

COLLEGE OF NURSING AND HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONS

RN to BSN Career Pathway Guide

Bachelor of Science in Nursing (RN to BSN)

BSN-Prepared Registered Nurse

Acute Care Nurse

Critical Care Nurse

Postsecondary Nursing Instructor



RN to BSN Degree Overview

GCU's Bachelor of Science in Nursing (RN to BSN) program is built for the working registered nurse who is ready to deepen their clinical expertise and step into broader leadership, specialty and education roles. Designed around the adult RN learner, the program builds on the strengths you already bring from your associate degree or diploma nursing background, layering in advanced coursework in health assessment, population health, nursing research and evidence-based practice. Whether you stay at the bedside, move toward a specialty care unit or look ahead to teaching the next generation of nurses, this degree is the foundation that opens each door. This program is offered online.¹

5%

Projected job growth for registered nurses through 2034²

\$93,600

Median annual wage for registered nurses, May 2024³

14 months

Time to complete core BSN coursework for a working RN⁴

What You'll Study

- ▶ **Nursing Leadership and Interprofessional Collaboration** — the core competencies for professional nursing practice, standards of care and the leadership and management skills that come with a broader scope of responsibility.
- ▶ **Health Assessment Across the Lifespan** — health history-taking, physical examination skills and the clinical judgment needed to identify actual and potential health problems.
- ▶ **Health Promotion and Population Health** — the community as the patient, using epidemiological data and nursing theory to plan health promotion and disease prevention strategies.
- ▶ **Pathophysiology and Complex Disease Management** — disease processes across the lifespan and the evidence-based interventions used to manage them in collaboration with the broader care team.
- ▶ **Nursing Research and Evidence-Based Practice** — statistical literacy, appraisal of published research and application of evidence-based findings to everyday nursing practice.
- ▶ **Nursing Informatics and Ethical Decision-Making** — the technologies that support documentation and communication of patient data, paired with a Christian foundation for ethical and spiritual decision-making in health care.

1. Clinical, practicum and immersion hours are completed locally, not online.

2. COVID-19 has adversely affected the global economy and data from 2020 to 2023 may be atypical compared to prior years. Accordingly, data shown is effective September 2025, which can be found here: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Outlook Handbook, [Registered Nurses](#), retrieved June 2026.

3. The earnings referenced were reported by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), [Registered Nurses](#), as of May 2024, retrieved June 2026. BLS calculates the median using salaries of workers nationwide with varying levels of education and experience. It does not reflect the earnings of GCU graduates in these occupations, nor does it reflect the earnings of workers in one city or region of the country or a typical entry-level salary. Median income is the statistical midpoint for the range of salaries in a specific occupation; it is very unlikely that a median salary will reflect an entry-level salary. It represents what you would earn if you were paid more than half the workers in an occupation and less than half the workers in an occupation. It may give you a basis to estimate what you might earn at some point if you enter this career. Grand Canyon University can make no guarantees on individual graduates' salaries. Employability will be determined by numerous factors over which GCU has no control, such as the employer the graduate chooses to apply to, the graduate's experience level, and individual characteristics and skills, against a pool of candidates.

4. Core nursing coursework can be completed in as few as 14 months. The entire program, including general education and elective credits, requires 120 credits total, and actual completion time varies based on transfer credits, course load and individual circumstances.

Why It Matters

The BSN curriculum is mapped to the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) Essentials — the national framework that defines what every baccalaureate-prepared nurse should know and be able to do.

Building these competencies is what allows a BSN to translate into real opportunities for charge nurse roles, specialty certification and, eventually, graduate study.

Because the program is designed for nurses who already hold an active RN license, coursework focuses on expanding what you already know rather than repeating entry-level nursing fundamentals.

AACN ESSENTIAL CORE COMPETENCIES YOU'LL BUILD

- Evidence-based practice and clinical judgment across the lifespan
- Leadership, quality improvement and interprofessional collaboration
- Population and community health
- Informatics and healthcare technologies
- Ethical, professional and person-centered nursing practice
- Scholarship, research appraisal and evidence-based decision-making



Interprofessional collaboration is central to BSN-level nursing practice.

Four Career Pathways

The Bachelor of Science in Nursing (RN to BSN) degree can support your professional growth in a variety of nursing practice areas. Whether you continue practicing in your current specialty, expand your responsibilities or prepare for future leadership or education roles, a BSN can help strengthen competencies in leadership, evidence-based practice, population health and care coordination.

PATHWAY 01 · BUILDING ON THE ROLE YOU ALREADY HAVE

BSN-Prepared Registered Nurse

For most graduates, a BSN doesn't mean leaving the bedside — it means a wider scope of responsibility within the RN role you already hold. This pathway leans on the program's health assessment, leadership and population-health coursework to prepare you for charge nurse, preceptor and other expanded RN responsibilities, without requiring a change in your current unit or specialty.

TYPICAL PRACTICE SETTING	Hospitals, ambulatory care, residential care and community health settings
MEDIAN WAGE	\$93,600/year, May 2024 ³
JOB OUTLOOK	5% projected growth, 2024–2034 ²
ADDITIONAL REQUIREMENTS BEYOND BSN	None required to practice as an RN; additional certification is optional

PATHWAY 02 · ADVANCED CARE FOR PATIENTS IN CRISIS

Acute Care Nurse

Many registered nurses build their careers in acute care settings, caring for patients with illnesses, injuries or conditions requiring short-term treatment. Although a BSN is not required to work in acute care, earning a BSN may help you strengthen competencies in leadership, evidence-based practice and care coordination that can support professional growth within hospital settings.

TYPICAL PRACTICE SETTING	Step-down units, post-surgical units and acute medical-surgical floors
MEDIAN WAGE	Reported under the broader Registered Nurses occupation, \$93,600/year, May 2024 ³
JOB OUTLOOK	Reported under the broader Registered Nurses occupation, 5% projected growth, 2024–2034 ²
ADDITIONAL REQUIREMENTS BEYOND BSN	Specialty certification (such as the PCCN) is recommended by many employers

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3. The earnings referenced were reported by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), [Registered Nurses](#), as of May 2024, retrieved June 2026. BLS calculates the median using salaries of workers nationwide with varying levels of education and experience. It does not reflect the earnings of GCU graduates in these occupations, nor does it reflect the earnings of workers in one city or region of the country or a typical entry-level salary. Median income is the statistical midpoint for the range of salaries in a specific occupation; it is very unlikely that a median salary will reflect an entry-level salary. It represents what you would earn if you were paid more than half the workers in an occupation and less than half the workers in an occupation. It may give you a basis to estimate what you might earn at some point if you enter this career. Grand Canyon University can make no guarantees on individual graduates' salaries. Employability will be determined by numerous factors over which GCU has no control, such as the employer the graduate chooses to apply to, the graduate's experience level, and individual characteristics and skills, against a pool of candidates.

PATHWAY 03 · SPECIALIZED CARE IN THE ICU

Critical Care Nurse

Critical care registered nurses care for patients with complex or life-threatening conditions in intensive care settings. While a BSN is not required to enter critical care nursing, many employers value bachelor's-prepared nurses, and earning a BSN may support continued professional development through coursework in health assessment, leadership and evidence-based practice.

TYPICAL PRACTICE SETTING	ICUs, coronary care units and trauma units
MEDIAN WAGE	Reported under the broader Registered Nurses occupation, \$93,600/year, May 2024 ³
JOB OUTLOOK	Reported under the broader Registered Nurses occupation, 5% projected growth, 2024–2034 ²
ADDITIONAL REQUIREMENTS BEYOND BSN	Specialty certification (such as the CCRN) is recommended by many employers

PATHWAY 04 · TEACHING THE NEXT GENERATION (LONG-TERM PATHWAY)

Postsecondary Nursing Instructor

A BSN can also be the first step toward a career away from direct patient care into teaching. Nursing instructors and teachers demonstrate and teach patient care in classroom and clinical settings to nursing students. This pathway typically requires graduate-level education (an MSN, DNP or PhD) beyond the BSN, making it more of a long-term destination than an immediate outcome of this program.

TYPICAL PRACTICE SETTING	Community colleges, universities and hospital-based nursing education programs
MEDIAN WAGE	Reported under Postsecondary Nursing Instructors and Teachers occupation, \$79,940/year, May 2024 ⁵
JOB OUTLOOK	Reported under the broader Postsecondary Nursing Instructors and Teachers, 17% projected growth, 2024–2034 ⁶
ADDITIONAL REQUIREMENTS BEYOND BSN	Graduate degree (typically an MSN or higher) generally required

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3. The earnings referenced were reported by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), [Registered Nurses](#), as of May 2024, retrieved June 2026. BLS calculates the median using salaries of workers nationwide with varying levels of education and experience. It does not reflect the earnings of GCU graduates in these occupations, nor does it reflect the earnings of workers in one city or region of the country or a typical entry-level salary. Median income is the statistical midpoint for the range of salaries in a specific occupation; it is very unlikely that a median salary will reflect an entry-level salary. It represents what you would earn if you were paid more than half the workers in an occupation and less than half the workers in an occupation. It may give you a basis to estimate what you might earn at some point if you enter this career. Grand Canyon University can make no guarantees on individual graduates' salaries. Employability will be determined by numerous factors over which GCU has no control, such as the employer the graduate chooses to apply to, the graduate's experience level, and individual characteristics and skills, against a pool of candidates.

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Quick Comparison Table

A side-by-side look at how the four pathways compare on settings, wages and outlook.

FACTOR	BSN-PREPARED RN	ACUTE CARE NURSE	CRITICAL CARE NURSE	POSTSECONDARY NURSING INSTRUCTOR
Typical Practice Setting	General hospital & community settings	Step-down / post-surgical units	ICU / coronary care units	Colleges & universities
Median Annual Wage (as of May 2024)	\$93,600 ³	\$93,600 ³ (reported under RN)	\$93,600 ³ (reported under RN)	\$79,940 ⁵ (reported under Postsecondary Teachers)
Job Outlook, 2024–2034	5% ²	5% ² (reported under RN)	5% ² (reported under RN)	17% ⁶ (reported under Postsecondary Nursing Instructors and Teachers)
Annual Openings	~189,100/year ²	Combined w/ RN ²	Combined w/ RN ²	~15,300 ⁶ (reflects projected increase in employment)
Additional Education/Certification Beyond BSN	None required	Specialty certification recommended (e.g., PCCN)	Specialty certification recommended (e.g., CCRN)	Graduate degree generally required

HOW TO READ THIS TABLE

Wages and outlook for acute care, critical care and BSN-prepared RN roles are reported by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics under the single, broader “Registered Nurses” occupational category — the data does not break out figures by unit or specialty.



². COVID-19 has adversely affected the global economy and data from 2020 to 2023 may be atypical compared to prior years; figures shown are effective September 2025 per the U.S. BLS Occupational Outlook Handbook, [Registered Nurses](#), retrieved June 2026.

³. The earnings referenced were reported by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), [Registered Nurses](#), as of May 2024, retrieved June 2026. BLS calculates the median using salaries of workers nationwide with varying levels of education and experience. It does not reflect the earnings of GCU graduates in these occupations, nor does it reflect the earnings of workers in one city or region of the country or a typical entry-level salary. Median income is the statistical midpoint for the range of salaries in a specific occupation; it is very unlikely that a median salary will reflect an entry-level salary. It represents what you would earn if you were paid more than half the workers in an occupation and less than half the workers in an occupation. It may give you a basis to estimate what you might earn at some point if you enter this career. Grand Canyon University can make no guarantees on individual graduates' salaries. Employability will be determined by numerous factors over which GCU has no control, such as the employer the graduate chooses to apply to, the graduate's experience level, and individual characteristics and skills, against a pool of candidates.

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⁶. COVID-19 has adversely affected the global economy and data from 2020 to 2023 may be atypical compared to prior years; figures shown are effective September 2025 per the U.S. BLS Occupational Outlook Handbook, [Postsecondary Nursing Instructors and Teachers](#), retrieved June 2026.

Where You'll Work & Nursing Accreditation

Common Work Settings

- **Hospitals and Acute Care Centers** — the largest employer of RNs, spanning medical-surgical units, intensive care, emergency departments and specialty service lines.⁷
- **Ambulatory Care and Outpatient Clinics** — physician offices, surgery centers and specialty clinics that rely on RNs for patient assessment, education and care coordination.
- **Community and Public Health Organizations** — county health departments, home health agencies and community clinics focused on population-level health promotion and disease prevention.
- **Residential and Long-Term Care Facilities** — skilled nursing facilities, rehabilitation centers and assisted living communities serving patients with chronic and complex needs.
- **Government and Military Health Agencies** — federal, state and military health systems that value the leadership and population-health training built into a BSN.
- **Colleges and Nursing Education Programs** — community colleges, universities and hospital-based training programs that need experienced RNs to teach the next generation, typically after additional graduate study.



RNs work across hospitals, clinics, community health and administrative settings.

7. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (n.d.). [Work Environment](#). Occupational Outlook Handbook. Retrieved July 2026.

ACTIVE RN LICENSURE: REMINDER

This Program Builds on a License You Already Hold

This program is designed for nurses who already hold an active, unencumbered registered nurse (RN) license; it does not prepare students for initial RN licensure or the NCLEX-RN exam.

Specialty certifications call for requirements beyond the BSN. Students who plan to pursue public health nurse certification in California may choose to complete an additional course designed to meet the state's educational requirements for certification. Because certification requirements vary by state, students should contact their state board of nursing to confirm any additional coursework, clinical or other eligibility requirements.

Requirements differ in areas including:

- Continuing education and license renewal requirements for your state of practice
- Eligibility criteria and exam requirements for specialty certifications (e.g., CCRN, PCCN, CNOR)
- Graduate-level education requirements for postsecondary nursing faculty roles
- Multistate licensure and Nurse Licensure Compact (NLC) participation by state
- Background check and fingerprint clearance requirements tied to clinical placements
- How “acute care” and “critical care” scope of practice is defined in your state and employer setting
- Washington students: 100 practicum/clinical hours are required per WAC rule 246-840-531

Key Organizations & Resources

- **AACN** (American Association of Colleges of Nursing) — aacnnursing.org · Source of national data on BSN employment preferences, employer hiring trends and nursing workforce research.
- **ANCC** (American Nurses Credentialing Center) — nursingworld.org/ancc · Administers the Magnet Recognition Program; according to AACN, Magnet-designated hospitals require a BSN for nurse managers and other nurse leaders.⁸
- **CCNE** (Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education) — ccneaccreditation.org · The programmatic accreditor for GCU's baccalaureate, master's, Doctor of Nursing Practice and post-graduate APRN certificate nursing programs.
- **Your State Board of Nursing** — find state-specific licensure renewal rules, continuing education requirements and scope-of-practice definitions — required reading before pursuing a specialty role.

Requirements for Admission

- ✓ Active, unencumbered RN license (associate degree or diploma in nursing)
- ✓ Completion of the Lopes Evaluation to confirm transfer credit (up to 90 credits, 84 lower-division maximum)
- ✓ Completion of 33 major credits across core BSN coursework
- ✓ At least 30 semester credits completed through GCU to satisfy residency requirements
- ✓ At least 36 semester credits at the upper-division (300+) level
- ✓ Completion of the Applied Evidence-Based Project and Practicum, including 40 clinical hours

8. American Association of Colleges of Nursing. (n.d.). [The Impact of Education on Nursing Practice](#). Retrieved October 2025.

Your Path From RN to BSN: Checklist

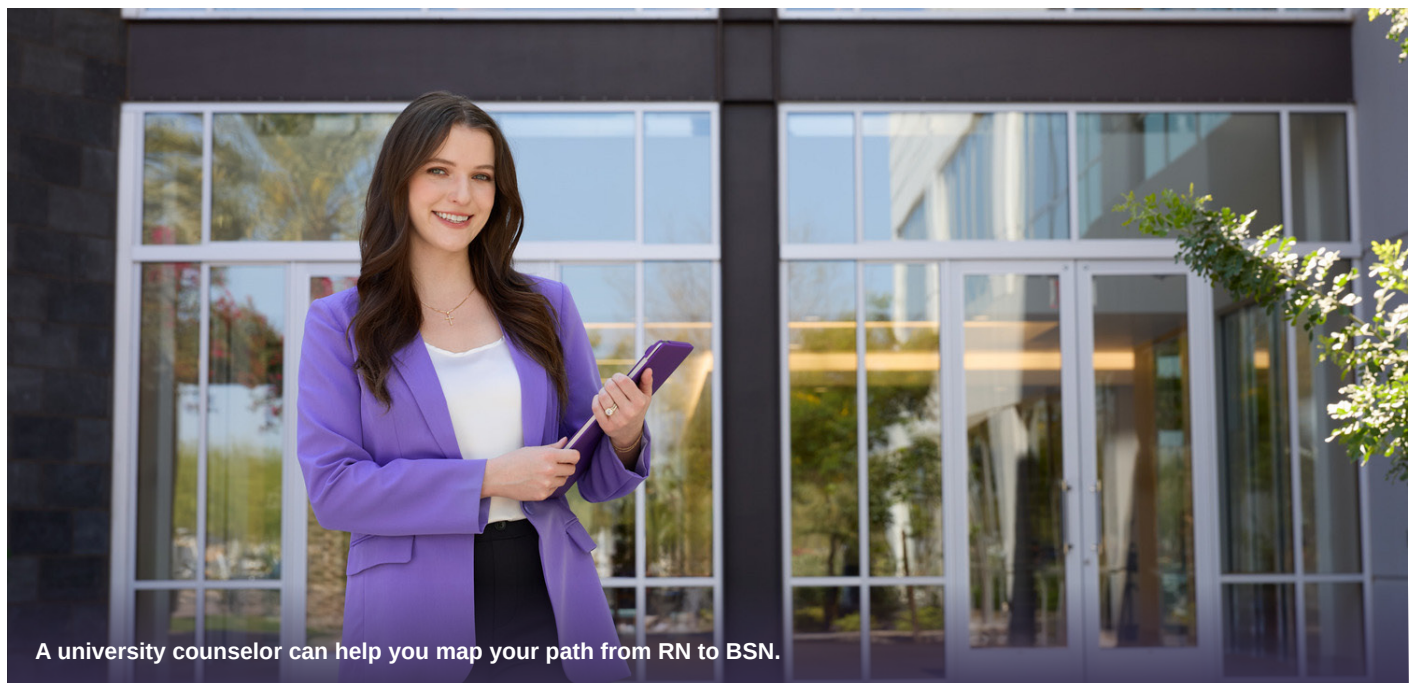
Earning your BSN doesn't reset your nursing career — it builds on it. Use this checklist to stay on track from your first day of enrollment through your first day applying your new credential at work.

Before You Enroll

- ✓ Confirm your active, unencumbered RN license and gather your nursing school transcripts
- ✓ Complete the Lopes Evaluation to estimate which of your previous credits will transfer
- ✓ Connect with a university counselor to map your remaining coursework and timeline
- ✓ Confirm whether your employer offers tuition assistance or reimbursement for BSN completion
- ✓ Talk with your manager about how your course schedule will fit around your current shift rotation

During Your BSN Coursework

- ✓ Complete core coursework in the sequence recommended by your university counselor, since several courses (like Pathophysiology and Complex Disease Management) build on earlier prerequisites
- ✓ Work with the Office of Field Experience (OFE) to complete all required clearances and documentation before starting your practicum experience
- ✓ Begin identifying a clinical nursing practice issue you could explore for your Applied Evidence-Based Project and Practicum
- ✓ Confirm your remaining upper-division and residency credit requirements with your advisor partway through the program
- ✓ Start researching specialty certifications (such as CCRN or PCCN) if a specialty pathway interests you



A university counselor can help you map your path from RN to BSN.

After You Graduate

- ✓ Update your resume, LinkedIn profile and internal personnel file to reflect your BSN
- ✓ Talk with your manager about charge nurse, preceptor or unit-leadership opportunities that may now be open to you
- ✓ Research specialty certification eligibility requirements for any subspecialty you may be interested in
- ✓ Consider whether an MSN in nursing education, leadership or a clinical specialty is a logical next step
- ✓ Stay current on your state's continuing education requirements for license renewal

SECTION 06 · QUESTIONS TO ASK

Questions To Ask Before You Enroll

Choosing where to complete your BSN affects your schedule, your wallet and how directly your coursework connects to your current nursing role. Come prepared with questions — it signals to university counselors that you're a serious, informed applicant.

About the Program & Curriculum

- What is the program's current CCNE accreditation status, and when is it next reviewed?
- How is the 33-credit core nursing curriculum sequenced, and which courses have prerequisites?
- Does the program's Applied Evidence-Based Project and Practicum let me focus on a clinical issue relevant to my current unit?
- How many credits will transfer from my associate degree or diploma program?
- What support is available if I need to complete general education or elective credits alongside core nursing coursework?

About Clinical and Practicum Experience

- How are the 40 practicum clinical hours in the capstone course structured, and can I complete them at my current employer? (100 practicum hours are required for Washington students under WAC rule 246-840-531.)
- Is fingerprint clearance or a background check required before specific courses, and how far in advance should I apply?
- How does the program support students completing clinical hours in a state with specific RN to BSN clinical-hour requirements (for example, Washington)?
- What happens if a change in my employment or clinical site affects my practicum placement?

About Outcomes & Support

- What percentage of students complete the program in 14 months, and what affects that timeline?
- What academic advising and tutoring support are available to RN to BSN students specifically?

About Finances & Timeline

- What is the total cost of attendance for the program, including per-credit tuition?
- Are scholarships or tuition discounts available specifically for RN to BSN students?
- Does my employer's tuition assistance program align with GCU's billing and disbursement schedule?
- How does enrollment status affect my time to completion if I need to pause a term?

RED FLAGS TO WATCH FOR

- Program cannot confirm current CCNE accreditation status
- Vague or evasive answers about whether clinical hours can be completed at your current employer
- No clear answer about how many of your previous credits will transfer
- No dedicated academic advisor for RN to BSN or working-adult learners

BEFORE YOU APPLY

- Confirm your RN license is active and unencumbered in your state of practice
- Complete the Lopes Evaluation to get an early estimate of your transfer credits
- Review the program's State Disclosures page for state-specific notes
- Talk with your manager or employer about tuition assistance and scheduling flexibility

TALK IT THROUGH

Your university counselor can help you confirm your transfer credits, map your timeline to graduation and answer any remaining questions about the Bachelor of Science in Nursing (RN to BSN).

 **READY TO TAKE THE NEXT STEP?**

Find Your Purpose.

Connect with a university counselor to learn more about the Bachelor of Science in Nursing (RN to BSN) and how to take the next step in your nursing career.

1 **Web:** <https://www.gcu.edu/rn-bsn>

2 **Phone:** 1-855-GCU-LOPE

Find your purpose at Grand Canyon University.

Private. Christian. Affordable. Visit [gcu.edu](https://www.gcu.edu)