

CHOOSING A NURSING PROGRAM

A Guide for Prospective Nursing Students

This document is prepared at the direction of the Arizona State Board of Nursing (AZBN). The AZBN approves all nursing programs in Arizona. This guide is not meant as an endorsement of any particular program and is provided to help prospective students understand program information and choose a program that suits their needs.

1. What is the difference between LPN and RN?

Licensed Practical Nursing (LPN) programs are vocational in nature and credits earned usually do not transfer to colleges and universities. LPNs have a limited scope of practice and must always be under the supervision of an RN or physician. Programs usually are of 12-20 months duration. The most frequent employment settings for LPNs are in long term care and residential settings. Required clinical experiences include basic medical-surgical, pediatric and maternity.

Registered nurses (RN) have a broader scope of practice and function autonomously. RN's are hired in a variety of settings, most commonly acute care. Registered nurse programs are 3-4 years in duration if pre-requisites are considered and lead to either an associate's degree or a baccalaureate degree. There is one pre-licensure program in AZ that provides a master's degree.

2. How can an LPN become an RN?

In Arizona there are many schools that award advanced placement to LPNs. Some students find it easier to gain admission to an LPN program while obtaining RN pre-requisites and then continue as an advanced placement student in an RN program. One university offers an LPN to BSN program. LPNs cannot directly challenge the RN licensure exam without completion of an approved RN pre-licensure program.

3. What are the differences between associate degree (ADN) RN nursing programs and baccalaureate (BSN) degree RN nursing programs?

Both these types of programs lead to the same initial RN licensure. Associate degree programs usually require 12-18 months (2-3 semesters) of pre-requisites prior to 2 years (4 semesters) in the nursing major. Baccalaureate programs are 4 years in length (8 semesters) and require additional coursework in liberal arts, nursing leadership, community health and nursing research. Some facilities preferentially hire baccalaureate graduates and some jobs are only available to nurses with a BSN or higher.

4. Will completing the program allow me to be licensed?

In most states the Board of Nursing is the approving entity for pre-licensure nursing programs. If the program is approved by the state, you can sit for the licensure exam upon successful completion. Most states maintain a publically available list of approved programs. If the program you are considering is not listed, it may be a fraudulent program or may have approval in another state. Check with your board of nursing if you suspect the program is fraudulent. Fraudulent programs tend to offer credit for life experience, lack a geographic address in the United States, have low admission standards and claim accreditation that is not officially recognized by the U.S. Department of

Education but may sound similar to one that is. Report suspected fraudulent programs to your board of nursing.

5. What does accreditation mean?

Please see the document entitled “Nursing Education Programs Approval/Accreditation Basics” on our website at

<http://www.azbn.gov/documents/education/Nursing%20Programs/Approval%20Accreditation%20Basics.6.09.pdf>.

All schools that offer nursing programs in AZ are accredited. This is not always the case in other states. Some nursing programs are also accredited. The official list of approved pre-licensure programs in AZ provides accreditation status of both the school and program. All pre-licensure programs on the list are approved by the Board. The list of programs can be accessed at:

<http://www.azbn.gov/Documents/education/Nursing%20Programs/Nursing%20Programs%20List.03.28.11.pdf>

6. If a school is accredited and the program meets Board standards does that mean my credits will transfer? Not necessarily. Credits earned at nationally accredited career type schools do not generally transfer to other schools. Students need to carefully weigh their educational choices, keeping their long-term career goals in mind when selecting a nursing program. While all approved programs are acceptable for preparing entry-level nurses, some may offer an advantage if the student will later seek an advanced degree.

6. How can I find out about the pass rates on the licensure exam (NCLEX)? For Arizona programs, trended annual pass-rates are available at

<http://www.azbn.gov/Documents/nclex/2011/Statewide%20NCLEX%20Results%20%202005-2010WEB.pdf>.

Quarterly reports are also available on the website (www.azbn.gov) under Education/NCLEX/Quarterly Reports.

The prospective student should research the program’s pass rate on the licensing exam (NCLEX). There is always some fluctuation in pass rates but the minimum acceptable first-time pass rate is currently 75% annually.

7. What if the program’s NCLEX pass rate is not listed?

This means that the program is new and has not yet had any graduates take the exam.

8. In addition to NCLEX pass rates, what other factors should a prospective student be aware of?

Attrition

The prospective student should ask programs about their attrition/graduation rates. Do most of the students graduate in the optimal time or take more time? In some programs, NCLEX pass rates may be high but if more than half the admitted students failed to complete on time, the program may be accepting students who

are not prepared for the work or may not have sufficient resources to remediate weak students.

Transparency

The prospective student should look at the school's web site for transparency regarding costs, teaching methods and admission requirements. Transparent programs post both the catalogue and nursing student handbook on the website. The prospective student should not have to provide any personal information or attend a seminar to obtain basic information. Costs and other factors should be comparable between programs.

Success Indicators

Evidence suggests that quality nursing programs have sufficient hours in both acute care and non-acute care clinical settings, incorporate high-fidelity simulation, have professors that teach both didactic and clinical, and have nursing courses based on traditional specialties (Medical-surgical, maternity/family, pediatric and psych-mental health). LPN programs are not required to offer a psych-mental health clinical experience.

In the Board's experience, programs with successful track records (no substantiated complaints/high NCLEX/low attrition) also provide private faculty offices and an RN skill lab director; they take student feedback seriously; they do not rely on standardized national exams to determine course or program passing. Standardized national exams are used as part of the course grade and to guide both student and program remediation. Extensive use of ITV or a program that is totally on-line has been associated with lower NCLEX pass rates and less student satisfaction. Students entering these types of program need to be self-directed, motivated learners.

Suggested areas to consider are:

- Where are the clinical experiences? How many hours of direct care clinical in each area? (Medical surgical/Pediatrics/Maternity/Psych-mental health) How many students does each clinical faculty supervise (maximum is 10)?
- Is high-fidelity simulation a part of the program?
- Do the same professors who teach didactic also teach clinical?
- Are the nursing courses based on traditional specialties?
- Is the program subject to any current or future adverse Board action? (check the Board's website also)
- Do the faculty members have private offices and time for academic pursuits?
- Is there a dedicated RN to manage the skills laboratory?
- How are standardized national exam scores used?
- What improvements has the program made in response to student feedback?
- What are the methods of instruction? Are any/all courses completely web-based or ITV based?

9. The waiting list for one program is 2 years, yet I can get into a new program in 2 months, what additional factors should I consider?

Enrolling in a new program is always a risk, but one that has paid off for many students. Earlier admission may mean that you can be employed as a nurse sooner, which can offset additional program costs. You can be fairly confident that the program will be of sufficient quality if the new program is part of a national program that has NLNAC or CCNE accreditation. If the program is not in that category, pay special attention to the transparency of the program and the quality indicators above. In addition to the quality indicators, there should be positive answers to the following questions:

- Do the administrator and some of the faculty have a credible track record teaching/administering pre-licensure nursing programs? This means they have a 5+ year history at a successful pre-licensure program before they came to the current program.
- How many clinical placements are guaranteed and where? (look at number of beds on the units).

10. I have a past record of trouble with the law. Will this affect my ability to enter into a nursing program?

It could. Most nursing programs require some kind of background check prior to entry. The most accepted document in the past was a Level I DPS fingerprint card. However, many clinical agencies are now doing their own fingerprint background checks and some convictions that are accepted for a fingerprint card are not accepted by the agency. Many schools are now adopting the most restrictive policies of the clinical agencies they use to screen students. This is because of the need to place all students in a clinical environment; the school cannot educate a nursing student who is not able to be placed clinically.

In addition the Arizona State Board of Nursing must deny applications that are submitted from persons with a felony or undesignated offence conviction that is less than 5 years from the absolute date of discharge. Other types of offences may also cause the Board to deny the license on a case-by-case basis. Please openly and honestly discuss your past brushes with the law with the prospective program so that appropriate advice may be given.

REMEMBER: There is no perfect program that works for every student. Be a good consumer and research options carefully to find a program that suits you and will support your success.

Best Wishes