The School of Nursing, founded in 1923, became the first school to prepare nurses under an educational rather than an apprenticeship program. Dean Annie Goodrich's insistence that her students came to Yale to learn a highly skilled profession rather than to provide extra hands to already trained nurses was truly revolutionary. The School has continued to spawn new ideas that have helped redefine nursing: the groundbreaking research of Virginia Henderson, the founding of the American hospice movement, and the first “graduate entry” system that enlivened nursing practice by attracting mature students with varied and rich life experiences.

Since its founding, the School routinely revises its curriculum to meet the profession’s needs. Because of an increasing realization that a college education was essential in the profession of nursing, the School of Nursing admitted only college graduates after 1934. Fifteen years later an advanced program in mental health nursing was added to the basic program. In 1952 the School became coeducational when the first male student was admitted.

A study of nursing education at Yale was undertaken in 1952. The Yale Corporation decided that the University could contribute to nursing most effectively through a graduate program for nurses who had both basic professional preparation and a baccalaureate degree. The basic program was discontinued in 1956, and the curriculum of the advanced program was expanded to prepare nurses in psychiatric–mental health, maternal-newborn health, and community health nursing. Nurse-midwifery was an option in the Maternal-Newborn Health Program until 1972, when it became the total clinical component of the program. A Master of Science in Nursing degree was awarded to those who had successfully completed a minimum of one year’s study, coupled with a summer field experience. A Certificate in Nurse-Midwifery was also awarded by Yale University until 1972, when national certification by the American College of Nurse-Midwives was instituted.

In 1959–60 a revised curriculum of two years of study leading to the master’s degree was inaugurated. The curriculum was further expanded in 1969 to include pediatric nursing and in 1974 to include medical-surgical nursing. In September 1992 a specialty was added in nursing systems and policy, then renamed nursing management and policy; that specialty was discontinued in 2003. From 2006 to 2015 the curriculum included a specialty in nursing management, policy, and leadership to prepare leaders in the management of delivery systems that promote patient safety and quality of care. In April 1997 the Yale Corporation approved the Post-Master’s Certificate for advanced practice nurses seeking additional specialty preparation. The first certificates were awarded at the May 1997 commencement exercises.

In April 1970 the Corporation approved development of a three-year curriculum for college graduates from other fields, a program of study now known as the Graduate Entry Prespecialty in Nursing. The first class of twelve enrolled in the fall of 1974.

In November 1992 the Corporation approved the development of a Doctor of Nursing Science program. The first class was admitted and enrolled in September 1994; and the first graduates were awarded the D.N.Sc. in June 1998. In 2006 the Corporation approved the program’s conversion from the Doctor of Nursing Science to a Doctor of Philosophy, awarded by the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences. The first Ph.D. class was admitted and enrolled in September 2006. In April 2011 the Corporation approved the development of a Doctor in Nursing Practice program. The first class of D.N.P. students was admitted and enrolled in September 2012.

In March 2020 Yale School of Nursing, along with the rest of the world, shut its doors as the globe faced the COVID-19 pandemic. In a matter of days, faculty, staff, and students pivoted to online teaching, learning, and working. Didactic learning as well as simulation experiences took place remotely, and clinical experiences were cancelled until fall 2020. The Class of 2020 was celebrated in a virtual ceremony, a first for the University, and many beloved traditions were cancelled due to the pandemic. Faculty and staff took the lessons learned from the spring term, and some in-person learning was able to resume in the fall 2020 term. Students were able to engage in clinical education again. Testing, quarantining, and personal protective equipment (PPE) requirements became the norm, and simulation experiences were created and executed while maintaining physical distancing in smaller groups. Many faculty and students worked at the bedside caring for COVID-19 patients, while maintaining their teaching and learning requirements.

As a community, YSN lived our mission to bring better health to all people. More than three hundred students, faculty, and staff volunteered to be part of surge-capacity support as we awaited the first wave of COVID-19 patients to inundate the local health systems. YSN developed a text-message-based survey to track local health care workers exposed to and/or diagnosed with COVID-19, including individuals’ estimated return-to-work dates. This tool helped local health systems plan for workforce needs as the cases in and around New Haven also continued to climb. In response to the national PPE shortage, YSN convened a group of local experts, both within and beyond Yale, to tackle two questions related to COVID-19: (1) how to streamline the production of urgently needed PPE, expedite FDA regulations, and create a supply chain of related equipment to keep area patients and health care workers safe; and (2) how to support similar processes around design and scaling of ventilator alternatives. Faculty collaborated on creative and innovative ways to produce and sterilize PPE with partners across campus and New Haven, including colleagues at the School of Engineering & Applied Science and businesses in the city. Students and faculty continued the important work at HAVEN Free Clinic by providing telehealth care and primary care, free of charge, to New Haven residents. Finally, the School worked with state and national partners, including credentialers, to ensure that educational guidelines could be flexible enough during the COVID-19 crisis to allow nursing students, including advanced
practice nurses, to continue their educational progression, utilize clinical simulation hours appropriately, and sit for their boards and join the health workforce that is needed more than at any other time in recent history.

On June 18, 2020, the School released an initial anti-racism plan in which Dean Ann Kurth acknowledged racism within YSN and apologized for all the times when YSN did not effectively address racism when it happened in the School. The plan outlined several initial actions the School would undertake in service of structuring an anti-racism academic learning and working environment. In the months that followed, the School held Structural Competency training for an initial cohort, with more trainings planned; added Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging metrics to faculty and staff annual evaluations; began requiring preceptors to sign off on the anti-racism statement; and undertook a major curriculum review that included anti-racism and anti-oppression components. In November 2020 Dean Kurth announced the new position of associate dean for equity. This will be an experienced faculty position that will provide pedagogical expertise as well as overall support for a full program of work, beyond the initial anti-racism plan. The Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion will report to the associate dean for equity. In March 2021 the School named Maurice Nelson, M.Ed., CDE, as the director of the office.

In early 2021 the School asked Benjamin Reese, Psy.D., clinical psychologist and national diversity expert, to conduct a survey of diversity, equity, and systemic/structural race issues at the School. The primary purpose was to understand these issues from the perspective of faculty, staff, and students and to recommend steps YSN needs to take. The scope of work included individual interviews and discussions with administrators, three faculty focus groups, three student focus groups, and two staff focus groups. Reese delivered a report in March 2021 summarizing his findings. It covered assets and challenges and opportunities for growth. He also gave eleven timely recommendations for the path forward. This community self-reflection was a recommended step in the planning process outlined by University Secretary and Vice President for University Life Kimberly Goff-Crews, with all schools and units at Yale now required to have five-year plans to enhance diversity, equity, inclusion (DEI), and belonging. The final plans are due to Goff-Crews and Gary Desir, vice provost for faculty development and diversity and Paul B. Beeson Professor of Medicine, in August 2021, for implementation in September 2021.