



Accreditation Update

Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing: Your Supportive Partner in Successful Nursing Accreditation



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ABSTRACT

In many nursing programs, there are a lot of new faculty members and new nurse administrators. These nurse educators are potentially preparing for their first accreditation visit since attaining their positions. Nurse educators may have questions about how to begin preparing for an initial accreditation visit or a reaccreditation visit. This article will provide information about the various resources available from the Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing to assist in the accreditation process and to be a supportive partner in nursing accreditation.

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Many nurse educators and leaders strive for a successful nursing accreditation site visit whether the program is seeking initial or continuing accreditation. The Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing (ACEN) is a supportive partner in this process and provides a variety of helpful resources, including access to the professional staff, self-study forums, program administrator workshops, and online resources. This article will clarify frequently asked questions related to initial accreditation support and provide information regarding two new support services that assist programs in a successful accreditation journey.

Initial ACEN Accreditation

Many new and existing nursing programs are interested in becoming ACEN accredited or are required by state regulatory agencies to achieve accreditation and have now started the journey toward accreditation. The ACEN professional staff are available by telephone or e-mail to answer questions regarding the candidacy process. As a supportive partner, the ACEN also provides guidelines and mentorship for programs seeking initial accreditation with the organization.

How does a program attain initial accreditation with the ACEN?

The candidacy process with the ACEN is essentially a three-step process. The first step of the process is to submit a candidacy application form. This form provides the ACEN with basic information about the program, the accreditation status of the governing organization, the status of the program with a state regulatory agency, such as a Board of Nursing, and other state regulatory agencies when applicable. Information about the organizational structure of the governing organization and nursing program is also a component of the candidacy application form. An ACEN professional staff member evaluates the program for eligibility to proceed with the candidacy process. Upon confirmation of eligibility, the program submits the candidacy application fee and an authorization for the candidacy process form. At that time, the ACEN will assign a member of the professional staff to be the program's mentor through the remainder of the candidacy process.

The second step of the process is the candidacy presentation. The program has up to 1 year to submit the candidacy presentation. The candidacy presentation is a "mini-Self-Study Report," which addresses selected Criteria in Standard 2 Faculty and Staff, Standard 4 Curriculum, Standard 5 Resources, and Standard 6 Outcomes. The presentation should include the narrative and supporting evidence to demonstrate current compliance with these selected criteria or the potential to be compliant within 2 years. Two professional staff members review the candidacy presentation and, based upon the information provided, determine whether the program moves to candidacy status or whether the program is deferred. A deferral simply means the presentation does not include sufficient information to verify compliance or the potential to be compliant within the candidacy timeframe. A deferred

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program may resubmit the candidacy presentation within 1 year without incurring any additional cost.

The program receives specific, individualized feedback from both professional staff reviewers regarding the information provided in the candidacy presentation. Working with the ACEN mentor, the program uses this feedback to modify the information about the selected criteria in the Self-Study Report or in the resubmission of the candidacy presentation.

Upon achieving candidacy status, the program will have 2 years to schedule an initial accreditation visit. The program will work with the ACEN Candidacy mentor and decide whether to schedule the visit as soon as possible or elect to wait. With an initial accreditation visit, the program must be able to demonstrate compliance with all six of the accreditation standards.

The third and final step of the candidacy process is preparing for and hosting an initial accreditation visit. As indicated, the program determines when this visit occurs within the 2-year candidacy timeframe. To initiate the visit, the program will submit an information form for accreditation site visit requesting the initial visit; this form is available approximately 18 months prior to the accreditation cycle. The application deadline for a Spring cycle is July 1st, and the deadline for a Fall cycle is March 1st. With this application and the initial visit, the program will incur additional costs, which are outlined in the Schedule of Accreditation Fees on the ACEN Web site. In preparation for an initial accreditation visit, the ACEN offers the program an opportunity to submit the narrative and supporting documents for one entire standard of its choice. A professional staff member will review this submission and provide feedback on that standard. This provides the faculty feedback that may be used to refine the standard prior to finalizing the Self-Study Report, which is due 6 weeks prior to the site visit. The ACEN professional staff will also provide an optional conference call to enable nurse administrators and faculty to ask questions about the initial accreditation visit, including questions related to effective preparation.

An initial accreditation site visit team is composed of at least three peer evaluators who spend a portion of 3 days on site reviewing the program. The purpose of this visit is to verify what is in the Self-Study Report, clarify any questions, and then amplify the answers within a site visit report. The onsite team makes a recommendation regarding initial accreditation for the program. This recommendation and the Self-Study Report to the evaluation review panel (ERP). The ERP is also composed of peer evaluators who conduct an independent review of the program's Self-Study Report and the team's site visit report; this group will make a recommendation regarding initial accreditation. The final step of the accreditation process is a review by the ACEN Board of Commissioners. This group reviews the Self-Study Report, the site visit report, and the recommendations of the onsite team and the ERP. The Board of Commissioners makes the decision to grant or deny initial accreditation for the program. Initial accreditation with the ACEN is for 5 years.

Is it true that programs must have a graduating class prior to seeking initial accreditation?

No, the program does not need to have a graduating class prior to seeking initial accreditation. In fact, the ACEN recommends that new programs seek initial accreditation prior to a class graduating. The program may schedule an initial accreditation visit in either the last academic term or the next to last academic term of the initial cohort. Therefore, with a successful initial accreditation visit, all current students benefit from graduating from an accredited program. Accreditation is not retroactive; therefore, programs are encouraged to begin the process early.

What if the program currently has a provisional status with the Board of Nursing, can the program begin the candidacy process with the ACEN?

A program that does not have full approval with the state regulatory agency that oversees the program is eligible to begin the candidacy process with the ACEN. However, the program is not eligible to schedule an initial accreditation visit unless the program has full approval. The governing organization must also hold accreditation with its accrediting agency to comply with ACEN Policy #3 Eligibility for Accreditation.

Since instituting the candidacy mentoring process in 2011 and refining it in 2012, the ACEN has had a 95% success rate with programs seeking initial accreditation with the organization. Programs considering accreditation are highly encouraged to speak with a professional staff member to answer any questions about this process.

New Services to Support Programs Seeking Continuing Accreditation

Given the success of mentoring during the candidacy process for programs seeking initial accreditation, the ACEN staff assessed the resources available to programs seeking continuing accreditation. As previously discussed, the ACEN offers a variety of resources to help programs meet their accreditation goals. These resources include forums, workshops, conference calls, and Web site resources, such as guidelines and templates. Despite these resources, some program faculty may find the preparation process overwhelming, particularly if they do not have prior accreditation experiences. The ACEN is committed to being a supportive partner and assisting programs with navigating the accreditation process. To this end, the ACEN created two new support services: the site visit observer opportunity and the advisory review.

ACEN Site Visit Observer Opportunity

The site visit observer immersion is a new ACEN service that provides insight into the site visit process. This opportunity is available for programs in candidacy seeking initial accreditation and currently accredited programs seeking continuing accreditation.

What are the benefits of serving as an ACEN Observer on a Site Visit Team?

There are several advantages to serving as an observer on a site visit team. The onsite observations and interactions are the most tangible benefits for observers as these observations and interactions underscore this unique learning opportunity. Site visit team observers “shadow” the peer evaluators on the site visit team by attending meetings with college and university presidents, vice presidents of academic affairs and student services, nursing faculty, general education faculty, and students. As such, the observer appraises the interactions of the peer evaluators and the governing organization's administration, faculty, staff, and students. Observers review processes, procedures, and guidelines from another governing organization, other state regulatory agencies, and the governing organization's accreditor, thereby expanding the observer's knowledge of state and regional educational guidelines for nursing programs.

During a site visit, observers attend classroom activities, tour clinical agencies, and educational facilities. Each of these observations and tours refines the observer's knowledge of various educational practices and settings. In addition, the observer has access to the nursing program's evidence room, which contains catalogs, handbooks, manuals, external constituency documents, nursing/governing organization's documents, meeting minutes, and course materials. A review of the documents in the program's evidence

room broadens the observer's understanding of the documentation needed to verify compliance with the ACEN Standards and Criteria.

Most importantly, all of these observations and interactions offer observers invaluable experiences starting with the peer evaluators' preparation and concluding with the exit meeting. In essence, the observer experience resembles a clinical component in a nursing course where the observer receives "hands-on" experiences utilizing cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains of learning. The observer immersion is a capstone, which prepares the observer for his or her ACEN site visit.

What are the requirements to be an observer on an ACEN accreditation visit?

Observers must read ACEN Policy #32 Observer On A Site Visit Team, complete an observer intake form, read and sign the observer acknowledgement form, submit his or her curriculum vitae, and complete the Peer Evaluator Online Orientation Program (2017). In addition, the observer is responsible for all expenses associated with the site visit (e.g., travel, lodging, meals, etc.). The observer is expected to make his or her own travel arrangements and to inform the host nursing program and site visit team chair regarding travel arrangements; the observer's travel arrangements should be aligned with the arrangements of the site visit team.

Will the observer experience offer any continuing education units?

Yes. When observers on ACEN site visit teams complete the Peer Evaluator Online Orientation Program (2017), they earn 5.75 continuing education units. The orientation consists of four modules, which includes information regarding the ACEN, preparation for the site visit, the ACEN Standards and Criteria, site visit logistics, site visit recommendations, and postsite visit processes.

ACEN Advisory Review

Another new opportunity to assist programs with a successful accreditation journey is an advisory review. This opportunity is primarily for programs seeking reaccreditation with the ACEN and provides an opportunity for a program to receive individualized feedback from a professional staff member.

What is an ACEN Advisory Review?

The purpose of an advisory review is to provide intensive assistance to an ACEN-accredited program preparing for the continuing accreditation process. An advisory review is an opportunity for more extensive support by the professional staff in an area of need that the program has identified. The recommended timeframe for an advisory review is

during the sixth or seventh year of the program's continuing accreditation or during the third or fourth year following the program's initial accreditation; however, the professional staff are happy to discuss the timing of the review based on individual program needs.

What does the advisory review include, and who should participate?

The program requests the review and identifies the focus points based on the specific needs of the program. The review may include an emphasis on process details, specific standards and criteria, or a review of draft documents. The review includes up to 4 hrs of in-person advisement and may include nursing faculty, the nurse administrator, staff, and even college administrators.

The professional staff can conduct an advisory review by teleconference, videoconference, or onsite, although it is important to note that an onsite review is not a mock site visit. Generally, the program will submit program documentation to the assigned professional staff member 3–4 weeks prior to the review. The documentation requested will be specific to the focus of the review. The professional staff member will then prepare feedback and guidance based on the individual program in relation to the ACEN Standards and Criteria. This feedback indicates the staff member's best judgment but does not guarantee that the Board of Commissioners will determine that the program complies with the ACEN Standards and Criteria.

For more information related to advisory reviews, please visit the Web site at <http://www.acenursing.org/acen-resources/>, e-mail us at advisoryreview@acenursing.org, or call the office at 1-404-975-5000.

Conclusion

The ACEN is a supportive partner available and committed to assisting nursing programs with initial accreditation or reaccreditation visits. The professional staff members are resources to nursing programs with any questions about the candidacy and accreditation process and about nursing education in general. The forums, workshops, online resources, and the new observer and advisory review options are also available to assist nursing programs. Programs are encouraged to take advantage of the resources available.

This will be a recurring column in *Teaching and Learning in Nursing*, and the ACEN invites individuals and/or programs to continue to submit questions they may have pertaining to accreditation. In future columns, the ACEN professional staff will respond to these questions and provide additional information about the accreditation process to promote transparency and assist all nurse educators and leaders in a better understanding of nursing accreditation. Please send questions to nard@acenursing.org.

For more information about the ACEN resources available, please visit the Web site: <http://www.acenursing.org/acen-resources/>, e-mail us at info@acenursing.org, or call the office at 1-404-975-5000.