Professional identity in nursing practice

By Richard L. Pullen, Jr., EdD, MSN, RN, CMSRN, CNE-cl, ANEF

Q: How do I develop a professional identity?
A: The National League for Nursing defines the attainment of a professional identity when a nurse internalizes and reflects on the core values of the nursing profession, engages in personal and professional development, and gains experience in the practice setting while growing in the profession. Nurses begin to develop a professional identity in nursing school by embracing the core values of nursing and through engagement with student peers, nursing faculty, and patients. Students integrate critical thinking and clinical reasoning with these core values as they begin to think, feel, and perform like a nurse. The nurse continues to nurture the development of a professional identity by engaging with other nurses in the practice setting following graduation from nursing school, including being mentored by experienced nurses and having a spirit of collegiality with the interprofessional team.

Nurses live their professional identity by embracing the American Nurses Association Code of Ethics and taking proactive leadership roles in evidence-based practice and research, quality improvement, informatics, patient-centered care, patient safety, cultural sensitivity, interprofessional collaboration that promotes effective communication, resource utilization, and environmental health. A professional identity entails having a commitment to lifelong learning, service to the community, and achievement of advanced degrees and certifications. Lastly, a professional image is an outward reflection of the deep, personal, internalized process of a nurse’s professional identity.

Consider the following strategies to help you develop a professional identity to advance the nursing profession:
• Develop a personal philosophy of nursing as a foundation in your practice. How do you describe your beliefs about nursing, personhood, health, and environment from a global perspective? How do caring relationships promote health, healing, and effective communication and collaboration? How does patient-centered care ensure safe, quality patient care and promote the achievement of positive patient outcomes?

• Become actively involved in professional nursing organizations. These organizations communicate standards of clinical practice, education, administration, and research. Students may begin service in professional organizations in the National Student Nurses’ Association while still in nursing school.

• Obtain advanced degrees and certifications based on your career goals. Competency requires ongoing learning in nursing practice. Nurses seeking leadership positions in healthcare organizations should explore achieving a minimum of a
baccalaureate degree in nursing. A graduate degree in nursing is often desired. Nurses desiring a career as an NP or educator need to earn a master’s or doctoral degree.

- Seek leadership opportunities. Whether at the bedside, in management positions, teaching in a healthcare organization or academic setting, or participating in committee or community activities, leaders embrace diversity, equity, and inclusion.
- Project a professional image. A professional image promotes a nurse’s credibility, which begins with educational achievement, practice experience, and effective verbal and nonverbal communication skills. A welcoming countenance and demeanor, being kind, spending time with others, and actively listening promote relationship building.

The development of a professional identity is an evolving process that includes your knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values. Being a role model for nursing is the best way to project an image that reflects your professional identity.

REFERENCES

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