

Portfolio Implementation as a Means for Achievement of Standards

Missi Stec, DNP, APRN, CNM, FACNM

Nicole Garritano, DNP, APRN, CPNP-AC

University of Cincinnati, College of Nursing

The use of e-portfolios in health professions education is a newly emerging topic. E-portfolios in other higher education disciplines has long been used to help students demonstrate and reflect on the attainment of objectives set forth by their program of study. Portfolios in disciplines such as nursing, however, take on a much different purpose. Nursing education requires that students demonstrates skill acquisition, knowledge retention and the ability to integrate critical thinking as it pertains to the nursing process. Portfolios provide a platform by which students and faculty can track and verify competencies as well as the achievement of end of program objectives and nationally recognized standards. This case study outlines the portfolio process, using Evernote, in the Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) program in the College of Nursing.

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Portfolio Use in Health Professions

Nursing education, traditionally, has been based on the idea of teaching future nurses to recognize and manage a variety of health variations with the intent of improving patient outcomes and improving the patient experience. School and colleges of nursing are responsible for verifying that student meet a core set of competencies that are set forth by the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN). Therefore, students at all levels including baccalaureate, masters and doctoral programs, demonstrate successful attainment of knowledge and skills through a variety of assessments. Assessments in nursing can include summative examinations, clinical evaluations, skills check off and an assortment of additional formative activities. The use of portfolios in nursing education is in its infancy and not widely utilized across all programs nationwide. Portfolios can be a valuable tool for providing a 360 degree view of the student, both personally and professionally, that assist faculty in ensuring that nursing student are achieving their defined competencies.

Background of portfolios at UC College of Nursing

Prior to the inception of the Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) program in 2011, the University of Cincinnati College of Nursing (CON) had no experience in using portfolios of any kind within its programs. The design for the portfolios for this program sparked from the interest of faculty for students to track their progress as it related to achievement of end of program outcomes and the nationally accepted American Association of Colleges of Nursing's (AACN) Essentials for Doctoral Education.

Portfolios and Doctoral Nursing Learning Outcomes and Accreditation Standards

Each program within the university had defined end of program objectives. These objectives outline the competencies and learning that need to have been accomplished in order to

graduate with a degree or certificate. Nursing also has a set of defined Essentials for each level of education. The Essentials are developed by AACN and encompass the Baccalaureate in Nursing, the Master in Nursing and the Doctor of Nursing Practice. The development of the portfolio program for the DNP program was to allow students to produce tangible evidence that they have met their end of program objectives and the Essentials for the DNP.

Portfolio Process for the DNP

The students' portfolio process in the CON includes a documented process for achievement of outcomes and competencies. This process includes naming conventions, how and when to add tags to work and identifies the necessary materials for demonstrating achievement of the required outcomes. The faculty also have a rubric based on the components required for the student's final work. Rubric scoring is determined by an evidence based system for the assessment of the outcomes. As a result of the process development and documentation, the portfolio program has become a transparent process for both students and faculty.

Folding the portfolio into a Course

Portfolios in the CON DNP program begin with the first semester of study in a 14 course sequence completed over 2-3 years. Each element that a student creates as a part of their doctoral work is placed in a specific working area of the portfolio. This ensures that work from all courses is included in the repertoire available to the student upon graduation. Faculty advisors and the DNP program director monitor the student's working portfolio as they progress through the program. Written guidelines are also provided to all students and to faculty working with them. Students then assemble a final portfolio of pre-determined work in the context of their final course in the program. This culminating course then provides the faculty with an overview of the student, their accomplishments and their body of work just before graduation.

Portfolio Platforms and Support

Students in the CON DNP program utilize an electronic notebook platform called Evernote. Evernote is a web based platform that also has an interface for tablets and mobile devices. This platform allows students to divide work into notebooks, synonymous with folders in a computing environment. Each notebook can contain an unlimited number of notes on that topic and notes can be categorized using tags. These tags provide indexing and useful organization to students when saving artifacts. Evernote maintains its own robust support system that includes live help, chats and learning communities with defined leaders. Additional support can be obtained through UCIT and through the CON CATER Help desk.

Student Attitudes towards the Portfolio

The progression through the portfolio process has not been without challenges. At its inception, students did not understand the purpose of the portfolio and its contents. The lack of transparency in the planning process was evident in the reactions from students in its early stages. Over the first two cohorts of students, there were key changes made to the platform and portability of the portfolio, which helped the initiative to gain momentum. Students are asked to evaluate their experiences in the program at time of graduation including a reflection of the portfolio process and outcomes. The thoughtful collection of data from students and faculty regarding the portfolio project has led to continued quality improvement. Portfolios have been streamlined and process documents are continually revised to reflect the data that is received in the evaluations.

Alumni often reflect on the process of the portfolio and articulate that they have used pieces of the portfolio in their professional careers as the foundations for evidence based practice and quality improvement projects. A recently graduated student used the contents of her portfolio to write a quality improvement grant in her workplace. The grant was funded for \$100,000 and was launched in fall of 2016. Over half the the graduates from 2012-2016 (n=71) have published or presented at least one work from their portfolios at national conferences or in peer reviewed journals. The intention of the portfolio was that students and alumni alike would

benefit from its contents while ensuring the idea of achieved competency at the time of graduation.

Faculty Attitudes towards the Portfolio

Portfolios in the CON are largely reviewed by two core faculty. Student portfolios are built largely in the student practicum courses. These courses are the foundation of the student's evidence based practice project. The practicum faculty review the portfolios for the purpose of ensuring that students are adding the necessary component each semester. In addition, the practicum faculty use the portfolios to review projects plans and other important documents that guide the student's progress. Final portfolios are evaluated using a rubric by the DNP program director. The final portfolio provides evidence of student attainment of the program objectives and the essentials of doctoral education.

Faculty have been receptive to the portfolio program and have been actively involved in the continuous improvement of the process. Faculty feedback is regularly sought out and considered with student feedback to ensure a meaningful experience. The initial learning curve for the portfolio was steep particularly for those faculty that were less experienced using the technology required. Faculty were able to overcome these barriers through peer support and faculty development programs offered in the CON. Faculty express satisfaction with the current platform and process and have been regularly contributing to the discussion around continued portfolio use.

Implementation of Portfolios

Implementation of a portfolio system requires thought, planning as well as buy in from stakeholders involved. The outcomes demonstrated by the DNP are proof of concept that portfolios provide a stable foundation for students to understand the importance of their doctoral work and how it continues to frame their careers after graduation. Faculty and programs that are in the process of planning, developing or implementing portfolio programs should consider three things; consistency, standards and documentation.

A consistent mechanism for set up is essential when considering standardized portfolios for competency assessment. Unlike in the liberal arts, nursing is a competency based profession.

The standardization of naming conventions, portfolio folder set up and tagging entries becomes of utmost importance when looking across portfolios to ensure a common core of competencies and outcomes.

Standards for accreditation or achievement of program outcomes must be adequately defined. The definition of the standards and outcome of the portfolio frames the faculty discussion with students about the importance of the portfolio and helps to achieve faculty and student buy in. Poorly constructed standards or outcomes leave opportunities for vague or incomplete portfolios and therefore inadequate assessment.

Documentation of all portfolio details from inception through completion assists faculty and students in the achievement of the above two ideas of consistency and standards. A formalized, documented process for portfolios frames out the structure for successful and sustainable portfolio programs. Such programs will contribute to the evidence programs must produce to maintain national accreditation for nursing.

Conclusion

Portfolios in nursing education can provide a level of competencies assessment that adds value for both students and faculty. The success or failure of this type of product depends on the structure, organization, purpose and ultimately the buy in from all involved parties. The success of the portfolio program in the CON DNP program can be attributed to the student and faculty involvement in the process from creation of the portfolio to final evaluation. The portfolio provides solid evidence of the achievement of AACN essentials and the DNP program outcomes. This evidence is invaluable to the student, faculty and the national accreditation bodies however no national standards for portfolio use exists. A body of evidence for the use of portfolios is accumulating, however, until there is a clear link between portfolios and achievement of nationally required accreditation standards it is a difficult to imagine that the use of portfolios, nationally, will trend upward.