically that just means there's gonna be a lot of writing papers, participating in discussions, and conducting research. But it also means that you can expect to learn a ton too. You're gonna learn a ton about leadership, research, healthcare policy. It is definitely rigorous work, but it is well worth it for the opportunities that it'll open up for you and the changes that you can make.

There are so many different paths to get there, but after earning your DNP degree, there are no additional licensing or certification requirements needed. Like anything in nursing, we have so many options and I know that can sometimes be overwhelming, but it's really awesome too that we have so many different paths that we can take as nurses.

So I hope this episode today helped clear up some misconceptions and confusion between practicing as an FNP and having a DNP degree. Think about what your ultimate goal is and that will help decide your decision. And if your goal changes down the road, that's okay too. There are tons of

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programs that can further your education and your nursing career, no matter what your starting point is.

Thank you everyone for tuning in. Hope you enjoyed this episode today. Be sure to follow our podcast channel and SMNP reviews on YouTube and Facebook, but until next time.

Thanks for listening to the *Real Deal Nurse Practitioner Club*. If you want more information about the different types of support that we offer to students and new nurse practitioners, you can visit npreviews.com. We'll see you next week.