

Overview of the ACEN Accreditation Process

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

Purpose: The purpose of the 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., clinical doctorate, master's, baccalaureate, associate, diploma and practical degrees).

General Process: The ACEN accreditation process includes the following:

- Candidacy (for programs seeking initial accreditation);
- Program preparation of the Self-study Report;
- Team site visit for program evaluation by program specific site visitors;
- Site Visitors' Report;
- Staff review;
- Evaluation Review Panel with program specific expertise;
- Staff review and referral to the ACEN;
- Commission accreditation decision; and
- Appeal panel (when appropriate).

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 Site Visitors' Report. In the third step, a peer Evaluation Review Panel examines the reports written by and about the program (Self-study Report and Site Visitors' Report). The final step is a review of the process and the decision on accreditation status by the ACEN Board of Commissioners.

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

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

- Enrollment figures;
- Graduation figures;
- Faculty numbers and credentials;
- Substantive change information;
- Complaints against the program;
- Job placement rates; and
- Licensure and certification examination pass rates.

Reports: ACEN will always share with the BONs program accreditation decisions and any adverse actions taken.

Accreditation Team Letter: This is the decision letter from accreditation team members.

Follow-up Report: May be required by ACEN when nursing programs are out of compliance with one or two of the ACEN Accreditation Standards. Based on the Follow-up Report and the recommendation of the Evaluation Review Panel, the decision regarding the accreditation status of the nursing program is made by the ACEN.

Decision Options

- Affirm continuing accreditation as the program is in compliance with all ACEN standards.
- For initial accreditation the next visit will be in five years, if the standards are met. For continuing accreditation, the next visit will be in eight years, if the standards are met.
- If the program is noncompliant with one or two standards, the next visit will be in two years for all programs, except practical nurse programs. For the latter, the next visit will be in 18 months. See the ACEN website for other variations.
- Deny continuing accreditation and remove the nursing program from the listings of accredited programs. The program is not in compliance with ACEN standard(s).

Self-study Report: Any program applying for accreditation must prepare a Self-study Report to demonstrate the extent to which the program meets the ACEN Accreditation Standards and Criteria. The process of self-study represents the combined effort of the governing organization administrators, nursing education unit administrators, faculty, staff, 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.

Team Report: The visit team chairperson is responsible for presenting an accurate, complete and well-organized report to the ACEN one week after the conclusion of the site visit. Team members will provide the chairperson with comments and draft sections of the report. This report may be 20-40 pages long, and the evidence must be verified and clarified.

Substantive Change Report: Any program proposing a substantive change in the ownership or form of control, mission, program offerings, curriculum, credentials conferred, length of program, method of delivery, relocation or establishment of an additional location must report it to the ACEN and obtain prior approval. The process must be followed immediately after the proposed change has been approved internally by the governing organization, but no later than four months before the planned implementation date. Accompanying this notification, the program must include a detailed report for review that identifies the change, provides rationale for the change, and addresses each of the ACEN Standards and Criteria that are or may be impacted by this change.

Substantive changes requiring immediate notification of ACEN include change in BON's approval status; change in accreditation status of the governing organization; decline in program outcomes, including licensure or certification examination pass rates, job placement rates, job satisfaction, or program completion rates; a default rate in student loan program that exceeds the regulation; identified fraud in the program; or any communication related to an adverse federal action.

Initial Accreditation: Initial accreditation of a nursing program is granted when the program demonstrates compliance with all ACEN Accreditation Standards. The next review is in five years.

Communication: Communication is promoted by:

- Solicitation of comments on proposed new or revised policies from all interested parties;
- Report to constituents of the annual report findings (Report to Constituents and website) 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 education needs of programs and program evaluators as groups;
- Continue to identify and disseminate information in appropriate arenas regarding specific developmental needs for individual programs and program evaluators; and
- Continue to identify and disseminate information in appropriate arenas regarding areas in which change needs to be facilitated.

References

ACEN. (2013). 2013 edition: ACEN accreditation manual. Atlanta, GA: Author. Retrieved from, <http://acenursing.org/accreditation-manual/>

Personal Communication with Sharon Tanner, executive director, ACEN.

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National Council of State Boards of Nursing
111 E. Wacker Dr., Suite 2900 Chicago, IL 60601
312.525.3600 | Fax: 312.279.1032 | www.ncsbn.org