

**How to Prepare for Becoming a Center of Excellence: One School
of Nursing's Story**

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In 2005, the University of North Carolina at Greensboro School of Nursing was designated a National League for Nursing Center of Excellence, recognized for excellence in faculty development. In 2008 we applied for a second three-year term. This time, we were recognized for creating environments that promote the pedagogical expertise of faculty.

Since the COE award was first established by the NLN in 2004, the categories and criteria have changed slightly. Currently, awards given are for creating environments that enhance student learning and professional development, promote the pedagogical expertise of faculty, and advance the science of nursing education. By sharing our experiences, we hope to help other schools apply for recognition as a COE. (The Intent to Apply for 2011 is due October 15, 2010. Visit www.nln.org/excellence/coe/index.htm.)

Study Criteria and Process The first step in preparing your application is to study the criteria and processes

carefully. Since there are three categories of awards, it is important to assess your school's areas of strength to determine the most appropriate category. Being aware of the process allows you to plan for the time and resources needed to complete the application.

Buy-in from your dean or director is important to the process. Both in 2004 and 2008, our dean was committed and willing to commit faculty time and resources as needed. In both years, once we selected a category and made the decision to apply, a COE champion was appointed to lead a committee to develop the application. This leader was responsible for nominating faculty to serve on the committee, planning meetings, and establishing a strategy to collect the necessary data to complete the application. Deciding which data are needed and actually collecting the data can be a long process. Plan for a full academic year to accomplish this task.

Choosing the Committee This is an important step. Our committee consisted of eight people. Each was assigned to a specific criterion, with the chairperson coordinating the process and editing the final document.

The makeup of the committee should reflect the makeup of the faculty. Ours included both tenured and

nontenured faculty, with some faculty on the clinical track. Having both long-term and relatively new faculty on the committee allowed our history to come through and provided the perspective of individuals who were new to the school. It is critical that all committee members are convinced that your school is *already* a center of excellence. You just need an opportunity to tell your story.

Beginning the Application Process The first step in the process is preparation of the Intent to Apply document. It is important to allow ample time for this first step. After deciding which category to pursue, all members of the committee can start to consider what data are needed. After our committee made this decision, the chair prepared the document and then asked for feedback from the committee and the dean prior to submission.

When preparing the Intent to Apply document, you must indicate whether you plan to use an NLN consultant to work with the COE committee in preparing the application. While the consultants we used in 2005 and 2008 were very different, both were exceptionally helpful. They concentrated on the process, giving little input on content, which must come from the faculty

themselves. They helped us consider how to tell our story and how to document that what we did made a difference in student learning. The school must pay the expenses of the consultant (travel, lodging, and food), but there is no fee for the consultation.

Creating a Timetable For any large task that will be done by a committee, a timetable is essential. It is important to allow ample time for data gathering, writing, and editing. Our committee chair drafted a timetable, and the committee approved it. Since much of our data were gathered from faculty, it was important to coordinate our efforts. We did not want faculty to be asked for small bits of data by each committee member.

Although much of our work could be done via email, we found it helpful to set some regular meeting times at the beginning of the process. We cancelled an occasional meeting, but we were glad that we had set aside meeting times on our calendars, shielded from other obligations. The timetable included tentative dates for a consultant visit so that all committee members could be present; due dates for drafts to be submitted to an editor; and dates by which the drafts would be returned from the editor. To

prevent crunches near the due date of the application, we planned to complete our process two weeks early.

Preparing the Application It is critical that the application reflect the views of the entire faculty. We found it helpful to talk with faculty as a group, to gather ideas about our preferred future for nursing education. We discussed our strengths as a school, and what we thought made our school stand out as a COE in faculty development and in the development of pedagogical expertise.

At our school, each faculty member prepares an annual report that details accomplishments of the past year and goals for the next academic year. These reports are combined into a School of Nursing Annual Report. While the individual reports were useful in preparing our application, we realized that some information was needed that could not be gleaned from reports. The committee then devised a list of questions that we sent by email to faculty, with a due date for receipt of the information.

Data that we found helpful included the following: faculty teaching awards and honors; lists of faculty publications and presentations, with an indication as to whether they involved students and/or alumni; lists of

service activities, especially those relating to teaching or education; and student honors and recognitions that reflected the pedagogy of faculty. With staff assistance, tables for each of these topics were prepared by the committee chair and sent to faculty for verification of accuracy and completeness.

For the first draft of the application, committee members each prepared an assigned section. The committee chair then compiled the pieces into a whole and edited the document to reduce redundancy. Finally, the application was sent to a professional editor who compiled the disparate parts into a cohesive whole.

We highly recommend having a professional editor look at the application with an eye for clarity, flow, and the telling of your story. We were fortunate that a professional editor, who has worked with our faculty for more than 20 years, primarily on manuscripts and grant applications, was available. We reserved her time well before we needed her services and planned to have drafts to her a week prior to her visits to the school.

The editor returned each draft within a week with penciled comments, and then met with the committee chair to discuss her critiques. A staff member took the edited draft and made the recommended changes, then gave the

corrected copy, along with the editor's penciled comments, to members of committee. When the final application was completed by the committee, the draft was again sent to the editor, who returned it a week later and met with the chair. Members of the staff constructed tables showing faculty and student accomplishments, revising them as needed to ensure that they were accurate and up to date.

When the final application was complete, the staff made arrangements to have bound copies prepared to mail, along with copies for each committee member and the dean. A check was prepared, and the bound application, with a cover letter, was mailed well before the deadline.

Final Thoughts When our school applied for COE designation, it was difficult to fit the development of the application into our already tight work schedule. At the committee's request, part of the timetable needed to be extended to give members time to complete their work, pushing the completion of the application closer to the mailing deadline.

One major realization we have had since that time is how important it is to help faculty from other schools learn more about the COE experience. A faculty member

from another state spent two days with us, shadowing the committee chair, meeting with committee members and other faculty, and attending classes and a faculty meeting. She wanted to know what a COE school of nursing looks like and acts like. This individual came at her own expense, using grant funds requested specifically for this purpose. Later she told us how helpful the visit was and shared with us the report she prepared for her dean and fellow faculty about preparing for designation as an NLN Center of Excellence. Upon request, we will assist other schools in any way we can.

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