

Nursing Portfolios: Drivers, Challenges, and Benefits



Kenneth Dion

Nursing portfolios have been a topic of discussion in literature and the halls of nursing schools for a number of years (Bell, 2001; Corcoran & Nicholson, 2004). Several macroeconomic factors, such as the changing nursing workforce (Manion, 2002), the nursing shortage, regulation, and heightened interest in health care quality have caused the interest in nursing portfolios to increase. This interest

is supported by the increase in publications on the topic. This article will briefly identify drivers behind a move toward the nursing portfolio, the challenges associated with portfolios, and the benefits of an online portfolio.

Drivers

Discussion of the nursing portfolio in literature dates back several years. Early articles recommend assembling a shoe box of documents that demonstrate professional competence. The components of the portfolio have been continuously refined over time (Bell, 2001; Corcoran & Nicholson, 2004). The process of assembling portfolios has been adopted in the teaching curriculum (Serembus, 2000).

The appearance of the subject of portfolios coincides with a refocusing on professional competence, its relation to patient outcomes, and the nursing profession's move from a model of continuing education to a model of continuing professional competence. As these dynamics continue to act as drivers behind this conversation, additional factors are causing the discussion of portfolios to intensify in the profession and schools of nursing.

The nursing shortage, as with any shortage, is bringing new entrants into the market. Rapid entry of new resources into a market can erode quality. The lack of educational capacity that is contributing to the nursing shortage is allowing schools of nursing to raise the bar on candidates. There must continue to be a vigilant focus on the quality of the new entrants that applies to domestic and foreign candidates. The portfolios implemented in conjunction with nursing education provide a vehicle for nursing education organizations to track candidate outcomes against established organizational quality objectives.

Many of the new entrants will be younger workers. This emerging workforce has different attitudes toward both work and technology (Manion, 1997). In other industries, such as information technology, we have seen the development of free agents who sell themselves as knowledge workers based on the work history and skills maintained in their portfolios (Gould, Wiener, & Levin, 1997). According to Gould et al. (1997), "Individuals who become free agents represent a rapidly expanding group of workers who, by choice or by chance, relate to the marketplace in a new, pragmatic way....They understand that their only security is being able to offer and sell the skills and services the market needs and values." As is the case with knowledge workers in other industries, nursing students familiar with technology will look for technologies that will both enable the ease of development of their professional portfolio and the ability to use that portfolio to promote the free agent lifestyle that some of the emerging nursing workforce are bringing to the profession (Green, 2005).

Regulation will continue to be a dominating factor in the health care industry. As research continues to support the link between education and patient outcomes, regulation will increasingly demand documented professional development and educational activities. Voluntary quality and outcomes-focused activities such as Magnet Designation™ have already been undertaken by health care organizations in an effort to stay ahead of the regulatory power curve. The application process for initiatives such as Magnet Designation includes the required submission of nursing portfolios.

The nursing profession has held that a certification in a specialty demonstrates a level of competence. Nursing certification bodies are utilizing portfolios as the vehicle for specialty certification (as is the case with certification in genetics nursing) (Monson, 2005). Other specialty organizations are considering the portfolio as a path to certification.

Challenges

As educators, researchers, students of nursing, and life-long learners, we continue to explore the art and science of nursing. From the quantifiable basics of the science (such as completing a code cart checklist or passing an exam for a licensure) to the more qualitative aspects of the profession (such as integrating our knowledge and experience to resolve a psychologically difficult situation or reflecting on complex nursing problem), today's nurses are challenged to articulate their expertise and the value nursing brings to the health care market. As such, nursing portfolios must support the capture of data which can be objectively evaluated, such as test scores, GPAs, and more subjective evaluations (such as case logs and exemplars). As is the case with the practice of nursing, the demonstration of nursing knowledge, synthesis and

implementation all require documentation. It is important that the demonstration of this expertise be captured shortly after the event takes place, otherwise it may be lost forever.

In addition to the challenge of capturing professional development and competency data, nurses must represent that information appropriately based on the target audience receiving the data. One must select different resumes or curricula vitae for distribution based on the needs of the receiver of the information and the desired message. This practice also applies to selecting the elements to be included in a portfolio. Selecting the components of, assembling, and distributing a paper-based portfolio for a targeted audience is a cumbersome, time-consuming process. It can be as difficult to organize and disseminate the documents in a paper-based portfolio as it is to capture it.

Opportunities

Today, technology exists for anyone to easily store electronic copies of important professional documentation, skills, education, training, certification, and work history. Nurses, from their entry into the profession through professional practice progression, should electronically store every piece of professional development documentation. A recent case in point is the thousands of nurses in America's Gulf Coast region who lost every shred of their professional documentation in the summer of 2005 as a result of catastrophic hurricanes. Had that information been captured and stored electronically, it would be available today. The alternative to an online portfolio for preserving these documents could follow this course; the nurse goes to the local public library, scans in her documents, loads them on a compact disc, and stores them in a safety deposit box.

The Web-based portfolio is a more efficient and interactive solution for those with access to the Internet. As Internet access becomes ubiquitous, the ability to capture and report on nursing activities will exist in almost real-time. The emerging work force will be asking for administrations to meet their technology needs centered on making them more efficient (Manion, 1997). Access to an online portfolio will enable nurses to capture professional development and competence activities shortly after completion and thereby reduce the instances of unaccounted for activities. An electronic online portfolio provides the nurse with a secure storage site for all professional development documentation. The nurse inputs and uploads all professional development activities and supporting documentation to a relational database which captures certifications, committees, community service, cover text, documents, education, honors, licenses, memberships, military service, publications, research efforts, student activities, training and seminars, and work history.

Capture of quantitative data is straight forward given the current evolution of our information systems. Grade point averages, license and certification expiration dates, and completion of organization-specific skill checklists can be captured easily in Web-based forms. Calculations such as the number of required education hours can be preformed by the technologies that support a Web-based portfolio. The quantitative data contained within the portfolio can be brought to life, delivering more value to the nurse by providing proactive reminders via e-mail and on-screen prompts of important professional development requirements (for example, an expiring license).

The Web-based portfolio facilitates the capture and evaluation of qualitative data often associated with the art of nursing. Recent advances in technology enable the uploading of documents to the Web for storage and distribution. Nurses and nursing students can now place a document (such as a case log or exemplar) online at the click of a button. This not only provides for safe storage of these important documents, it also facilitates easy sharing of those documents with peers and evaluators. In the future, natural language processing programs will provide greater efficiencies for portfolio evaluators by pre-screening qualitative data contained in the portfolio before passing the portfolio along for subjective human evaluation.

Using a Web-based portfolio, the nurse or student nurse has the ability to create multiple portfolios containing only those elements from this comprehensive database that the nurse feels appropriate to the specific target audience receiving the portfolio. Using the artist as a parallel example, one finds that an artist selects the pieces of her work to take to a meeting with a gallery owner in hopes of getting a show based on certain factors. These factors may be conscious or unconscious and might include the reputation of the gallery, the reputation of the gallery owner, or the advice of a friend or mentor that has personal knowledge of that gallery or owner. Just as artists must be able to select works from their portfolio to represent themselves appropriately based on audience, the nurse must have a vehicle to gather and demonstrate their expertise in the art and science of nursing that is appropriate for the target audience.

Using a Web-based portfolio from anywhere, nurses or nursing students have access to the Internet, they can assemble a portfolio containing only the constituent data and documents they desire. They can then send an e-mail message to their desired recipient with a link to view this custom-designed

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portfolio. There is no document to copy or postage to pay. In addition to sending a link via e-mail to share the elements of a portfolio, nurses or students can save and distribute a portfolio as a PDF file. Portfolios can be developed for any number of activities including clinical care evaluation, employment seeking, or research collaboration.

Additional features on an online portfolio that enhance its value over current paper-based approaches include a “dashboard view” that shows real-time status of all licenses, certifications, training requirements, calendar, personal and professional goals, and personal Web link favorites. This online repository will allow the nurse or student to maintain and access a self-created online document library that could include patient teaching materials and other clinically or professionally valuable documents. In the instance where the portfolio is provided by a school of nursing or health care organization, Web links and documents can be populated on the nurse’s or student’s dashboard by the sponsoring organization.

Conclusion

The migration from a model of continuing education to continuing professional competence along with advancing technology brings the opportunity to capture, demonstrate, and articulate the art and science of nursing and its valuable contribution to the health care system. Schools of nursing are requiring that professional portfolios be developed by both undergraduate and graduate nursing students. Lifelong learning as a nurse begins in the school of nursing. Significant consideration should be given to starting today’s nursing students on the correct professional path with a Web-based portfolio. It will facilitate the capture, learning, and competence activities for both the faculty and the student due to the ease of adoption, create opportunities for standardization, and process improvement around data collection and dissemination. For more information on Web-based professional portfolios, attend the session entitled, “Building Your Professional Portfolio” at the National Student Nurses’ Association’s 54th Annual Convention in Baltimore Maryland, April 5-9, 2006.

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University of Pennsylvania to Renovate and Rename Nursing Building for Former Dean Claire Fagin

The University of Pennsylvania School of Nursing has received a \$5 million gift from the Annenberg Foundation to support the renovation and renaming of its building for Dean Emerita Claire M. Fagin, a pioneer in nursing research.

Fagin, who served as dean of the Penn School of Nursing from 1977 to 1992, helped transform the profession of nursing through emphasis on research and nursing science. She established a number of centers, including the Center for Nursing Research, that have produced a generation of Penn researchers who have gone on to make significant contributions to nursing.

From 1992 to 1993, Fagin served as interim president of the University of Pennsylvania. She most recently served as director of the John A. Hartford Foundation National Program “Building Academic Geriatric Nursing Capacity,” and she continues to provide organizational and nursing consulting to private and public groups.

“This unique gift positions the School to take yet another step in its path from excellence to eminence. We are tremendously grateful to Mrs. Lenore Annenberg and The Annenberg Foundation for honoring Claire Fagin’s exemplary leadership while supporting Penn Nursing’s incredible work improving health and health care,” Penn President Amy Gutmann said.

“The Annenberg Foundation’s generous support will enable us to create an environment for our researchers to continue the advancement of nursing science and thus build on the legacy left by Dr. Fagin,” said Afaf I. Meleis, Margaret Bond Simon Dean of the School of Nursing.

The Annenberg gift is a milestone in Penn Nursing’s campaign to renovate its building. Phase 2 of renovations, projected to cost \$15 million, calls for new laboratories and offices on the upper floors to encourage closer collaboration between researchers and scholars.

Tobacco Free Nurses Survey

The American Nurses Foundation, in partnership with the UCLA School of Nursing and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, is participating in the first national program focused on helping nurses to stop smoking. Tobacco Free Nurses is a one-stop shop for all nurses, especially nurses who want to help their patients quit smoking and nurses who want to quit themselves. We are nurses who want to benefit nurses and patients, and promote a tobacco free society.

Please take the survey to help us improve the ways in which we can help nurses and their patients quit smoking. This anonymous survey will take 3-5 minutes of your time. You may refuse to answer any questions you don’t want to answer. Take the survey on-line at www.nursingworld.org

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Applications for the 2006 Nursing Economic\$ Foundation Scholarships Now Available



Since its establishment in 1990, the **Nursing Economic\$ Foundation** has promoted the advanced educational and research activities of nurse executives who are pursuing graduate-level degrees. Scholarships (\$5,000) are awarded yearly to future nurse executives for tuition, fees, and other expenses incurred while completing their degrees. To date, the Foundation has awarded \$225,000 as part of the journal's mission to advance nursing leadership in health care.

Please urge your students and colleagues to learn more about and apply for these valuable scholarships.

The **Nursing Economic\$ Foundation** is funded through the generous support of individuals and corporations. To make a donation or request information regarding the 2006 scholarship awards, contact:

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AACN, NSNA, and GNAP Host Graduate Recruitment Fair

AACN is pleased to join with the National Student Nurses' Association (NSNA) and the Graduate Nursing Admissions Professionals (GNAP) Network to host a Graduate Programs Recruitment Fair as part of NSNA's upcoming annual conference in Baltimore. On April 5 from 1:30 p.m. to 3:30 p.m., students attending the NSNA convention will be invited to visit with recruiters from nursing schools to discuss graduation education options. AACN member schools wishing to participate in this event must be registered to attend the upcoming GNAP conference scheduled for April 4-5, 2006. To reserve a free table, send an email to rosseter@aacn.nche.edu. Schools wishing to exhibit at the NSNA convention are encouraged to contact Rick Gabler at Gablerr@ajj.com for more details. Information on NSNA's 54th Annual Convention being held April 5-9, 2006, is available online at www.nсна.org