Why go back for a baccalaureate degree?

Experienced nurses explain why they pursued a BS or BSN and how the experience affected them.

By H. Allethaire Cullen, MSN, RN, and Marilyn E. Asselin, PhD, RN-BC

If you’re a diploma or associate-degree nurse, you’ve probably asked yourself the question: Should I go back to school for my baccalaureate degree?

The answer depends, in part, on your goals: Where do you want to be in 5 years? In 10 years? Will a baccalaureate degree be helpful—or even necessary—to achieve your goals?

If you love what you’re doing and don’t anticipate that you’ll need a baccalaureate degree to continue doing it, there’s no reason to go back to school. You should, however, keep an eye on trends, so you’ll know if a mandate for a baccalaureate degree is coming toward you. If you plan to become a nurse manager, educator, or specialist, you’ll need a BSN degree as a stepping stone to your new career. For almost everyone else facing the question, the answer isn’t as clear.

For a recent research project, we interviewed 11 experienced nurses who decided to return to school for their baccalaureate degrees. We wanted to know why they made the decision and what impact it had on them and their practices. If you’re on the fence about your future, consider what these nurses had to say. (See Should you pursue a baccalaureate degree?)

Why go to school?
The reasons for pursuing a baccalaureate degree were varied. Some of our participants said the timing was right: Their children were older, and the nurses began to think of the immediate future as time for themselves. Others said they often took continuing-education classes and did self-studies because they enjoyed learning. For them, going to college was a natural progression.

Many of the 11 nurses saw obtaining a baccalaureate degree as a way to better themselves. “It helped my self-esteem,” many said. One nurse expressed this sentiment by saying, “I felt it was a chance to see if I had many brain cells left.”

Of course, some nurses wanted to become clinical specialists or educators, and obtaining a baccalaureate degree was the first step. Others thought that the degree would enable them to continue in nursing. “I probably have another 15 years to work,” said one nurse, “and because nursing is hard physical work, I want to have other options in my profession.”

Some pursued a degree because they see themselves as role models. “I think I’ve helped a lot of women,” noted one participant when speaking of her peers. “People come to me like I am the elder of the floor.” She and others found that pursuing their degrees was a powerful way to set an example for younger nurses. However, acceptance wasn’t universal. One nurse said, “I learned right away that certain people did not want to talk to me about school, and they didn’t want me to talk to them about it, either.”

Nurses who are parents found that returning to school sent their children a strong message about perseverance and goal achievement. We were touched by the story of one nurse who told us that she and her son have attention deficit disorder. “I went back to school to show my son that the diagnosis doesn’t mean anything, to show...
him that he can do whatever he sets his mind to."

**What does the degree mean?**

"I think it means that I still have the ability to grow, to learn, and to move forward," said one nurse. Another commented, "I feel pride. I’ve accomplished something for myself and for my profession."

Other nurses noted that they had developed more confidence, better abilities to handle conflict and resolve problems, and better leadership skills. Nearly all of our participants agreed that their studies had improved how they handle change in their practice. One nurse said, "Nobody likes change." But she went on to explain how her education helped her understand the need for change when research proves there are better, safer ways of doing things. As she said, "I have changed how I view change!"

**Does a degree improve nursing practice?**

All the participants believed they were good nurses before they decided to pursue a baccalaureate degree, but they agreed that the advanced education made them better nurses. One summed up the general feeling: "I think that before, if a situation arose, I would take the avenue I already knew. Now that I’ve been exposed to research, holistic nursing, and community nursing, I view things from a different perspective. I take all things into consideration. I feel as though I have a better handle on the patient’s needs."

Nurses told us that they were surprised at how important it had become to them to integrate nursing theories and evidence-based practice into their daily activities. They also found that they honed their critical-thinking skills and now apply them to each patient-care situation. These realizations have led to another benefit: renewed enthusiasm for their profession. As one nurse remarked, "Putting a new perspective on things helped me refocus on why I went into nursing."

All our participants were pleased with their decisions to obtain a degree. They believe that their education has helped make them better nurses, and current research supports their belief. So what about you? Should you go back to school? When you weigh the pros and cons, remember to do what best serves you, your loved ones, and your patients.

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**Selected references**


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