MEETINGS

WELLNESS MILESTONES

The magical metamorphosis a student registered nurse anesthetist (SRNA) goes through to become a CRNA is extraordinary. It feels like a life or death struggle to transform from a caterpillar-like state where you’re wrapped in a cocoon of textbooks, board practice questions, and endless clinical rotations to break through the National Certification Exam (NCE) and emerge as a fully functional CRNA who can fly on your own. This article will discuss the transition from student to practice, highlighting advice for the last six months of anesthesia school, the transition out of school, and the first six months of practice. I have collated these insights from my own experience and that of dozens of CRNAs I have spoken to. More information on this topic can be found on episode 25 of my podcast, From the Head of the Bed… a podcast for the anesthesia community (www.fromtheheadofthebed.com).

The Last Six Months of School

The three big elements that will consume your attention at the end of school are your project/thesis, the job search, and boards. Hacking out time from the jungle of class and clinicals to wrap up your project/thesis early will pay off big towards the end of school. Likewise, securing a job several months out from graduation will eliminate a big stressor. My podcast episode 23, “Tips for the Job Hunt”, may be helpful.

Putting both your project/thesis and the job hunt behind you will help you focus on the biggest piece of finishing school: passing boards. Here are 10 Tips for Crushing Boards:

1. Develop the right mindset. Believe you can pass. Develop a growth-oriented mindset and your exceptional capacity to succeed. The weight of doubt is not worth carrying.
2. Study ferociously. There is no amount of time spent studying that you will regret once you pass.
3. Take care of yourself. Find a balance that includes adequate sleep, exercise, and eating well. Like an athlete or actress training for a big role, you’re training to perform at your best in an epic event. Act like it in every way: mind, body and spirit.
4. Do timed practice exams. Taking timed practice exams with no music or distractions will help you prepare psychologically for boards.
5. Visit your exam location ahead of time. Pearson Testing Centers are classically difficult to find. Eliminate the stress of possibly getting lost on the day of the exam by finding the parking lot, building, elevator, floor, office, and bathroom of your testing center ahead of time.
6. Get your stuff together. This is the “Mom Tip.” Lay out your required paperwork, identification cards, and car keys the night before the exam.
7. Stop studying. Cramming in the last 12-24 hours before the exam will probably not be helpful and will likely only increase your stress. Plan to finish studying a day out. Get good sleep the two or three nights before your exam. Rest mentally and physically ahead of your exam.
8. Take exams carefully. Once you’re at the computer, relax and breathe. Read carefully. Don’t rush. If you’ve done timed practice exams, you’ll have plenty of time to complete all 100-170 questions. Remember, 30 of the minimum 100 questions are random and don’t count toward your score. Have fun—you’re becoming a CRNA!
9. When you finish the exam—relax. Be proud of yourself no matter the result. Many excellent CRNAs needed more than one attempt to pass the NCE. Tell yourself that you will pass—today or another day. You will be a CRNA!
10. When you pass: CELEBRATE! Enjoy what you have accomplished!

Transitioning out of School

You probably can’t wait to get out of school, but know that there are some things actually worth savoring in the waning months of your program. You have been in the trenches with your classmates, preceptors, and professors for years. Since many SRNAs move to take jobs, you may not see these folks after school. Take time to hang out and celebrate with your friends and classmates. Say thanks to your professors and

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preceptors—it means a lot and goes a long way towards maintaining professional contacts that might help you down the road.

**First Six Months of Practice**
Wrapping up nurse anesthesia school is the culmination of years of planning and hard work. It’s like summiting Everest! You and your family have likely sacrificed massively to make this dream come true. Yet it’s also a new beginning—a time to lay a foundation for your future career and life. Here are some tips to help you get started.

In terms of your clinical practice, trust what you have learned in school, have a rationale for what you’re doing (and not doing), and be willing to grow. You will continue to see new cases, challenging pathophysiology, new staff, anesthesiologists, and surgeons. Trust that what you know is sound, evidence-based anesthesia practice. Do not do something just because it’s the way your facility or new group has done things for years. Know why you practice the way you do. Keep studying, keep looking up cases, keep challenging yourself to incorporate new tools and techniques. Don’t be afraid or embarrassed to ask for help when you need it. It takes time to get comfortable working on your own, so go easy on yourself and know who your resources are for support and guidance. School teaches you the science of anesthesia; your practice is where you develop the art of providing anesthesia. You’ve been given the tools to build a safe practice and rewarding career; now is the time to build it!

Remember, the anesthesia community is small, so don’t burn bridges professionally. Think carefully before taking a job and before leaving a job. Leave on good terms and give your first employer a reasonable commitment of time before leaving for the next job.

Let’s talk about money. First, money isn’t everything, but it is a pretty powerful tool when harnessed appropriately. When considering a job, think about all the variables (i.e., time off, call schedule, benefit package, location, case mix, group dynamics, etc.) and not just the gross salary. Remember: You’re bankrupt until you’re debt free. Spend less than you make and prioritize becoming debt free. Learn to embrace delayed gratification, and learn the power of compounding interest. Maximize your contributions to retirement planning, investing, and saving. You don’t make as much as a surgeon or anesthesiologist or even a debt-free CRNA, so don’t act like it. You also earn substantially more than some of your other colleagues in the operating room, so be respectful and professional when talking about money, vacations, and purchases.

You Have Incredible Potential
You are the single best advocate for your own practice, your profession, and your future career. You can build the kind of practice you want. You have incredible capacity to either build others up or tear them down. Be kind, even inspirational, to other perioperative staff and the SRNAs you will work with. Remember that you are now the standard bearer of an esteemed profession. You are the face and voice of CRNAs to everyone around you. You may be the only CRNA your patients and their families ever meet.

Consider giving back through the AANA Foundation and the Political Action Committee (PAC). The AANA has paved the road we all walk on as CRNAs. If each of you remain active members of the AANA and give back $250 annually to both the Foundation and PAC, the future of CRNA practice will be brilliant! These are the best ways to stay informed of emerging trends in anesthesia, to stay connected with your colleagues across the nation, and to help build a stronger future for CRNAs. Those who have gone before us have given time, effort, and money to create the careers that we now enjoy. Consider giving back just as our seasoned CRNA colleagues have!

A good life is the culmination of thousands of little choices made well. You made an excellent choice to become a CRNA! Enjoy the fruits of your labor. Keep setting a trajectory in your decision making that creates the life you’ve imagined. Show kindness to others, spend less than you make, develop hobbies outside of work that are rewarding, give back, go big, live the dream, save lives, and have fun! Welcome to the CRNA family!

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Listen to episode 35 of my podcast, *From the Head of the Bed*, where I will discuss more about key tips for successful transitions to practice. [www.fromtheheadofthebed.com/episode35](http://www.fromtheheadofthebed.com/episode35)