

## Navigating AORN's Fellowship Process

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The Association of periOperative Registered Nurses (AORN) serves as the professional voice for perioperative nurses. The AORN draws upon the collective wisdom of its membership to promote safe surgical care. More than 41,000 members and 160,000<sup>1</sup> operating room nurses rely on AORN for evidence-based tools, a robust clinical journal, continuing education, and the premiere AORN Global Surgical Conference and Expo. The AORN is nearly 70 years old and remains the unifying force between members, healthcare organizations, and industry partners.<sup>1</sup> As a mature organization, AORN's volunteer leadership followed the tradition of other professional societies in creating a fellowship program. The purpose of this article is to review the Fellowship of the AORN (FAORN) program's history, review the selection process for becoming a fellow, and educate AORN members and the public on this prestigious recognition.

### The Term Fellow

The word *fellow* is a gender-neutral term that professional associations bestow on their members as a designation of distinguishment. An organization creates a *fellowship* program when it reaches an undefined state of maturity and a sphere of influence beyond its membership.<sup>2</sup> Each organization creates its own unique standards to earn the honorary designation. Applicants undergo a selective process to earn the designation.

For FAORN, members should recognize the designation is earned through substantive contributions to the field of perioperative nursing. The field of perioperative nursing includes direct clinical practice, education, administration/leadership, or research/evidence-based practice. Therefore, members who aspire to fellowship status would have the capability of demonstrating to peers how their significant, sustained, and substantive contributions in one of these areas have advanced perioperative nursing.

### History of AORN Fellowship

The 2018 AORN President, Stephanie Davis, envisioned the creation of a fellowship of AORN. In response to the President's charge, AORN formed a task force to investigate opportunities and challenges and to provide recommendations to the AORN Board of Directions for an AORN Fellowship. Following deliberation, the AORN Board of Directors approved the recommendations of the task force. AORN accepted applications for consideration the same year. AORN's President David Wyatt announced the inaugural class of nine FAORNs in 2021.

The AORN Board of Directors recognized the application process needed revision. The Board created a Fellow Redesign Committee in 2021. Their work continued into 2022. The AORN accepted applications in 2022 and acknowledged new fellows at the 2023 Global Surgical Conference and Expo in San Antonio, TX.

### The AORN's Fellowship Process

The journey to fellowship is highly individualized. This infers that the selection committee scrutinizes the individual's application for contributions to perioperative nursing and does not benchmark the application against other applicants. The process begins with an awareness of the program and a self-assessment. Individuals who desire the title must have sufficient documented evidence of contributions to perioperative nursing and demonstrate linkages to the AORN [mission, vision, and values](#).<sup>3</sup> Documented evidence can be in the form of accomplishments, disseminated material, or other contributions. Individuals should clearly self-assess the depth and breadth of their accomplishments.

An online application process exists and will always have the latest update. The application process is open from July 1 to September 15 annually at 11:59 MT. The application, supporting documents, and frequently asked questions are posted on [Fellowship | AORN](#).<sup>4</sup> Those interested in fellowship should review the publicly available material to better understand the process.

The personal side of the application is straightforward. Individuals must hold AORN membership. Individuals must be licensed registered nurses. All applicants must meet the educational qualifications. At a minimum, the individual must have at least one degree in nursing at the baccalaureate degree or higher. In addition, the individual must have evidence of a graduate degree. A graduate degree is not restricted to the nursing discipline. The final qualification for consideration requires that the individual hold at least one national nursing certification. National certification validates expert knowledge and signals a commitment to professional growth.<sup>5</sup> Certification also enables lifelong learning. Work environments, such as those with Magnet® designation, encourage certification. The Magnet program recognizes more than 350 different certifications.<sup>5</sup>

The applicant must complete three narratives with strict adherence to the space limitations. The first narrative distills the individual's professional evolution at the state, regional, national, or international levels. In this narrative, there will be evidence of the professional nursing role and the contributions and outcomes of the role to perioperative nursing. The significant contributions should be evident beyond employment and the local level. The contributions should be scalable to have further impact and conveyed in the submission.

The second narrative allows individuals to identify their contributions and articulate how they further AORN's mission, vision, and values.<sup>3</sup> Through professional development or practice, individuals should be able to demonstrate an impact for others to see. The final narrative component allows the applicant to select one of four areas: (a) clinical practice, (b) education, (c) administration/leadership, or (d) research/evidence-based practice. Applicants should demonstrate their contributions to one of these areas focused on perioperative nursing with specific examples and data.

Individuals have 2,500 characters including spaces to declare and expand on their contribution to perioperative nursing in each of the three narratives. Across all narratives, there is a need for concise and clear writing. Supportive data and examples, within the prescribed limitations, are expected.

Applicants should also plan to preview the required curriculum vitae (CV). A CV represents one's professional accomplishments.<sup>6</sup> The CV should be highly descriptive of one's expertise. The application process does not allow the inclusion of a resume. The prescribed structure of the CV allows individuals to include information on:

- title and employment,
- licensures and certifications,
- education history,
- professional background and work history,
- contributions and impact relative to the selected area of focus,
- awards and honors,
- citations of publications,
- presentations, and
- elements of teaching,
- leadership positions in AORN and other professional organizations,
- philanthropy, and additional experiences that demonstrate impact.

The CV has a maximum of 20 pages and a minimum size of 11-point font. The CV content must align with the area selected for consideration.

The application process requires sponsorship. One of the sponsors must be a member with an FAORN credential or an AORN member who is a Fellow in the American Academy of Nursing (FAAN). Current Fellows have already made significant and sustained contributions to nursing. They are well-positioned to peer review the work of others. Individuals considering fellowship must communicate early and often with the sponsor.

Individuals should recognize that the current Fellows listed as sponsors on the AORN webpages have volunteered to be contacted for sponsorship consideration. The sponsors are only limited by time, not the number of people that ask them to sponsor. Individuals may be initially hesitant to reach out to a Fellow if there is not a pre-existing relationship. The applicant has to *break-the-ice* and begin a professional relationship. Alternatively, sponsors may decline to participate in the process if time and other obligations prohibit them from focusing sufficient time on the applicant. If the sponsor is agreeable, the applicant should be able to articulate all elements of the narratives and CV for the potential sponsor to make an informed decision. Like other relationships, the interaction between the applicant and sponsor must be nurtured and each party must fulfill any mutually agreed upon obligations. The fellowship application process requires significant investments of time and is an iterative journey.

The second letter of support comes from an individual who holds a position to attest to the contributions made. That person must be able to embellish the personal narratives and express how the contribution has demonstrated wider implications for perioperative nursing. The FAORN guidelines term for this statement is as a facility/leader sponsor.

Both sponsors are responsible for amplifying the individual's contribution; they do not merely repeat or endorse the applicant's narratives. Reviewers expect to see a higher-level demonstration of the assertions made.

The applicant must submit all components of the application. No mechanism exists for sponsors or others to submit on behalf of the applicant. Applications can only be submitted

through the FAORN application portal, accompanied by a non-refundable payment of the application fee.

The FAORN has a selection committee (FSC). The FSC members cannot serve as sponsors during their committee tenure to avoid conflict of interest. All deliberations and work products of the committee are confidential. The FSC members review only the completed application and may not supplement the application with personal knowledge. In addition, members of the AORN Board of Directors and AORN staff are not eligible to apply for fellowship or serve as a sponsor during their tenure.

### **Barriers to Achieving FAORN**

The FSC has experience in reviewing applications. The committee does not provide individual feedback, however the FSC discloses lessons learned on the barriers that prevent achievement of fellowship. First, narratives are underdeveloped in content or lack clarity. Narratives must be written clearly, and authors must consider space limitations. The narratives must express the contribution, significance, sustainability, and relevance to perioperative nursing and the linkages to the AORN mission, vision, and values.<sup>3</sup> The sponsor statements must amplify the narrative. To resolve this barrier, the applicant and sponsors should review all material and agree on the final content.

Another barrier is inconsistency. Inconsistency between the applicant's personal narratives and the CV creates challenges for the review committee. Content within the narrative and not on the CV cannot be validated or verified. A slightly different view of inconsistency pertains to sustainability. One-time accomplishments at a local level and without dissemination do not reflect the intent of being significant and sustainable.

The final barrier pertains to the completeness of the application. The review committee only reviews complete applications. Incomplete applications, or those where the applicant does not meet the basic qualifications, do not progress to the review phase. An incomplete application eliminates the opportunity for consideration.

### **Ongoing Obligations of FAORNs**

Individuals selected for the prestigious FAORN designation are required to maintain AORN membership. The FAORN designation is directly tied to paid AORN membership dues and the FAORN fees. Those who become FAORNs have demonstrated a commitment to perioperative practice and the level of commitment would not diminish after achieving fellowship. These individuals also agree to serve as sponsors for future applicants.

### **Conclusion**

The Fellowship of AORN is a designation and an honor for any perioperative nurse to achieve. The ongoing synergistic brain trust of the collective of FAORN nurses achieving this designation can propel and advance AORN's mission, vision and values into the future. Being an FAORN means one is recognized as having accomplished significant outcomes and is willing to continue to make ongoing substantive contributions to a valued organization. The FSC welcomes applicants to consider and then apply to become an FAORN.

### References

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