The COVID-19 pandemic and related containment measures will prevent Vermont nursing education programs from using many conventional classroom sites for didactic instruction, and students will in many cases be excluded from clinical sites. In view of these developments, this guidance is intended to assist Program Directors in understanding how the Office of Professional Regulation (OPR) will interpret applicable Administrative Rules of the Board of Nursing.

The Director of Professional Regulation finds that State policy, for the duration of the COVID-19 related State of Emergency, calls for maximizing the safety, continuity, and educational integrity of Vermont nursing education programs, even where doing so may require suspension of Board of Nursing Administrative Rules intended to achieve those goals in non-emergency contexts. To the extent the guidance herein conflicts with a Rule referenced herein, application of the Rule will be stayed pursuant to 3 V.S.A. § 123(i).

Goals & Priorities

Each Vermont RN and LPN education program has a Board approved curriculum, supported by established statements of mission, purpose, and outcome metrics. The State’s several Program Directors are authorized to take appropriate measures to ensure curricular continuity notwithstanding interruption in access to educational facilities and sites. These measures may include extension of distance learning to new classes and content and the expansion of simulation to substitute for clinical education hours. Operational decisions should prioritize, in order:

1. Protection of the health, safety, and welfare of students, educators, patients, and the general public.
2. Continuity of educational service, in order that nursing students are timely and competently prepared for examination and clinical practice.
3. Fidelity to each program’s established mission, purpose, curriculum, and outcome measurement systems.
4. Fidelity to accreditation standards.

Change Notices

Rules 4.4 and 4.5 require that Program Directors notify the Board of Nursing of substantial changes in curriculum, sites, administration, and program duration. For the duration of the declared State of Emergency, Program Directors may execute necessary changes without prior notice or specific approval. Program Directors are asked to email a concise summary of program changes and updates to Executive Officer for Nursing Phyllis Mitchell (phyllis.mitchell@vermont.gov) each Friday. The Office will request additional detail as necessary.
Facilities & Resources

Existing instructional facilities and clinical sites may become unavailable. Program directors may exercise professional judgment in the use of alternative facilities, instructional modalities, clinical sites, and simulation laboratories. Consistent with Rule 4.27, programs should operate only if appropriately resourced to execute their curriculum objectives.

Faculty

Existing nursing program faculty may become unavailable. Program Directors may exercise professional judgment to fill vacancies with the most qualified available candidates. Instructors whose credentials fall outside the requirements of Rules 4.20 through 4.24 should be clearly identified in a program’s Friday change report. Please include any new instructor’s CV with a brief statement of qualifications.

Curriculum Hours; Clinical Hours

The curriculum-hour requirements of Rules 4.30 (registered nursing programs) and 4.32 (practical nursing programs) may be satisfied by remote learning and simulation as necessary and appropriate in the view of the Program Director. The 25% simulation cap, established by Rule 4.29(c), is waived for the duration of the State of Emergency.

Accreditation

Programs are required to maintain accreditation and should operate in conformity with accreditation standards whenever possible. Program Directors are advised to maintain close contact with accreditors and adhere to accreditors’ recommendations respecting alternative educational strategies.

Evolving Developments

As the COVID-19 State of Emergency develops, the General Assembly and Governor may generate new legislative and executive output to address healthcare issues. Please monitor the OPR website, https://sos.vermont.gov/opr/, for additional guidance.