



## Your Career in Nursing—The Path of the Professional Nurse

Let us each and all, realizing the importance of our influence on others—stand shoulder to shoulder—and not alone, in good cause.

—Florence Nightingale (1881)

### INTRODUCTION

*You have most likely discovered the unique and rewarding nature of your chosen profession. Nursing provides extraordinary opportunities to make a difference in people's lives. It is most gratifying to be a member of a profession that is held in the highest esteem by the public because of their unfailing trust in us (Gallup Poll, 2009). A career in nursing offers you the profound privilege to serve and care for others. Indeed, your life will be changed and enriched by being a nurse. You will think and act like a nurse through a continually evolving process of education and socialization to the nursing role. Your relationships with others—your family, teachers, mentors,*

*colleagues, and patients—will also be a major influence in your development. The partnerships and bonds you establish with mentoring colleagues will help you navigate the path to career success and satisfaction in nursing—to be the best nurse you can possibly be.*

In this chapter, you will learn:

1. What it means to be a professional nurse
2. The difference between a career and an occupation
3. The seasons and stages of a nursing career
4. The value of collegiality in a nursing career

## BEING A NURSE

Caring for others in health and illness—this will be your life’s work as a professional nurse. The work of nursing is exciting, challenging, and always changing. Since the focus of nursing is human beings, every single day in the life of a nurse is special. You will experience the complexity of human beings as you share your patients’ most intimate human experiences and make a difference in their lives. You will find the great joy and gratification of serving others in health and illness through the entire continuum of life. Being a nurse calls forth the depths of your humanness and compassion. Inevitably, nursing becomes an integral part of your life and your personal identity.

Professional nurses are expected to expand their knowledge and expertise throughout the different stages of their careers in order to provide safe comprehensive health services to the public in accordance with contemporary best practices. To a large extent, this lifelong learning occurs through collegial relationships with many different people. Mentors are especially significant support people as they can assist you with many essential professional activities as you navigate your career. Mentors guide and advise, inspire and encourage, and open doors to opportunities that will expand your knowledge and expertise. You will be empowered by mentors to become the best nurse you can be—to perform at the very “top of your game.”

## WHAT IS NURSING?

Nursing is a **profession**, a **discipline**, and a **career**. Various guideposts to nursing knowledge and practice describe the profession, its legal scope, ethical standards, and values. These guideposts are a window into the essence of professional nursing and its societal contract. They remind us that the core focus of nursing is the human being and the human experience of suffering and illness, and wellness and health. As a nurse, you provide care to people through your own humanity in conjunction with professional and ethical standards. Exhibit 1.1 highlights the key elements of professional nursing as described in *Nursing’s Social Policy Statement*, *Code of Ethics for Nurses*, *Nursing: Scope & Standards of Practice*, and a *State Nurse Practice Act*.

## **Exhibit I.1** Guideposts to Professional Nursing

### Definition of Professional Nursing

*Nursing's Social Policy Statement* (ANA, 2010) defines nursing as:

...protection, promotion, and optimization of health and abilities, prevention of illness and injury, alleviation of suffering through the diagnosis and treatment of the human response, and advocacy in the care of individuals, families, communities, and populations.

The International Council of Nursing states that:

Nursing encompasses autonomous and collaborative care of individuals of all ages, families, groups and communities, sick or well and in all settings. Nursing includes the promotion of health, prevention of illness and the care of ill, disabled and dying people. Advocacy, promotion of a safe environment, research, participating in shaping health policy and in patient and healthsystems management, and education are also key nursing roles (<http://www.icn.org>).

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**Exhibit I.1** *Continued***Legal Scope of Nursing**

Each state has a legally authorized Nurse Practice Act that determines the nature and scope of nursing practice within the state. These Practice Acts reflect the obligation of the state, in collaboration with the profession, to protect the health and safety of the public. Every licensed nurse should know the content of the nurse practice act governing legal practice in their state. One state, for example, defines the scope of nursing as:

diagnosing and treating human responses to actual or potential health problems through such services as case finding, health teaching, health counseling, and provision of care supportive to, or restorative of life and well-being, and executing medical regimens prescribed by a licensed physician, dentist or other licensed health care provider. . . . (New York State Education Department, 1972).

**Standards of Practice and Professional Performance**

*Nursing: Scope and Standards of Practice* (ANA, 2010) guides nurses in the application of their professional skills and responsibilities.

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**Exhibit I.1** *Continued*

The 16 standards comprise:

- **Six standards of practice:** Describe a competent level of nursing care, demonstrated by the critical thinking model, or the nursing process, for professional nurses, advance practice nurses, and nurses in role specialties.
- **Ten standards of professional performance:** Describe a competent level of professional role behavior, related to ethics, quality of practice, education, professional practice evaluation, communication, collaboration, evidence-based practice and research, resource utilization, environmental health, and leadership, including mentoring.

**Ethical Guidelines for Nursing**

*The Code of Ethics for Nurses with Interpretive Statements* (ANA, 2001) makes explicit the “primary goals, values, and obligations of the profession” and is a framework for ethical analysis and decision making. “Individuals who become nurses are expected not only to adhere to the ideals and moral norms of the profession but also to embrace them as a part of what it means to be a nurse” (p. 5).

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**Exhibit I.1** *Continued*

The *Code of Ethics for Nurses* serves the following purposes (p. 7):

- It is a succinct statement of the ethical obligations and duties of every individual who enters the nursing profession.
- It is the profession's non-negotiable ethical standard.
- It is an expression of nursing's own understanding of its commitment to society.

## WHAT DO YOU DO AS A PROFESSIONAL NURSE?

The nursing profession is complex and holds high expectations for its members to ensure that the highest level of safe, ethical, and quality care is provided to patients and their families. Being an authentic professional nurse requires knowing and being all of these expectations. As a professional nurse you will:

- Possess a specialized body of knowledge
- Provide compassionate patient-centered care
- Uphold nursing's scope and standards of practice
- Employ evidence-based practice in patient care
- Provide safe care within nursing's legal and ethical codes

- Exhibit self-regulation and accountability
- Engage in lifelong study of nursing
- Join professional associations and networks
- Serve as an advocate for patients, colleagues, and yourself

- The focus of nursing is the care of human beings in health, suffering, and illness.
- The nurse's own humanity is central to the nurse-patient relationship.
- Nursing has societal, professional, intellectual, legal, and ethical components.

## GET A CAREER: GET A LIFE OF SERVICE

Nurses are privileged to have many opportunities to build exciting careers. Indeed, the nursing profession offers endless possibilities for advancement in specialty practice and leadership roles. Your career success is always just around the corner—if you want it! To “get a career,” it is necessary to assess your dreams and goals, examine your dedication and motivation, and commit to active development of your career. To be a professional person is not just having an occupation or holding a job. A career is a



lifetime vocation that brings enormous rewards, satisfaction, and self-fulfillment to your life.

A professional career is different from an occupation or a job. A career implies a calling, vocation, or a professional life that provides an essential service to society. A career also offers multiple avenues for personal achievement and advancement. An occupation or a job is daily work or activity that serves as a source of livelihood or income. Whether you view nursing as a profession and career—or as an occupation and a job—will determine your personal and professional behaviors and commitment to nursing. Reflect on the profession of nursing and your nursing practice. Some questions to ponder are:

- What does nursing mean to you?
- What are the key values you hold as a nursing student and/or professional nurse?
- What are you most passionate about as a nurse?
- What is your image of the “ideal” nurse that you aspire to be?

Writing down your answers can strengthen your pride in and dedication to your chosen profession. Your reflections can reaffirm your values and ideals in caring for your patients. They can remind you why you became a nurse and the qualities of the nurse you aspire to be.

Table 1.1 illustrates some major viewpoints of nursing as a career in contrast to viewing nursing as an occupation.

**TABLE 1.1 Attitudes Toward Nursing as Career Versus Occupation**

	Career/Profession	Occupation/Job
Longevity	Lifelong vocation	Temporary; means to an end
Education	University/college	On-the-job and vocational training
Continuing Education	Lifelong and ongoing	Short term; related to job requirements
Commitment	Long term	Varies
Expectation	Extensive professional roles and responsibilities	Reasonable work for reasonable pay responsibilities end with shift

## THE CHANGING SEASONS OF A NURSING CAREER

Beginning and advancing your nursing career entails moving through various stages over an extended period of time. This does not happen overnight. The process of professional career socialization is well documented and is similar for every profession. One popular framework, *From Novice to Expert* (Benner, 1984), describes how nurses move through stages of clinical proficiency. The five developmental stages are: **novice, advanced beginner, competent practitioner, proficient practitioner, and expert practitioner.**

Successful movement through each stage occurs gradually over time with education, experience, and guidance. Most particularly, active involvement and mentoring by teachers and mentors is a critical element in successfully achieving the tasks of each developmental stage.

Another model of career development highlights the **necessity of support relationships throughout a career**, especially mentoring relationships (Dalton, Thompson, & Price, 1977). This model applies to all professional careers, not just nursing. Table 1.2 illustrates the four successive career stages and the **primary relationships, central activities, and major issues** in each stage. You will note that there is a progressive, developmental nature of the activities, tasks, presence of support relationships, and psychological issues in each stage.

The essential value of **relationships** in each stage is emphasized, including the interactions and relationships among mentors and protégés. It is clear that each career stage requires the presence of persons who are committed to being a teacher, mentor, and advocate for you as you move through the developmental steps of growing and learning. These support relationships are particularly important at **transition points**, for example, obtaining your first position after nursing school, getting promoted, deciding on a specialty role, entering graduate study, and changing your workplace setting. At each stage or transition point, you will require different kinds of mentors, depending on your particular goals, needs, and issues. You will need different mentors for different reasons in different seasons of your nursing career to develop your talent for serving others in health and illness.

TABLE 1.2 Four Career Stages

Aspect	Stage I	Stage II	Stage III	Stage IV
Primary relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Apprentice</li> <li>• Novice</li> <li>• Protégé</li> <li>• Learner</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Peer–colleague</li> <li>• Advocate</li> <li>• Mentor</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mentor</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sponsor</li> </ul>
Central activity/task	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assisting</li> <li>• Learning</li> <li>• Following directions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Independent contributor</li> <li>• Specialist</li> <li>• Role model</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Training and teaching</li> <li>• Influencing</li> <li>• Interfacing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shaping direction of organization and profession</li> </ul>
Major issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dependence</li> <li>• Interdependence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Independence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assuming responsibility for others</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exercising power and influence</li> </ul>

Source: Adapted from Dalton et al. (1977).

- The qualities and responsibilities of a professional career are different from having a job or an occupation.
- A nursing career is a life choice and a lifestyle.
- A professional career has distinct developmental and achievement stages.
- Each career stage requires the presence of support people, including mentors.

## NURSES NEED EACH OTHER

Nursing is a relationship profession. Nursing cannot be learned or carried out in isolation. Learning about nursing and being a nurse is clearly a “team sport.” Enormous interdependence necessarily exists among nurses and nursing students in order to learn and perform the complex responsibilities of nursing. Shared interdependence is central in the relationships among students, teachers, peers, professional colleagues, and leaders. Only nurses can help other nurses learn about nursing. Nurses need other nurses to be important champions and cheerleaders for them as they carry out their challenging work. In order to develop to your fullest potential as a nurse, it is necessary to attract the interest of nursing colleagues and to obtain their mentoring support.

All life and career developmental models acknowledge the central importance of support persons in the life and

career journey of every human being. One writer put it this way: “Our survival and development depend on our capacity to recruit the invested attention of others to us” (Kegan, 1982, p. 17). The complexity of a nursing career calls for a substantial support network to ensure your success and satisfaction. It is essential, therefore, that you build relationships with dedicated, caring colleagues who will serve as your mentors and role models. **The bottom line: A successful nursing career requires the support, active involvement, and dedicated investment of other nurses.**

## COLLEGIALITY: IT’S A GIVEN

An important aspect of professionalism is called “collegiality.” The three “Cs” of collegiality are (1) caring, (2) collaboration, and (3) cooperation. Professional nurses demonstrate collegiality with each other by respecting, mentoring, and advocating for nursing students and nursing colleagues. A high value is placed on collegiality in *Nursing: Scope and Standards of Practice* (ANA, 2004; 2010). Collegial behaviors support the professional development of all nurses as colleagues and include (ANA, 2004):

- Sharing knowledge and skills with peers and colleagues

- Providing peers with feedback about their practice and role performance
- Enhancing professional practice and role performance through interaction with colleagues
- Maintaining compassionate and caring relationships with colleagues
- Establishing supportive teaching–learning work environments
- Modeling expert professional practice
- Mentoring nursing colleagues

The message is clear: if you want to become an excellent nurse with a serious career, be sure to find compassionate and altruistic colleagues. They're worth their weight in gold. When nurses help each other, everyone benefits, including our patients and our profession. If collegiality is absent, and nurses are uncaring and competitive with each other, everyone loses. Nurses are known for their nurturing quality with their patients. This quality must be expanded to include the nurturing of each other as colleagues. Bonding with other colleagues is one of the most important “secrets” in establishing a satisfying professional life. Nurses and students who “live” the standard of collegiality will help create compassionate work environments that are developmental and motivational. Such workplaces will support nurses to become the best they can be through tapping into their talent and potential.

- Nursing is a human-focused discipline that requires high-level knowledge, skills, and compassion.
- Nursing is learned and performed in collaboration with others, especially colleagues who serve as mentors, teachers, and role models.
- For career success, build relationships with committed, caring colleagues who will generously mentor you to reach the heights of excellence and satisfaction.