

## How to Think/Act/Feel Like a Nurse: Forming Professional Identity in Nursing

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**P**rofessional Identity in Nursing is an initiative to a) scientifically develop new knowledge and language about professional identity in nursing, and b) widely share this deeper understanding so students, nurses, health care colleagues, and society in general may better understand what it means to think, act, and feel like a professional nurse.

### Background

The notion of professionalism in nursing is an important one. Regulatory, practice and educational settings report concerns about how nurses demonstrate professionalism (Ciftcioglu et al., 2019; Cusack et al., 2019; Sherman & Cohn, 2019). Scholarly work confirms the understanding of the term *professionalism* within the discipline of nursing is disparate and unclear (Crigger & Godfrey, 2011). Other health care disciplines report similar difficulties with the term (Armitage-Chan & May, 2018; Jarvis-Selinger et al., 2012).

Nearly 2 decades ago, colleagues in medical education discovered their way of teaching professionalism was not helping students meet the outcomes faculty expected (Cruess & Cruess, 2006). These scholars turned to developmental psychology and other disciplines and found that focusing on identity formation (Jameton, 1984; Marcia, 1994) yielded a richer understanding of the professional learners' experiences, and in turn, more effectively guided them in building a professional identity (Cruess et al., 2014; Jarvis-Selinger et al., 2012).

The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching's 2010 work on *Preparing the Professions* (Carnegie Foundation, n.d.) offered recommendations



for each of the five professions studied: law, clergy, engineering, medicine and nursing. Only two professions had a parallel recommendation: medicine and nursing. In both cases, researchers recommended an explicit focus on formation as part of the educational experience (Benner et al., 2010; Cooke et al., 2010).

In the years since the Carnegie Foundation study, medicine has embraced professional identity formation as an integral component of medical education. Medical schools incorporate professional identity formation into course offerings, simulation, and curricular standards. Pharmacy, veterinary medicine and physical therapy are following suit and incorporate professional identity formation within their curricula (Godfrey et al., 2020).

Nursing's path has been different. Although Benner and colleagues' book, *Educating Nurses: A Call for Radical Transformation*, recommended that nursing education "shift from an emphasis on socialization and role-taking to an emphasis on formation" (Benner et al., 2010, p. 86), no groundswell has followed

among nurse educators to clarify and potentially standardize a discipline-wide focus on professional identity formation in education, practice, or regulation. In preliminary work on an interprofessional scoping review of professional identity in several healthcare disciplines, research articles about professional identity are more prevalent in nursing ( $n = 214$ ) than in medicine ( $n = 152$ ), pharmacy ( $n = 24$ ), or veterinary medicine ( $n = 4$ ) (Godfrey et al., 2020). Clearly, academic nurses are conducting research on the topic, yet no accepted definition or coherent plan to build new knowledge in this area has emerged.

### Enter – A Think Tank Methodology

In 2018, a group of nurse leaders convened in a 50-person, invitation-only Think Tank to explore professional identity in nursing and build the structure, purpose, definition, and direction needed for it to positively impact the discipline.

The most important reason to use a think tank is to "serve as an important catalyst for ideas and action... At their best, think tanks possess the ability to capture the political imagination by brokering ideas, stimulating public debate and offering creative yet practical solutions to tackle...[the discipline's] most pressing problems" (United Nations University, 2015, para. 2).

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Equipped with required pre-reading, leaders from the United States and Canada gathered at the University of Kansas School of Nursing and rolled up their sleeves to determine the professional identity in nursing definition based on the literature, to identify which and how many domains were reasonably part of this concept, and to begin identifying domain definitions, key elements of each domain, and corresponding competencies and exemplars for each domain. This 1.5-day event included representatives from practice, regulation (including accreditation), and education, as well as someone from every major national nursing organization.

Eleven of the 50 participants volunteered to serve on the newly formed Steering Group to guide the group's work. Work groups established at the Think Tank continued to meet by phone and video-conferencing following the event. Within three months, the definition, domains and definitions, key elements, and rudimentary competencies were in place.

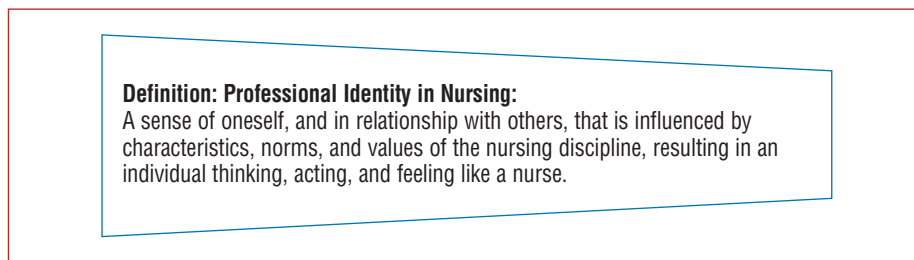
Dissemination was robust via national presentations and publications following Think Tank 2018. Because of increasing interest, the Professional Identity in Nursing Steering Group convened a second invitation-only, 50-person Think Tank in 2019. Half of the original participants returned for another 1.5 days devoted to intense, interactive thinking to advance the knowledge and language of professional identity in nursing. New participants added to the knowledge-building work.

### Think Tank 2019 Results

The 2019 participants made small revisions to the definition (see Figure 1) and further clarification of the four domains identified in the 2018 Think Tank (see Figure 2). They affirmed the overall professional identity in nursing definition, and the names and definitions of the four domains (see Figure 3). Additionally, they identified key elements of each domain, created exemplars, began work on competencies, participated in developing a WHY statement (see Figure 4), and created "speed conceptual modeling" visuals to be used by work groups in virtual meetings going forward. Those attending reported high levels of satisfaction with the Think Tank experience largely because of Drs. Cindy Clark and Susan Luparell's leadership in facilitating both events.

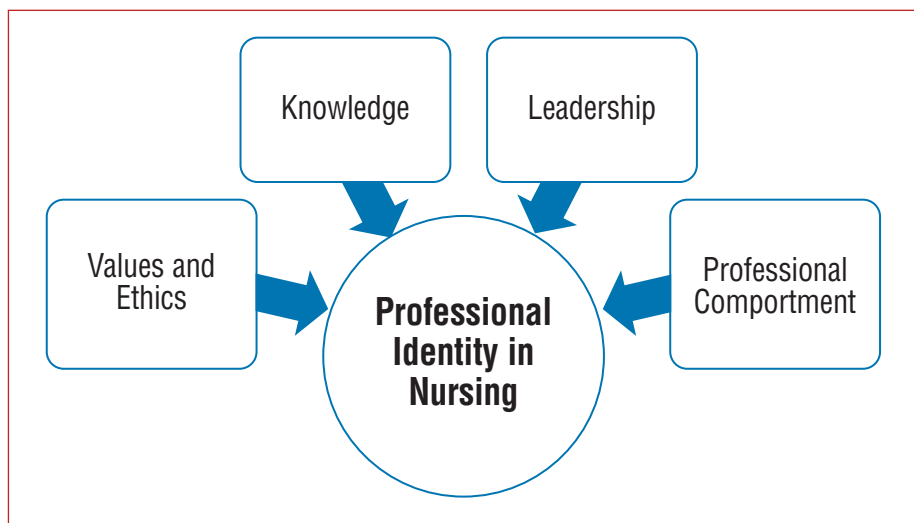
The Professional Identity in Nursing Steering Group became the Professional Identity in Nursing Advisory Council in

**Figure 1.**  
**Professional Identity in Nursing Definition**



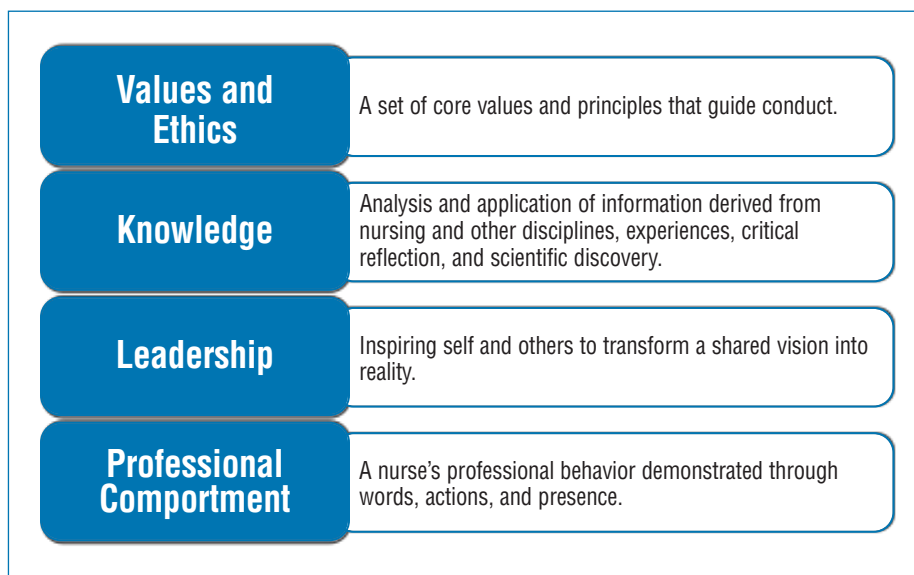
Source: Godfrey & Young, 2020.

**Figure 2.**  
**Professional Identity in Nursing Domains**



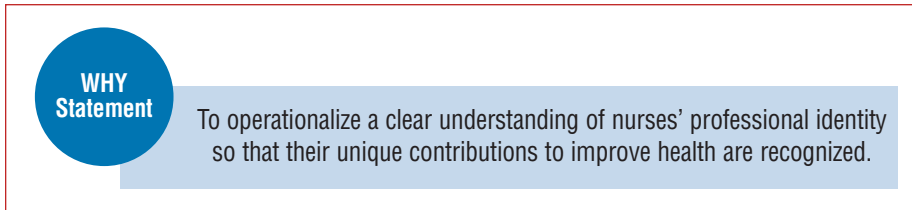
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**Figure 3.**  
**Professional Identity in Nursing Domains and Definitions**



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**Figure 4.**  
**WHY Statement for Professional Identity in Nursing**



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January 2020 and advocated to name the entire effort the *International Society for Professional Identity in Nursing (ISPIN)*. ISPIN is working with Sigma Theta Tau International (STTI) so that STTI can be the repository for all ISPIN work. Professional identity in nursing podcasts through STTI are in the planning stages.

### Professional Identity: Next Steps in Building New Knowledge

“Certain collective values and ethics which are held in common by the professionals in a discipline guide and provide the perspective for the unique body of knowledge” (Hinshaw, 1989, p. 164). In this time of COVID-19 and unparalleled global health care concerns, nursing needs to know itself well and be able to communicate what society can expect from someone who thinks, acts, and feels like a professional nurse. Here is what is planned for new knowledge development:

- **Finalize the conceptual model.** The conceptual model group is in its final stages of developing the conceptual model for professional identity in nursing using the Norris Method for Process Development. Plans are in place for publication and dissemination.
- **Develop a psychometrically sound instrument to measure awareness of professional identity in nursing.** Researchers from Washington State University, Duke University, and ATI Nursing Education are working together to develop the instrument and further test the domains, definitions, and key elements of professional identity in nursing.
- **Test model and instrument.** Work on testing the conceptual model, further developing the theoretical framework, and adapting the instrument for widespread use is in the 12- to 18-month plan.
- **Incorporate language, definition, domains and their definitions, key**

**elements, competencies, and exemplars in regulatory, educational, and practice environments.** Once some of the preliminary theoretical and scientific work is done, ISPIN will turn its attention to broadly communicating the findings and language to positively impact the discipline.

### Professional Identity: What Deans, Directors and Faculty Can Do

**Join a work group.** More work groups have emerged: Dissemination (including social media); the Demonstration Project (in Kansas and beyond); Science/New Knowledge; Key Elements-Competencies-Exemplars; Conceptual Model; and WHY Statement. Each group has met, and all have chairs/co-chairs. Consult the website for details.

**Visit the Professional Identity in Nursing—University of Kansas website and receive quarterly updates.**

**Volunteer for specific efforts in education, practice, and regulation.** Next steps include actively communicating the Professional Identity in Nursing work in education, practice, and regulatory environments.

### In Summary

Things are changing rapidly in nursing education regarding professional identity in nursing. Terms like *formation*, *professional identity*, and *competent* are now a part of seminal document development at both the National League for Nursing (NLN) and the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN). A “clear understanding of nurses’ professional identity so that their unique contributions to improve health are recognized” (ISPIN WHY Statement; © ISPIN) is important to all of us. Be a part of this grass-roots effort to clarify and amplify how today’s nurses should think, act and feel as professional nurses.

To borrow from Margaret Mead, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens [nurses and nurse advocates] can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.” **DN**

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Volume 41, No. 4 • Spring 2020

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*Dean's Notes* is indexed in Cumulative Index to Nursing & Allied Health Literature.

*Dean's Notes* is published four times a year (winter, spring, summer, and fall) by Anthony J. Jannetti Inc., East Holly Avenue, Box 56, Pitman, New Jersey 08071-0056. Telephone 856.256.2300. FAX 856.589.7463. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced without the express written permission of the publisher. Address changes should include mailing label and be forwarded to the publisher.

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