

AAN News & Opinion

The role of sponsors in the fellow application process

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With the mission of the American Academy of Nursing focused on improving health through leadership in “health policy and practice,”¹ the fellow selection process is an essential component in ensuring achievement of that ambitious mission. In a sense, this is the Academy’s corollary to succession planning and, as such, suggests the importance of mentors and colleagues in the process. The purpose of this article is to discuss the role of the sponsors in mentoring, coaching, and assisting their applicants. Prior articles have described the application and selection processes at length.^{2–5} We will expand on the discussions about the role of the sponsors in helping colleagues determine readiness for applying and, by extension, the potential roles sponsors might play in coaching and mentoring the next generation of Fellows. We aim to build on comments in a 1997 memorandum to Fellows by Schmitt and Sparacino⁶ and a 2006 paper by Gennaro and Sebastian⁵ regarding the mentoring role of sponsors.

Succession planning has been described as a way to promote organizational continuity as well as a means for developing future leadership talent.^{7,8} This suggests that developing leadership is a way to promote achieving an organization’s mission. The mission of the American Academy of Nursing¹ focuses on the use of nursing knowledge to make long-term improvements in healthcare. Identifying, nurturing, and sponsoring future leaders in the field for Fellowship in the Academy contributes substantially to achievement of the mission of the Academy. Over the years, the Academy has developed a number of tools that can assist Fellows and potential applicants as applicants develop in their careers and, later, in the application process itself.

Fellowship in the Academy is an honor and one that Fellows are eager to extend to colleagues whose accomplishments merit this recognition. Based on the criterion that new Fellows are thought to have the potential for future “contributions to nursing and the Academy,”⁹ we might assume that fellowship is a way to continue

building excellence in the field and improving the health of people. Thus, the role of the sponsors takes on additional importance when one considers that sponsorship might include helping a protégée develop a plan for a career trajectory that builds significant contributions to the field. Once those contributions are mature, the role of the sponsor includes assisting the applicant to determine how best to structure an application to clearly illustrate the national or international significance of the work and the likelihood of ongoing leadership in the field.

The 2006 Fellow Selection Task Force chaired by Dr. Karren Kowalski developed a Pre-Fellow Self-Assessment Worksheet⁹ that was implemented as part of the 2007 application process. This document was placed on the applicant Web site and intended as a tool that could be used by applicants and their sponsors in determining readiness for fellowship and identifying the accomplishments that might be highlighted in the application. Because use of the worksheet is voluntary, we do not know how many applicants used it as part of the 2007 selection process, although future applicants could be queried regarding their use of the worksheet and its perceived helpfulness. The worksheet includes questions related to the criteria for fellowship, thereby guiding potential applicants in thinking about the extent to which they have met the criteria.

We think sponsors likely begin their work with potential future fellows in 1 of 2 ways. Either the sponsor might have served as a long-time mentor or colleague of the individual, or the sponsor might be someone whom the applicant contacts expressing interest in fellowship. Thus, the sponsor may have had a lengthy professional relationship with the applicant or a fairly recent one. If the relationship has been longstanding, the role of the sponsor might have begun well in advance of the application process through mentoring and coaching. Once the potential sponsor and applicant determine the time may be right for application to the Academy, the Pre-Fellow Self-Assessment Worksheet⁹ is a mechanism for assessing readiness. It also is one way a Fellow might help a promising protégée consider how to build a body of work that makes a significant contribution on a broad scale.

Another approach to sponsorship occurs when an individual approaches a current Fellow and expresses an interest in fellowship. In this case, the sponsor might know of the applicant’s work or might have worked with the applicant on a professional basis, but perhaps

not have had a longstanding professional connection as a mentor. The conversation between an individual interested in fellowship and the potential sponsor is crucial in determining the extent to which the individual is thought to meet the criteria for fellowship. The potential sponsor in this case might assist the individual wishing to apply in reviewing the Pre-Fellow Self-Assessment Worksheet,⁹ determining readiness or possible next steps if the individual has not yet met the criteria for fellowship, and coaching and assisting the applicant with assembling the application materials. Either way, the sponsor's role is critical.

Because applicants have 2 sponsors, both provide important input into the 2 steps in the process: determining readiness and developing the application materials. The 2006 Fellow Selection Task Force developed a set of "Recommended Sponsor Responsibility Guidelines"¹⁰ that were included in the 2007 application materials. It may be useful for the 2 sponsors and the applicant to have a phone conference or face-to-face meeting to jointly review the criteria and instructions for application as a means for discussing the key points in the applicant's background that will be highlighted. Sharing drafts of the materials with each other during the development of the application is another strategy to assure coherence in the full package and to clearly communicate the special contributions and their impact that the applicant has made to nursing and healthcare. We also encourage reading the published papers on this topic²⁻⁵ to understand the application process and read the suggestions of other Fellow Selection Committee chairs. Whatever approach applicants and sponsors use for working together in developing the application, it is useful to agree upon a plan that will facilitate assembling an application that clearly communicates the ways in which the applicant meets the criteria for fellowship.

Questions often arise within the Academy about whether particular kinds of work are more likely to secure approval for fellowship. No one type of work takes priority, whether research, teaching, clinical service, policy-making, entrepreneurship or other focal area. The field needs all types of contributions and diversity within the Academy and that is what is most likely to lead to significant improvements in health care in the future. The critical factors are meeting the criteria for fellowship and communicating those clearly.

The review process was explained in a 2006 paper.⁵ One aspect of the process is the initial review by 2 members of the Fellow Selection Committee and the dyad presentation to the full committee of those applicants for whom it is less clear whether they meet the criteria. The 2007 Fellow Selection Committee is developing guidelines that will be used by the 2008 Committee for summary presentations by reviewer dyads to the full committee during discussion of appli-

cants at the face-to-face committee meeting. The guidelines for presentation center on the extent to which the reviewers saw evidence of the applicant having met the criteria. Areas of weakness may simply have resulted from insufficient clarity or explanation in the application, or it is possible that the applicant's work, while excellent, may not yet have achieved national or international impact as delineated in the criteria. The Fellow Selection Committee is very much aware that every application reflects the belief of at least the 2 Fellows who serve as sponsors, that their applicant merits fellowship. Thus, not being accepted in many cases may result from the application not sufficiently highlighting the scope and impact of the applicant's work. The Pre-Fellow Self-Assessment Worksheet⁹ will be helpful to applicants and sponsors when determining how to strengthen applications.

The Fellow Selection Committee hosts discussions at the Annual Meeting to answer questions about the application process. We encourage participation in the discussion, as the goal of the selection process is to select all who meet the criteria.⁵ We need to foster leadership for nursing in the future and this is a key mechanism for acknowledging past contributions and encouraging further development of important contributions to the field in the future. This is a critical time for nursing and for improving healthcare. Fellows have important roles to play in making ongoing contributions to nursing and health care, and we need more Fellows in the Academy to build and expand on the amazing contributions that so many are making.

We would like to thank the members of the 2007 Fellow Selection Committee for their contributions to the process this year and the ideas related to the role of sponsors in the process. We also wish to acknowledge the 2006 Fellow Selection Task Force that developed materials to assist applicants and sponsors and that were implemented as part of the 2007 application process. We thank Rebecca Gade, Program Manager for the American Academy of Nursing, whose meticulous recording of notes and compilation of data facilitates ongoing improvements in the process.

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