

A Brief History of the Duke University School of Nursing

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Ninety years ago, on January 2, 1931, the Duke University School of Nursing opened its doors to its first class of 24 students. Only a year earlier, Dean Bessie Baker, RN, moved to Durham to lead the new nursing school and to also become head of Nursing Services for the new Duke Hospital. Baker served as dean, instructor, recruiter, and hospital liaison at Duke University. Ann Henshaw was the first instructor.

The school has offered many different degrees over the years. The first students, all high school graduates, received a diploma after a three-year program that cost just \$100 per year. In 1938, the school began offering baccalaureate degrees to students who had completed two years of college along with the nursing curricula.

During World War II, Duke was one of 34 nursing schools in North Carolina to participate in the Cadet Nurse Corps program to help mitigate the severe nursing shortage. This program provided free tuition, fees, uniforms and a monthly stipend for nursing students. In exchange, students agreed to serve in military or civilian hospitals for the duration of the war.

In 1944, the school began a five-year Bachelor of Science in Nursing Education degree program and a decade later, in 1953, it added the fourth Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) degree program in the state.

Under the leadership of Thelma Ingles, MA, RN, chair of the Department of Medical-Surgical Nursing, in 1958 Duke developed the clinical nursing practitioner program, one of the first master's programs of its kind in the United States. However, after five years, the National League for Nursing Education refused to accredit this new degree in nursing care, thus opening the door for the Physician's Assistants program to sprout and grow.

The mid 1960s were a time for expansion and inclusivity. In 1966, Roger Voelkel and Don Brown became the first male students to attend the school and the next year, Donna A. Harris became the first African-American student at Duke.

In 1984, as a part of Duke University's retrenchment plan, the last class of BSN students graduated. The graduate programs also ended in 1984, re-opening in 1985 with a new curriculum and focus on research.

New programs in advanced practice opened in the 1990s. In 1992, the school launched North Carolina's first Master's Geriatric Nurse Practitioner Program. Other nurse practitioner programs soon followed, including pediatric, acute care and



Students and faculty in an early class of Duke University School of Nursing. Credit: Duke University

oncology/HIV. In 1999, an innovative degree program titled Health and Nursing Ministries combined master's-level work in theology and advanced nursing practices to prepare faith-based nurses.

The expansion of programs continued in the first decade of this century. The Nurse Anesthesia master's degree program premiered in 2001. A year later, the school once again began offering a BSN degree – this time as an accelerated, 16-month degree offered to students already holding an undergraduate degree. In 2006, the school accepted the first students into the new PhD program. In 2008, the school launched the first Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) degree program in North Carolina to prepare nurses for leadership positions in clinical care.

Today, the Duke University School of Nursing continues its history of excellence and is currently ranked second in the nation by the U.S. News and World Report.

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