

Overview of the ACEN Accreditation Process

Scope: Initial accreditation and continuing accreditation of practical programs, diploma programs, associate programs, master's programs, postmaster's certificate programs, clinical doctorate programs, and DNP specialist certificate programs. ACEN is a gatekeeper for Title IV funds for select programs.

Purpose: The purpose of ACEN is to provide specialized accreditation for programs of nursing education, both postsecondary and higher degree, which offer either a certificate, a diploma, or a recognized professional degree (e.g., practical, diploma, associate, master's, postmaster's certificate, clinical doctorate and DNP specialist certificate).

General Process: The ACEN process for the evaluation of nursing education programs is a comprehensive four-step process with the program self-review and self-study report as the first step. The second step is the site visit conducted by peer evaluators resulting in the peer evaluators' visit report. In the third step, a peer Evaluation Review Panel examines the available information about the program (e.g., self-study report, peer evaluators' visit report, additional information, etc.). The final step is a review of the available information and an accreditation decision is made by the ACEN Board of Commissioners.

All programs seeking initial accreditation from the ACEN must apply for candidacy. Candidacy is granted after a successful professional staff review of a program's current compliance or potential compliance with select accreditation standards. A program that has achieved candidate status must complete the accreditation process within two years.

In summary, the ACEN accreditation process includes the following:

- Candidacy (for programs seeking initial accreditation);
- Program preparation of the Self-Study Report for programs seeking initial or continuing accreditation;
- Site visit by program specific peer evaluators with program specific expertise;
- Peer evaluators' visit report;
- ACEN staff review of peer evaluators' visit report;
- Evaluation Review Panel composed of peer evaluators with program specific expertise;
- ACEN Board of Commissioners accreditation decision; and
- Appeal Panel (when appropriate).

Self-study Report: Any program seeking initial or continuing accreditation must prepare a self-study report to demonstrate the extent to which the program meets the accreditation standards. The process of self-study represents the combined effort of the governing organization administrators, nursing education program administrators, nursing faculty, nursing staff, nursing students and other individuals concerned with the nursing program. All those associated with the program should participate in the self-study process. Broad participation leads to an understanding of the total program.

Peer Evaluators' Visit Report: The peer evaluators on the site visit team are responsible for presenting an accurate, complete, and well-organized report to the ACEN within one week after the conclusion of the site visit. After a thorough review by appropriate stakeholders, the program typically receives the final report within eight weeks of the site visit.

Decision Options: The options for initial accreditation and continuing accreditation are:

Initial Accreditation

- Initial accreditation is granted when a program is in compliance with all accreditation standards. The next visit will be in five years for programs granted initial accreditation.
- Initial accreditation is denied when a program is not in compliance with all accreditation standards. The programs may restart the Candidacy process at any time.

Continuing Accreditation: Typically, programs seeking continuing accreditation have an opportunity to come into compliance with the accreditation standards; however, for an appropriate reason(s) the ACEN Board of Commissioners can deny continuing accreditation at any point in the review process.

- Continuing accreditation is granted when a program is in compliance with all accreditation standards. The next visit will be in eight years for programs granted continuing accreditation.
- Continuing accreditation with conditions is granted when a program is noncompliant with one or two accreditation standards. A follow-up report is required. The maximum monitoring period for diploma and degree programs is 2 years; the maximum monitoring period for practical programs is 18 months; and the maximum monitoring period for standalone certificate nursing programs that are not a practical nursing program is determined by the length of the certificate program.
- Continuing accreditation with warning is granted when a program is noncompliant with three or more accreditation standards. A follow-up report and a follow-up visit is required. The maximum monitoring period for diploma and degree programs 2 years; the maximum monitoring period for practical programs is 18 months; and the maximum monitoring period for standalone certificate nursing programs that are not a practical nursing program is determined by the length of the certificate program.
- Continuing accreditation for good cause is granted when a program continues to be noncompliant with any accreditation standard(s). A follow-up report and a follow-up visit is required. The maximum monitoring period for diploma and degree programs 2 years; the maximum monitoring period for practical programs is 18 months; and the maximum monitoring period for standalone certificate nursing programs that are not a practical nursing program is determined by the length of the certificate program.
- Deny continuing accreditation.

Accreditation Letter: This is the letter the governing organization/nursing program receives regarding the ACEN Board of Commissioners' accreditation decision.

Sharing Decisions with BONs: The ACEN will always share program accreditation decisions made by the ACEN Board of Commissioners with BONs.

Monitoring Process – Follow-up Report: Required when a nursing program is out of compliance with any accreditation standard(s). All programs out of compliance with any accreditation standard(s) must submit a follow-up report and a follow-up visit is required for all programs on Continuing Accreditation with Warning and Continuing Accreditation for Good Cause.

Monitoring Process – Annual Report: All accredited programs are required to submit an annual report. The annual report will request the following information (at a minimum):

- Enrollment figures;
- Completion/graduation rate;
- Faculty information;
- Substantive change information;
- Complaints against the program;
- Job placement rate; and
- Licensure and/or certification examination pass rate(s).

Substantive Change Report: It is the responsibility of each nursing education unit to notify the ACEN of major changes in a nursing program to ensure maintenance of accreditation status and protection of students in accordance with Policy #14 Reporting Substantive Changes and, when required, seek approval prior to the initiation of the substantive change; see Accreditation Manual at www.acenursing.org. Failure to report a substantive change may place the accreditation status of a nursing program in jeopardy and may have consequences related to Title IV certification and eligibility.

Communication with Stakeholders: Communication is promoted by:

- Solicitation of comments on proposed new or revised policies or new or revised accreditation standards from all interested parties;
- Report to Constituents of the annual report as aggregate data trended over time; and
- Broad consultation across constituencies.

Systematic Review of Standards: Data analysis is used to:

- Maintain validity and relevance of the ACEN Standards and Criteria;
- Maintain reliability of the ACEN accreditation processes and practices;
- Continue to identify and disseminate information in appropriate arenas regarding specific needs of programs and peer evaluators as individuals or groups; and
- Continue to identify and disseminate information in appropriate arenas regarding areas in which change needs to be facilitated.

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