Using e-Portfolio to Showcase and Enhance Soft Skill Reflection of MSN Students

Nurse educators and leaders in health care systems are realizing that master’s-prepared graduates need to possess advanced clinical knowledge coupled with awareness and application of soft skills. Both of these elements promote successful navigation among diverse interdisciplinary networks in academic arenas and clinical practice. Soft skills, which include communication, professionalism, teamwork, and perseverance, have emerged as basic necessities among new graduates in the business world, including health care. Individuals with a high level of emotional intelligence, i.e., self-awareness, are positioned to be successful in collaboration and leadership proficiency.

As educators, we can promote graduate students’ self-awareness of individual soft skills or character strengths that can be cultivated in clinical or practicum experiences and ultimately carry through to their roles as educators or clinicians (Seguin, 2019). In our Master of Science in Nursing (MSN) nurse educator track, faculty intentionally facilitated a process for students to create an identity underscoring individual and unique soft skills. A teaching-learning experience emerged subsequent to a professional development activity for faculty in which the Values in Action Character Strengths (VIA) Survey was completed to recognize individual personal soft skills.

The VIA Survey served as a mechanism to capitalize on personal and professional strengths, which in turn could contribute to a healthy work environment and positive culture. The ultimate goal was to use the ensuing self-awareness information obtained in the survey scores as a catalyst for reflection for professional growth and to stimulate meaningful action.

Robust discussions among faculty centered on the top strengths identified and ways these strengths could foster a positive teaching-learning experience for students. Due to the success and introspection afforded to faculty self-awareness, graduate faculty determined the survey could facilitate and improve graduate students’ determination of their personal soft skill or character strengths. Faculty capitalized on building skills and showcasing individual values and talents of graduate students in a final-semester assignment within the nurse educator track.

After completing the VIA Survey and identifying the top five character strengths, students intentionally sought opportunities throughout the 160-hour practicum to demonstrate the soft skill of character strength in action. Using a technological e-Portfolio platform, student communication of soft skills in action served as a reflective writing assignment, a dialogue generator, and an organized visual display of these strengths. For the soft skills criterion in the e-Portfolio, students provided examples of how the top five strengths identified in the survey were exemplified in the work environment during their clinical or academic practicum.

One student narratively reflected on how professionalism, punctuality, and integrity were role modeled on the clinical unit. A scenario of how conflict was intentionally resolved using the appropriate chain of command according to policies and procedures of the hospital while maintaining professional conduct was the focus narrative of another student.

One student described an opportunity to develop attributes of a team player in the academic practicum setting by stepping in and offering assistance in clinical labs, which were not part of the student’s original plan for accruing hours. The e-Portfolio provided the student a dynamic medium to share components of the educational journey, which demonstrated mastery of attaining MSN and nurse educator track program outcomes as well as noncognitive soft skills.

Postgraduation utility of the e-Portfolio exemplified students’ individual accomplishments and marketable soft skill qualities to enhance their postgraduation hiring quest (McMillan et al., 2014) and articulated short- and long-term career goals. The educational value of reflection of soft skills combined with the application of written skills in a creative narrative storytelling format (Edwards, 2014) assisted students in understanding their personal and professional values and identities as nurse educators. This visual display articulated their soft skill strengths and weaknesses combined with professional accomplishments, such as involvement in professional organizations, practicum experiences, exemplars of coursework assignments, and areas of interest for future employment. The reflective and written process essentially functioned as a written demonstration of curricular outcome achievement and student journey through the nurse educator program.

Although research abounds in business literature related to the importance of graduates possessing soft skills, there is a dearth of evidence related to the development and possession of soft skills among graduate nursing students. Nurse educators’ commitment to providing an optimal education for graduate students calls for attention to soft skill development as well as advanced clinical skill attainment.

References


Francine M. Parker, EdD, MSN parkefm@auburn.edu
Libba R. McMillan, PhD, RN
Auburn University School of Nursing
The authors have disclosed no potential conflicts of interest, financial or otherwise. doi:10.3928/01484834-20200422-16