

# **Baccalaureate Nursing Students’ Professional Identity: Does Participation in a Welcome to the Nursing Profession Ceremony and Adoption of a Standardized Uniform Enhance their Sense of Professional Identity?**

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## **Abstract**

*In an effort to foster socialization into the nursing profession, faculty and administration at a Canadian nursing school in Newfoundland and Labrador (NL) introduced a “welcome to the nursing profession” ceremony and adopted a standardized uniform (navy pants and white top) in 2014. The purpose of the formal ceremony and standardized uniform was to promote a sense of professionalism and pride in nursing as a profession. This research study was conducted to determine if baccalaureate nursing students’ sense of professional identity was enhanced through participation in the welcome to the nursing profession ceremony and adoption of a standardized uniform. A convenience sample of 210 BN students in Year 3 and Year 4 were surveyed on-line. The students in Year 3 had actually attended the ceremony and wore the standardized uniform, and the students in Year 4 had not participated in a ceremony and had not worn the standardized uniform. This paper highlights that students’ perceptions of professional identity were enhanced by attending a welcome to the nursing profession ceremony and wearing a standardized uniform. Participants also provided insight into other collaborative activities to promote baccalaureate nursing students’ sense of professional identity.*

**Keywords:** *Nursing, Students, Professional, Identity, Uniform, Ceremony, Collaboration*

## **1. Introduction**

Professional identity in nursing encompasses a variety of concepts and variables and has been linked with self-concept, public image [1], nursing attire [2], professional socialization [3] and nursing education programs [4][5]. Fagermoen defines it as “the values and beliefs held by the nurse that guides his/her thinking, actions and interactions with the patient” [6]. Fagermoen further describes professional identity as a nurse’s perception of what it means to be and act like a nurse. The formation of professional identity begins on admission to nursing school and is a continuous dynamic and evolving process [7][5]. Nurse educators and faculty are integral to this process, as they act as role models for students and influence the culture and environment of nursing education programs [8][1][9][3].

It has been recognized that badges, uniforms, and rituals help shape student nurse professional identity and can denote beginnings in a student’s professional journey [10][8]. In an effort to foster development of professionalism and encourage students to ‘think and act

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### **Article history:**

Received (March 8, 2025), Review Result (April 9, 2025), Accepted (May 17, 2017)

like a nurse', the administration and faculty at one nursing school in NL approached nursing students through the school's student nursing society to propose a welcome to the nursing profession ceremony for students in their first year of the program. As one of the objectives of the nursing society is to act as a liaison between nursing students and faculty, collaboration with this group was deemed an appropriate starting point. Already, one partner nursing school had been offering a crest ceremony to welcome their first year nursing students, which contributed to this school's desire to formally welcome the first year students. After consultation and discussion with students, administration, and faculty, the nursing society supported implementation of a welcome to the nursing profession ceremony.

Around this same time, a standardized school uniform was also being deliberated. Faculty had discussed the idea of a standardized school uniform for students during various faculty forums. The provincial nurses' union had also recently endorsed a standardized uniform of white top and black pants for registered nurses as a component of its Clarity Project aimed at improving visibility of registered nurses in the workplace [11]. Ultimately, in partnership with nursing students, a school uniform of white top and navy pants was adopted. This uniform incorporated one of the school colors (blue) and was similar to the provincially adopted registered nurse uniform. The school uniform would be worn for the first time at the welcome to the nursing profession ceremony, and the first year students would also be formally presented with their school crest at that time. The ceremony would take place just prior to their first clinical rotation and students could invite family members to attend. The first year students worked together to develop a pledge relevant to nursing practice standards that would be recited at the ceremony as a public acknowledgement of their commitment to the nursing profession.

The researchers were interested in knowing how students felt about this ceremony and the wearing of a standardized uniform in relation to their professional identity development. Thus, the purpose of this research study was to determine the impact of a welcome to the nursing profession ceremony and adoption of a standardized uniform on nursing students' professional identity in one school of nursing.

## **2. Method**

### **2.1. Study design**

This descriptive study was designed to determine if professional identity of baccalaureate nursing students' in one school of nursing was enhanced through participation in a welcome to the nursing profession ceremony and adoption of a standardized uniform.

### **2.2. Research questions**

- 1) Do nursing students who attended a welcome to the nursing profession ceremony perceive that this experience enhanced their sense of professional identity?
- 2) Do nursing students perceive the standardized uniform of navy pants, white top, and school crest helps promote their sense of professional identity?
- 3) What other activities do nursing students identify that would promote or enhance their sense of professional identity during their baccalaureate program?

### **2.3. Sample**

A convenience sample of approximately 210 nursing students in Year 3 and Year 4 of their baccalaureate program were sent an e-mail questionnaire via survey monkey. The Year 3

students were the first class to participate in a welcome to the nursing profession ceremony and to wear a standardized uniform in their first year of nursing school, whereas the Year 4 students did not have this experience. The overall response rate was 32.9% (n=69).

## 2.4. Questionnaire

The questionnaire used in this study had two components. The first section collected socio-demographic data such as year in the baccalaureate nursing program and age. In the second section, a brief questionnaire using a Likert scale format was developed by the researchers to determine the impact of a welcome to the nursing profession ceremony and the wearing of a standardized uniform on the nursing students' sense of professional identity. Open-ended questions within the questionnaire also allowed participants to identify other activities that might enhance professional identity during their baccalaureate nursing program. The survey monkey link for the questionnaire was distributed via email to all potential participants in the study.

## 2.5. Data analysis

SPSS version 21 was used to analyze the quantitative data. Descriptive statistics were used to explore the impact of attending a welcome to the nursing profession ceremony and the wearing of a standardized uniform on students' sense of professional identity. Qualitative data obtained from the open ended questions was analyzed for themes.

## 2.6. Ethical considerations

Prior to the study commencement, ethical review and approval was obtained from the provincial Health Research Ethics Authority (HREA) and from the Regional Health Authority Research Proposals Approval Committee (RPAC). Permission to access the student population was obtained through the administration of the nursing school. Participation in this study was voluntary, all responses were anonymous and completion of the questionnaire indicated consent.

# 3. Results

## 3.1. Demographic data

Table 1. Year 3 students' demographics

| Age Range | Number of Participants (N) | Percent (%) |
|-----------|----------------------------|-------------|
| 18 – 24   | 28                         | 82.4        |
| 25 – 29   | 3                          | 8.8         |
| > 30      | 3                          | 8.8         |

Table 2. Year 4 students' demographics

| Age Range | Number of Participants (N) | Percent (%) |
|-----------|----------------------------|-------------|
| 18 – 24   | 26                         | 74.3        |
| 25 – 29   | 5                          | 14.3        |
| > 30      | 4                          | 11.4        |

### 3.2. Quantitative results

Table 3. Year 3 students' responses

| Year 3 Students (n=34)                                        |                                                                                                                                                                               |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Did attending the ceremony enhance professional identity?     |                                                                                                                                                                               |
| 92.6%                                                         | of respondents who attended a welcome to the nursing profession ceremony prior to their first clinical rotation felt it enhanced their sense of professional identity         |
| 7.4%                                                          | of respondents who attended a welcome to the nursing profession ceremony prior to their first clinical rotation felt it had no impact on their sense of professional identity |
| Did wearing the school uniform promote professional identity? |                                                                                                                                                                               |
| 100%                                                          | of respondents felt that a standardized uniform of white top, navy pants and school crest helped promote their sense of professional identity                                 |

Table 4. Year 4 students' responses

| Year 4 Students (n=35)                                          |                                                                                                                                                             |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Would attending a ceremony enhance professional identity?       |                                                                                                                                                             |
| 76.5%                                                           | of respondents felt that a welcome to the nursing profession ceremony would have enhanced their sense of professional identity                              |
| 17.6%                                                           | of respondents felt that a welcome to the nursing profession ceremony would have no impact on their sense of professional identity                          |
| 5.9%                                                            | of respondents felt that a welcome to the nursing profession ceremony would not have enhanced their sense of professional identity                          |
| Would wearing the school uniform promote professional identity? |                                                                                                                                                             |
| 79.4%                                                           | of respondents felt that a standardized uniform of white top, navy pants and school crest would have helped to promote their sense of professional identity |
| 11.8%                                                           | of respondents felt that a standardized uniform of white top, navy pants and school crest would have no impact on their sense of professional identity      |
| 8.8%                                                            | of respondents felt that a standardized uniform of white top, navy pants and school crest would not have enhanced their sense of professional identity      |

### 3.3. Qualitative data

Students were provided an opportunity on the questionnaire to offer any further comments related to promotion of their professional identity. Participants identified that participation in a welcome to the nursing profession ceremony helped them to feel as though they were part of the nursing profession, and that wearing a standardized uniform offered increased student visibility and allowed them to feel proud and professional. Students also offered the following

suggestions for collaborative activities that might contribute to team-building and cohesiveness:

- Student lanyards or pins for identification of school and current year of program
- Special ceremony for students who make the dean's list
- Spirit week event to promote team building
- More conference opportunities for students
- More simulated clinical scenarios depicting actual clinical events
- Overall, students who participated in this study felt that the welcome to the nursing profession ceremony and adoption of a standardized uniform and school crest did promote and strengthen their sense of professional identity.

#### 4. Discussion

Participants in this study overwhelmingly felt that the welcome to the nursing profession ceremony and the wearing of a standardized uniform enhanced (or would have enhanced) their sense of professional identity (see Tables 3 and 4). Year 3 (N=34) and Year 4 (N=35) students were equally represented in this research. From the demographic data collected categorically (Tables 1 and 2), the majority of respondents (78.26%) ranged in age from 18-24 years, thus were just beginning a professional career pathway.

In recent years, schools of nursing have joined the ranks of other health professions that offer formal 'White Coat Ceremonies' to provide a symbolic rite of passage into a designated profession. Such ceremonies typically signify the "beginning of the student's professional journey" [8]. The welcome to the nursing profession ceremony described in this article was offered to nursing students in the first year of their program just prior to their first clinical rotation. As indicated in the sample section, the participants in this study were Year 3 and Year 4 students at the time of data collection. The Year 3 students were the first group in the school for whom a welcome to the nursing profession ceremony was implemented during their first year of the program. When asked what impact a welcome to the nursing profession ceremony would have on their professional identity, 92.6% of Year 3 and 76.5% of Year 4 students agreed or strongly agreed that the ceremony enhanced (or would have enhanced) their sense of professional identity.

Some of the participants in this study who had attended the welcome to the nursing profession ceremony also provided further commentary to explain how they felt about it:

*"It was really exciting to attend the ceremony. Made me feel like this was it, I'm on my way to becoming a real nurse. I was very proud to have my name called and receive my crest."*

*"The welcome to the nursing profession ceremony prior to Nursing 1520 (first clinical rotation) made it feel more like I was working towards a career and becoming a nurse instead of just going to school."*

One of the participants who had not attended the welcome to the nursing profession ceremony stated:

*"I think it (welcome to profession ceremony) would have been a nice gesture as a welcome to the profession."*

These comments indicate that students are able to recognize the value of a formal ceremony early in their nursing program as they move toward developing their own professional identity. The results of this study support the findings of Goodolf [12] who

studied the educational experience of nursing students as they form a professional identity. She suggested that development of a positive professional nursing identity is enhanced when socialization into the profession happens near the beginning of the educational program, and that nursing students' desire to 'feel like a nurse' was an important part of the process of forming a professional identity.

When asked what impact a standardized uniform would have (or would have had) on their professional identity, 100% of the Year 3 respondents and 79.4% of the Year 4 respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the uniform enhanced (or would have enhanced) their sense of professional identity. These findings are supported by Timmons and East [13] who found that uniforms can be instrumental in establishing occupational boundaries of a professional group and can be influential in the formation of professional identity. The provincial nursing regulatory body – the Association of Registered Nurses of Newfoundland and Labrador (ARNNL) [14] encourages registered nurses to recognize the importance of their appearance (including uniform) on the development of the nurse-client relationship, and maintains that the registered nurses' appearance plays a role in upholding professional standards. As well, the provincial nurses' union (RNUNL) noted the value of a standardized uniform in strengthening RN identity. In one Clarity Project update, the union stated that a unique uniform has allowed nurses to "stand up and stand out" in the workplace [11].

Data collected from student participants in this study who wore the standardized school uniform indicate they concur with the literature findings, and with professional nursing organizations, that the standardized uniform has a positive impact on promoting their professional visibility. Some of the comments received included:

*"LOVE the uniform. During clinical, everyone knows who we are and can easily pick us out. It looks very professional and is a great representation of our school."*

*"Everybody always knows when I am a student nurse and I love it. It is so great to have that kind of public identity. I cannot wait until I am a RN and I can wear the white and black uniform."*

One Year 4 student who did not wear a standardized uniform also recognized the importance professional attire has on visibility, evident through the following comment that a standardized uniform would make:

*"Students more easily recognizable. Easier for staff and clients to recognize the students. Easier for the students to keep on their best behaviour."*

These findings support the importance of professional attire on promoting the visibility of the student nurse.

Professionalism can also be enhanced by a uniform. Lehna et al. [2] discuss clothing as a form of non-verbal communication. They consider that what someone wears can allow clear identification of a specific profession, influence interactions between individuals, and project a professional image. A study by Pawlina et al. [15] regarding medical student professionalism found that wearing professional clothing allowed medical students to switch into their professional roles more easily.

Participants in this study offered the following comments indicative of the importance of the uniform in the development of their sense of professional identity:

*"I feel very professional when walking into the clinical setting while wearing a uniform. As a student nurse, I feel I can be taken more seriously if we present ourselves in a professional uniform."*

*“The white top and navy pants helped give me a sense of professional identity.”*

One of the participants who did not wear a standardized uniform stated:

A standardized uniform “would have given me a sense of excitement and pride.”

Clearly, the wearing of a standardized school uniform impacted students’ sense of professionalism in a positive manner. Some of the students who had not worn the adopted uniform would have been proud to do so.

As previously discussed, the initiation of the welcome to the nursing profession ceremony was the result of a collaborative effort between students, administration, and faculty. Students themselves also worked collaboratively on the nursing pledge that they recited at the formal ceremony. A feeling of unity as a group, and a sense of team work, was evident when respondents shared their feelings about how the standardized uniform impacted them. Participants offered the following insights:

*“The standardized uniform is fantastic. Provides a sense of unity and easily identifiable. I enjoy the fact that people know who we are and we are not confused for anyone else (ex: PCA, LPN, RN, cleaning staff).”*

*“Wearing the uniforms and being presented with a crest made it feel like we were officially in the program and made me feel a part of a larger group.”*

The importance of working together as a team was further highlighted by another participant. This student responded to the researchers request for other collaborative activities or events that might enhance student professional identity by offering the following comment:

*“A spirit week type of event,...where classmates can take part in activities together to promote team-building and bonding of classmates”*

Statements like these from nursing students are encouraging for faculty, and indicate interest in the nursing program, a genuine desire to improve collaborative activities, and a willingness to share ideas that can support further development of student professional identity.

## **5. Conclusions**

Professional identity in nursing is a complex concept that begins in nursing education programs and encompasses such variables as professionalism, professional socialization, self-concept, nursing roles and values, responsibilities to society, and understanding of what it means to be a nurse. Nursing students who participated in this study were positively impacted by the welcome to the nursing profession ceremony and adoption of the standardized uniform. They indicated that a welcome to the nursing profession ceremony enhanced their sense of professional identity and that wearing a standardized uniform, complete with the school crest, promoted this feeling as well. Students who had not participated in these activities felt such events would have fostered their sense of professional identity. A formal ceremony in which students publicly and officially receive their school crest, and where they wear a standardized uniform similar in style to registered nurses in the province, should be continued to enhance their sense of professional identity. Activities such as this should continue to occur in the first year of nursing school, as this is the time when students are beginning to understand what it is to feel like a nurse and are starting to develop their own sense of professional identity. Student involvement in other endeavours they feel may enhance their sense of professional identity should also be encouraged and possibly implemented. Supporting students in this manner allows their voices and opinions to contribute to shaping their professional

development. The activities presented in this article represent several ways faculty, administration, and students can work together collaboratively to promote constructive experiences that may ultimately positively impact patients, society, and the nursing profession itself.

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