Professional Nurse’s Portfolio

Shirley K. Bell

In today’s continuing effort to find an organized, useful approach to demonstrate the professional nurse’s competency, the professional nurse’s portfolio is being seriously discussed. The various components of a professional portfolio and the concept of reflective practice are presented. Key words: portfolio, professional, reflective practice

In this era of rapidly developing technology and practice, and the concomitant concern for quality and safety, the professional nurse’s portfolio is being used more formally by nurses in the United States and other countries as a means of tracing the development of one’s career and expertise. Over time, the portfolio becomes a record of personal development, a means of accountability through self and/or peer assessment, and ultimately a professional history and source of pride to the nurse who has kept pace with a dynamic profession.

—Margretta Styles, RN, PhD, FAAN

Mention the word portfolio and several images come to mind. The portfolio may be one of an actress with photos from several roles, a model with photos from various kinds of clothing displays, an architect with pictures of various completed projects, or a personal stock portfolio that details various investments. One type of portfolio that is receiving a great deal of interest is the professional nurse’s portfolio.

An example of a continued competency model is one that demonstrates a type of reflective practice process and the results of that are incorporated into a portfolio. Reflective practice as described by Daniel Schon, contains two essential parts. He described reflection-in-action as how professionals deal with complex situations in which there are no right or wrong answers. Professional practice includes more than just knowledge, it includes the art of practice and thinking about what does and does not work and how to change one’s actions in order to get a better outcome. This thought process occurs at the same time the practice activity occurs: the practitioner is tuning one’s activity using experience to improve chances of goal achievement. Professional practice is more than application of knowledge and demonstration of skills; it also includes intangible intuition.

Schon also discusses reflection-on-action where the practitioner often reflects on

Shirley K. Bell, RN, EdD, Clinical Associate Professor, College of Nursing, Arizona State University West.

© 2001 Aspen Publishers, Inc.
what has transpired in the past and thinks about what might work better in the future. Reflection-on-action is an important part of how practitioners learn from their experience.

Patricia Benner described this type of learning in her pioneering work on how a nurse moves from a novice to an expert. This learning process helps the nurse to develop an expert role where the nurse has experienced and learned from a variety of situations in order to be able to predict what kinds of situations might occur given any set of circumstances.

Importance of a Professional Portfolio

The professional nurse’s portfolio has a different meaning for each position that a nurse might hold. Probably the type of nurse most familiar with something similar to this is the faculty member who has had to prepare a “book” or “dossier” to be submitted for promotion. A well-developed portfolio can transcend career changes, additional education, expansion in community areas, and much more. The portfolio may be used for the researcher who needs to track proposals, funding, and publications. The nurse who is an independent contractor may use the portfolio to store one’s business plans, contracts, and a list of various positions held.

Three career areas will be discussed in detail in this article. The first is the novice nurse who is documenting all the learning that goes on in the first year of her career. The second is the experienced staff nurse who is preparing a portfolio for a promotion consideration or advancement up the clinical ladder and who is also concerned about documentation. The third is the nurse executive/manager who may be developing one’s staff or implementing a new type of evaluation process and will need to be conversant with what can be included in a portfolio. Of course, the nurse executive/manager, as an experienced nurse, will be interested in documenting one’s achievements and conducting a yearly self-evaluation process using reflective thinking as well.

Purpose of a Portfolio

The overall purpose of a portfolio is to provide a repository for the historical information about one’s career. It is a place to store the important papers that helps to determine the professional career path one has taken. The portfolio helps to project a professional image with all the appropriate parts being documented and organized. The portfolio also helps to prepare one to optimize one’s career potential and to communicate what one has accomplished and is capable of achieving in the future in a new job, an advancement, or at another level of a clinical ladder.

Components of a Portfolio

The initial component of a portfolio would be a current resume and curriculum vitae. The resume is a one- to two-page document that contains the important information about a professional career, including demographic data, education, goals and objectives, and relevant experience. This should be updated at least on a yearly basis so as to not lose valuable experience that needs to be included. Portfolio documentation may be used for a variety of purposes, from preparing to interview for a new job,
In these turbulent times, which are also times of opportunity, a current resume will increase one’s ability to be responsive to a variety of opportunities.

volunteering for community committees, or other professional activities. Both staff nurses and nurse executives/managers may want to become involved in a variety of activities that add to one’s value to one’s agency. In these turbulent times, which are also times of opportunity, a current resume will increase one’s ability to be responsive to a variety of opportunities.

A curriculum vitae is a much more detailed document listing all the various components of one’s professional life. This would include the information in a resume as well as a list of all the committees one has served on, the continuing education and in-service activities in which one has participated, speeches given, community activities, publications, and honors and awards. Material in each section of the portfolio is categorized and listed chronologically, beginning with the most recent events.

In order to document career growth, one needs to have a yearly work plan that details one’s goals and objectives. If this is the first experience in developing a yearly plan, the staff nurse may need some assistance in helping to focus his or her goals and objectives so as to be successful and continue to develop. The nurse may be able to use a mentor, preceptor, or a more experienced nurse to help focus goals and objectives. The new nurse wants to learn everything at once. This novice may become overwhelmed with trying to apply the education learned in school and all the new knowledge learned during orientation and thus not have an opportunity to practice skills and demonstrate knowledge. Focusing on goals and objectives may help decrease this frustration. The nurse executive/manager may want to modify the agency position descriptions into a work plan/evaluation form and add an area at the bottom for personal development. This can be applicable for both the staff nurse and the nurse executive/manager at various levels. The yearly evaluation can then be used for planning for next year’s activities and writing next year’s goals and objectives.

Copies of one’s yearly performance appraisals can be included in this portfolio section related to work plan or kept in a separate section that just contains evaluations. An individual summary of tangible accomplishments should be written, highlighting the expectations of the position and what has been accomplished throughout the year. Information documenting advancements in position, such as achieving another level of clinical expertise or a change in position; as well as any increases in salary, whether via a merit raise or a cost of living increase, should be included. Special skills and competencies should be documented. In today’s workplace important special skills such as computer expertise and a listing of all the courses taken as well as an objective evaluation of one’s acquired technical skills should be included.

If applying for a nurse executive/manager’s position for the first time, with the expectation of preparing budgets, it would be important to document related service, such as serving as treasurer for an organization that required budgets on a yearly basis. Also, it would be helpful for the prospective employer to know if the applicant has
developed budgets for a research project that was completed during advanced education. As a staff nurse who really likes computer work, advancement in the informatics area or development of a new role of teaching others about the use of computers might be an area that could be developed.

Many positions require that you have documentation in a variety of areas. Examples include such items as a CPR card, Advanced Cardiac Life Support (ACLS) certification if appropriate, chemotherapy certification, documentation of immunizations, drug screening results, and a current liability insurance certificate. These would need to be appropriate for the agency and even may vary from unit to unit within an agency. These requirements should be clearly defined for both the staff nurse and nurse executive/manager at all levels.

Professionals like to receive and save the various letters of appreciation from patients, families, other professionals, and perhaps even from students who have been in the agency or for whom they have served as a preceptor. This may also be true for new graduates that one has worked with in a variety of positions. Documenting positive feedback is one way of promoting the best events that happen in a nurse’s career. Shifting the focus from traditionally negative documentation to include positive events requires a shift in attitude. The professional nurse deserves recognition for positive contributions.

Many times nurses become involved in paid and volunteer activities that need to be documented in the portfolio. An example might be working with local or national legislators in order to get safe needle legislation passed. A nurse may serve as a consultant on a book project, as a data collector for a research project, or even as an item writer for certification examinations, all of which would need to be documented.

Nurses are always giving speeches or presentations. Documentation should include the topic, audience type (which can range from students at the local elementary school to a national convention), and date. A log sheet should be kept and then this information should be added yearly to the curriculum vitae. A copy of the speech may also be kept, especially if the topic may be presented again. As one’s career progresses, these presentations may turn into publications, ranging from an article in your agency’s newsletter to the publication of a book. All manuscripts need to be tracked and a log should be kept of all publications. These should also be added to your curriculum vitae on a yearly basis. A copy of each publication should be kept in protective sheets.

Involvement in agency committees, task forces, and other outside professional organizations needs to be documented. This would include the title of committees, position held, time of involvement, offices held, and whether this was at a local, state, or national level. Staff nurses may be involved in governance activities in their agency, specialty organizations, or state nurses’ association. Nurse executives/managers may be involved in the previously listed activities as well as nurse executives’ organizations.

Community activities often comprise a major part of one’s life when starting a career. Involvement in such areas as the Scouts, PTAs, sports teams, music events, and church activities should be documented and tracked. These activities demonstrate community involvement and provide the opportunity to learn additional skills. Many
leadership skills can be honed in the community arena. Serving as organization president treasurer, or secretary can help to develop expertise in a variety of areas, including the ability to work with others, organize and implement projects, meet deadlines, and act responsibly—all of which are valuable assets in the work arena.

Recognition as nurse executive/manager of the year, employee of the month, or being inducted into the national nursing honorary, Sigma Theta Tau, are just a few of the honors and awards that also need to be documented. Such items would include commendations from the work place or organizations (both professional and community), listings in national reference books, or awards for scholarship, innovative practice, or research. These need to be logged in the appropriate section of the portfolio, listed in chronological order with the most recent listed first.

What is required to function as a professional in your position? At the least is a current license to practice as a professional nurse. Do you need to be credentialed as a nurse executive/manager or in a clinical field? If so, then those need to be documented and stored. It is a good idea to keep what is required to maintain national certification with the copy of the document, as this facilitates the renewal process.

Many of the certifications require continuing education hours or an update of ACLS, for example. All certificates that are given for continuing education credit should be logged and also added to one’s curriculum vitae on a yearly basis at a minimum. A list of the in-service hours received from your agency should be kept on a separate list. These are important for the agency and could be important in promotion, merit raises, or continued competency, although they usually do not count for national certification. If there is confusion about the difference between continuing education and in-service education offerings, this may be clarified by the education department in the agency or by calling the state nurses’ association.

Other items that may be included in one’s portfolio include a copy of current references that may be used, as needed; a list of contacts from other agencies, organizations, states, or specialty areas; and a place for business cards for important professional contacts. These contacts may be related to one’s current position or as a result of networking at professional meetings. Other items that are important to the individual nurse or to the employing agency may be added.

Summary

The professional nurse’s portfolio provides both the staff nurse and the nurse executive/manager with the opportunity to document all aspects of their career and to actively plan for its future development. How about planning the annual updates around an event like Nurse’s Week? Celebrate the advancement of your career while others are celebrating all of nursing. It is time to take charge of your career rather than just letting it happen.

REFERENCES
