ACCREDITATION MANUAL

Section I
General Information
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INTRODUCTION

MISSION

The Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing (ACEN) supports the interests of nursing education, nursing practice, and the public by the functions of accreditation. Accreditation is a voluntary, peer-review, self-regulatory process by which non-governmental associations recognize educational institutions or programs that have been found to meet or exceed standards and criteria for educational quality. Accreditation also assists in the further improvement of the institutions or programs as related to resources invested, processes followed, and results achieved. The monitoring of certificate, diploma, and degree offerings is tied closely to state examination and licensing rules and to the oversight of preparation for work in the profession.

PURPOSE

The purpose of the ACEN is to provide specialized accreditation for all types of nursing programs, including clinical doctorate, master’s/post-master’s certificate, baccalaureate, associate, diploma, and practical nursing programs. The ACEN accredits nursing programs in secondary, postsecondary, and hospital-based governing organizations that offer certificates, diplomas, or degrees.

GOALS

As the leading authority in nursing accreditation, the goal of ACEN is to strengthen quality of nursing education through a common core of standards and criteria that:

- Establishes supportive partnerships
- Advocates self-regulation
- Promotes peer review
- Fosters educational equity, access, opportunity, mobility, and preparation of employment.
- Serves as a Title IV-HEA Gatekeeper (These include some practical nursing and hospital-based nursing programs eligible to participate in programs administered by the United States Department of Education or other federal agencies.)

RECOGNITION

The ACEN is recognized as the accrediting body for all types of nursing education by:

- United States Department of Education (USDE)
- Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA)
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National, regional, and specialized accreditors that oversee federal funding eligibility must be reviewed by the USDE to ensure that the accrediting body meets specific standards established by Congress. The Secretary of Education for the USDE is charged with review of accrediting bodies and providing recognition to those accrediting agencies that meet the Secretary of Education’s criteria. Students in institutions or programs accredited by a USDE-recognized agency are eligible for federal financial aid assistance and other needed resources.

BENEFITS OF ACCREDITATION

ACEN accreditation is a voluntary peer-review process intended to enhance quality improvement in nursing education. Accreditation:

- Heightens faculty members' and administrators’ awareness and responsiveness to areas needing improvement.
- Aids in student recruitment.
- Provides useful information for career and education decision making.
- Enables student eligibility for funding support from federal and state agencies, and foundations.
- Is required by many nursing programs for admission to the graduate level.
- Is required by some state regulatory agencies.
- Assists employers seeking graduates who are competent practitioners.
- Offers professional development opportunity and validation for faculty.
- Facilitates the transfer of credit using the following considerations:
  - the educational quality of the institution from which the student transfers;
  - the comparability of the nature, content, and level of credit earned from the programs offered by the receiving college or program; and
  - the appropriateness and applicability of the credit earned from the programs offered by the receiving college in light of the student’s educational goals.

PHILOSOPHY OF ACCREDITATION

The ACEN accreditation program is founded on the belief that specialized accreditation contributes to the centrality of nursing for the public good and provides for the maintenance and enhancement of educational quality through continuous self-assessment, planning, and improvement. Accreditation indicates to the general public and to the educational community that a nursing program has clear and appropriate educational objectives and is working to achieve these objectives. Emphasis is placed upon the total nursing program and its compliance with established standards and criteria in the context of its mission/philosophy as well as current and future nursing practice.

Accrediting agencies share responsibility with faculty and clinicians for the development of accreditation standards and criteria, policies, and procedures for participation in accreditation and review of accreditation processes. The ACEN supports the continuation and strengthening of voluntary specialized accreditation by peers as a principal means of public accountability and ongoing improvement. Specialized accreditation sets standards for programs and ensures, through the self-study process and accreditation review, the promotion of effective education and program improvement. Because the nursing education unit analysis is closely related to the
governing organization itself, ACEN activities will, when possible, be coordinated with those of other officially recognized regional and specialized accrediting bodies.

Standards and criteria for accreditation, materials that document compliance, policies, and procedures are based on principles widely accepted and tested in general and professional education. All those involved in the process must be aware of current developments in education and nursing; the effectiveness of the current standards, criteria, policies, and procedures; and the evidence of need for change. A systematic ongoing review of all components of the accreditation process is essential to ensure an up-to-date, reliable, and valid accrediting process.

**ACEN AND THE HISTORY OF NURSING ACCREDITATION**

1893  The American Society of Superintendents of Training Schools for Nurses, forerunner of the National League for Nursing, was founded for the purpose of establishing and maintaining a universal standard of training for nurses.

1917  The National League of Nursing Education published *Standard of Curriculum for Schools of Nursing*.

1920  Accrediting activities in nursing education were begun by many different organizations.

1937  The National League of Nursing Education published *A Curriculum Guide for Schools of Nursing*, the last of its type by the organization.

1938  The National League of Nursing Education initiated accreditation for programs of nursing education for registered nursing.

1938  The National Nursing Accrediting Service was formed for the purpose of unifying accreditation activities in nursing. It was discontinued in 1952 when accreditation activities were consolidated under the National League for Nursing (NLN).

1952  The USDE recognized the NLN (later NLNAC and then ACEN) and included it on the initial list of recognized accrediting agencies.

1958  The NLN Board of Directors established a policy charging each educational council with the responsibility for developing its own accreditation program. The program was conducted through the three (3) NLN membership units: the Council of Baccalaureate and Higher Degree Programs; the Council of Diploma and Associate Degree Programs (the Diploma and Associate Degree Programs separated into two (2) councils in 1965); and the Council of Practical Nursing Programs (1966). The accreditation program and services were administered by NLN professional staff.

1964  Federal funding for nursing education under the Nurse Training Act was contingent upon the compliance of schools of nursing with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

1977  The Council on Postsecondary Accreditation (COPA) recognized the NLN Accreditation Program, which later became the Council for Recognition of Postsecondary Accreditation (CORPA).

1991  Outcome criteria were incorporated into Standards and Criteria for all accredited programs.

1995  The NLN Board of Governors approved the recommendation of the NLN Accreditation Committee to institute core Standards and Criteria.
1996 The NLN Board of Governors approved establishment of an independent entity within the organization to be known as the National League for Nursing Accrediting Commission (NLNAC).

1997 The NLNAC, now the Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing (ACEN), began operations with sole authority and accountability for carrying out the responsibilities inherent in the accreditation processes.

Fifteen (15) Commissioners were appointed: nine (9) nurse educators, three (3) nursing service representatives, and three (3) public members. The Commissioners assumed responsibilities for the management, financial decisions, policy-making, and general administration of the NLNAC.

The peer review process was strengthened with the formation of program-specific Evaluation Review Panels.

1998 The NLNAC continued collaborative work with specialty organizations to strengthen application of standards for advanced practice nursing programs. Advanced practice nurses were invited to serve as clinicians on the site visit teams.

1999 The NLNAC core Standards and Criteria were revised.

The Secretary of Education, USDE, renewed NLNAC recognition as a nationally recognized accrediting agency for nursing education programs and schools, both postsecondary and higher degree, which offer a certificate, diploma, or a recognized professional degree including master’s, baccalaureate, associate, diploma, and practical nursing programs in the United States and its territories. Title IV Note: Only diploma programs and practical nursing programs not located in a regionally accredited college or university may use accreditation by this agency to establish eligibility to participate in Title IV program.

2000 The NLNAC first accredited international programs.

2001 The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) renewed NLNAC recognition as a nationally recognized accrediting agency for nursing education.

The NLNAC was incorporated as a subsidiary of the NLN.

2002 The NLNAC core Standards and Criteria were revised.

The Secretary of Education, USDE, renewed NLNAC recognition as a nationally recognized accrediting agency for nursing education programs and schools, both postsecondary and higher degree, which offer a certificate, diploma, or a recognized professional degree including master’s, baccalaureate, associate, diploma, and practical nursing programs in the United States and its territories. Title IV Note: Only diploma programs and practical nursing programs not located in a regionally accredited college or university may use accreditation by this agency to establish eligibility to participate in Title IV program.

2005 The NLNAC core Standards and Criteria were revised.

The NLNAC first accredited Post-Master’s Certificates (PMC).

The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) renewed NLNAC recognition as a nationally recognized accrediting agency for nursing education.

2006 The Secretary of Education, USDE, renewed NLNAC recognition as a nationally recognized accrediting agency for nursing education programs and schools, both postsecondary and higher degree, which offer a certificate, diploma, or a recognized
professional degree including master’s, baccalaureate, associate, diploma, and practical nursing programs in the United States and its territories. Title IV Note: Only diploma programs and practical nursing programs not located in a regionally accredited college or university may use accreditation by this agency to establish eligibility to participate in Title IV program.

2007 The NLNAC Standards and Criteria for Clinical Doctorate approved by the NLNAC Board of Commissioners.

2008 The NLNAC core Standards and Criteria were revised.

The Secretary of Education, USDE, granted expansion of scope of recognition as a nationally recognized accrediting agency for nursing education programs and schools, both postsecondary and higher degree, which offer a certificate, diploma, or a recognized professional degree including master’s, baccalaureate, associate, diploma, and practical nursing programs in the United States and its territories, including those offered via distance education.

2009 The NLNAC first accredited Clinical Doctorate programs.

2011 The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) renewed NLNAC recognition as a nationally recognized accrediting agency for nursing education.

2012 The Secretary of Education, USDE, renewed ACEN recognition and granted expansion of scope of recognition as a nationally recognized accrediting agency for nursing education programs and schools, both postsecondary and higher degree, which offer a certificate, diploma, or a recognized professional degree including clinical doctorate, master’s, baccalaureate, associate, diploma, and practical nursing programs in the United States and its territories, including those offered via distance education. Title IV Note: Practical, diploma, associate, baccalaureate, and higher degree nursing education programs that are not located in a regionally accredited institutions may use accreditation by this agency to establish eligibility to participate in Title IV programs.


The NLNAC implements mentoring for Candidate programs.

2013 The NLNAC core Standards and Criteria were revised.

The name of the Commission was changed to the Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing (ACEN).

2015 The ACEN endorses academic progression programs in nursing in cooperation with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Academic Progression in Nursing (APIN) program and the Future of Nursing: Campaign for Action.

2016 The Secretary of Education, USDE, renewed ACEN recognition as a nationally recognized accrediting agency for nursing education programs and schools, both postsecondary and higher degree, which offer a certificate, diploma, or a recognized professional degree including clinical doctorate, master’s, baccalaureate, associate, diploma, and practical nursing programs in the United States and its territories, including those offered via distance education. Title IV Note: Practical, diploma, associate, baccalaureate, and higher degree nursing education programs that are not located in a regionally accredited institutions may use accreditation by this agency to establish eligibility to participate in Title IV programs.
The ACEN endorses 5th Edition of the National Task Force Guidelines for Evaluation of Nurse Practitioner Programs.

The ACEN Board of Commissioners approve the offering of Advisory Reviews.

The ACEN Board of Commissioners approve Observers on site visit teams (Policy #31).

2017 The ACEN core Standards and Criteria were revised.
The ACEN first accredited DNP Specialist Certificates.

PRODUCTS AND SERVICES

- Initial accreditation and continuing accreditation site visits of approximately 150-200 nursing programs per year
- Continuous monitoring of more than 1,200 programs per year
- ACEN Accreditation Manual
  - General Information
  - Policies
  - Standards and Criteria/Glossary
- ACEN Directory of Accredited Nursing Programs (electronic database)
- Bridges (electronic newsletter)
- Forums/Workshops
  - Self-Study
  - Peer Evaluator
  - Team Chair
  - Nurse Administrator
- Candidacy Program
- Advisory Review Program
- Observer Program
- Mentoring by Professional Staff
- Report to Constituents
  - Analysis of ACEN Annual Reports
  - Analysis of Accreditation Cycles
- ACEN website: [www.acenursing.org](http://www.acenursing.org)

ACEN ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE
THE COMMISSION

OVERALL STRUCTURE OF THE COMMISSION

The ACEN is governed by a 15-member Board of Commissioners. The Commissioners are elected by the representatives of ACEN-accredited nursing programs. The legal basis for the foundation and structure of the Commission is outlined in the Bylaws and the Articles of Incorporation. The ACEN is incorporated under the laws of the state of New York.

BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS

- Nine (9) Commissioners are nurse educators representing ACEN-accredited programs, three (3) Commissioners represent the public, and three (3) Commissioners represent nursing service.
- Commissioners are diversified and ensure balanced representation from across identified constituencies insofar as possible.
- No Governor, officer, or employee of the NLN or its subsidiaries, or employee of the ACEN may serve as a Commissioner.
- The Board of Commissioners sets accreditation policy and makes accreditation, administrative, budget, and policy decisions.
- Commissioners serve as chairpersons of the program-specific Evaluation Review Panels.
- Decision of accreditation status is made by the Commissioners based on review of program materials, the Site Visit Report/Focused Visit Report/Follow-Up Visit Report, and the recommendation of the Evaluation Review Panel.

Names, credentials, and affiliations of Commissioners are available online at www.acenursing.org/acen-board-of-commissioners/.

ACEN STAFF

The ACEN staff maintain operational functions of the office and support the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Board of Commissioners, and nursing programs. Names and credentials of staff are available online at www.acenursing.org/acen-staff-3.
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GENERAL INFORMATION

ACCREDITATION STANDARDS AND CRITERIA FOR ACADEMIC QUALITY OF POSTSECONDARY AND HIGHER DEGREE PROGRAMS IN NURSING

ACEN ACCREDITATION STANDARDS

STANDARD 1
Mission and Administrative Capacity
The mission of the nursing education unit reflects the governing organization's core values and is congruent with its mission/goals. The governing organization and program have administrative capacity resulting in effective delivery of the nursing program and achievement of identified outcomes.

STANDARD 2
Faculty and Staff
Qualified and credentialed faculty are sufficient in number to ensure the achievement of the end-of-program student learning outcomes and program outcomes. Sufficient and qualified staff are available to support the nursing program.

STANDARD 3
Students
Student policies and services support the achievement of the end-of-program student learning outcomes and program outcomes of the nursing program.

STANDARD 4
Curriculum
The curriculum supports the achievement of the end-of-program student learning outcomes and program outcomes and is consistent with safe practice in contemporary healthcare environments.

STANDARD 5
Resources
Fiscal, physical, and learning are sustainable and sufficient to ensure the achievement of the end-of-program student learning outcomes and program outcomes of the nursing program achievement of the goals and outcomes of the nursing education unit.

STANDARD 6
Outcomes
Program evaluation demonstrates that students have achieved each end-of-program student learning outcome and each program outcome.

ACEN DEFINITION OF QUALITY
The core values of accreditation emphasize learning, community, responsibility, integrity, value, quality, and continuous improvement through reflection and analysis. They require the nursing program to measure itself by exacting standards, honor high aspiration and achievement, and expect all persons associated with the program to recognize their responsibility to provide a supportive and humane environment in which people interact with each other in a spirit of cooperation, openness, and mutual respect.
Peer review is a long-established and effective component of program evaluation in educational settings. It is used to help determine which programs to accredit. Peer reviewers are familiar with the current thinking in the various program types, understand the curriculum rules and conventions, and are trained to identify program compliance with the ACEN Standards and Criteria.

Program-specific expertise is preserved at the point of documentation, program evaluation conducted by peers from like programs at the time of the site visit, during Evaluation Review Panel deliberations, and upon appeal.

Quality in education ensures high levels of opportunity for student learning and achievement. Accreditation is an affirmation of values central to thinking about postsecondary and higher education: appropriate mission, organizational structures, processes, and functions; resources aligned with core values; collegiality; and continuous self-improvement.

The ACEN accredits all types of nursing education programs in a variety of postsecondary and higher education settings including vocational-technical agencies, hospitals, for-profit institutions, professional schools, seminaries, colleges, universities, and other institutions that offer diplomas, certificates, and/or academic degrees.

UNDERSTANDING STANDARDS AND CRITERIA IN THE EVALUATION OF NURSING EDUCATION UNITS

The singular function of nursing is the improvement of the human condition. Each certificate, diploma, or degree has an identifiable, discrete set of specific end-of-program student learning outcomes and program outcomes. Postsecondary and higher education provide for the development of learners' ability to think for themselves, master analytical problem-solving, apply scientific knowledge, and make value judgments within the context of the specific program type. Thus, education requires a broad academic orientation and depth and breadth of intellectual skills translated into competencies so as to fulfill nursing's functions in all types of nursing.

**Standard** – Agreed-upon expectations to measure quantity, extent, value, and educational quality.

**Criteria** – Statements that identify the elements that need to be examined in evaluation of a Standard.

The current version of the Accreditation Standards and Criteria becomes effective on the Commission’s approval date. Programs scheduled for review within 12 months of revision of the Standards and Criteria may elect to use the current or former version of the Standards and Criteria.

ACCREDITATION PROCESSES AND PROCEDURES

PLANNING FOR ACCREDITATION

Nursing program(s) considering accreditation should contact the ACEN to begin the candidacy process. As part of this process, nursing program(s) will be assigned a member of the professional staff as their mentor. The mentoring service is provided to facilitate faculty self-review and planning. The nurse administrator, faculty of the program, and administrative officers
of the governing organization determine when the program is ready to apply for candidacy and the initial accreditation visit. The decision should be based on an in-depth self-study of the program in relation to the ACEN Standards and Criteria. When the ACEN Commission grants accreditation to a program, all students who graduated during or after the accreditation cycle* during which the initial site visit was performed will be recognized as graduates of an accredited nursing program.

Note: Initial accreditation is effective as of the accreditation cycle in which the Board of Commissioners grants initial accreditation. **Accreditation is not retroactive for students who graduated prior to the semester/quarter/term in which the initial accreditation site visit occurred.**

*Fall Cycle: July 1 to December 31  
Spring Cycle: January 1 to June 30

**OVERVIEW OF THE EVALUATION 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 peer evaluators
- Site Visit Report
- Staff review of Site Visit Report
- Evaluation Review Panel with program-specific peer evaluators
- Commission accreditation decision
- Appeal Panel (when appropriate)

The ACEN process for the evaluation of nursing 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 Visit Report. In the third step, an Evaluation Review Panel examines the reports written by and about the program (Self-Study Report and Site Visit Report). The final step is a review of the process and the accreditation status decision determined by the ACEN Board of Commissioners.

**CANDIDACY PROCESS**

A nursing program seeking initial accreditation must apply for candidacy. Candidate status is granted after the ACEN professional staff review the nursing program’s potential to achieve ACEN accreditation. Programs applying for initial accreditation will be assigned an ACEN professional staff member once they have begun the candidacy process. A program seeking accreditation must:

1. Complete **Candidacy Eligibility Form** for candidacy. After eligibility has been confirmed, submit payment for the **required fee**. See Schedule of Accreditation Fees available on the ACEN website ([www.acenursing.org](http://www.acenursing.org)) under Resources for Nursing Programs.
2. Provide evidence of current approval from the state regulatory agency for nursing and the governing organization's accreditation/approval status (where appropriate) is a requirement of this component of the process.
3. Submit a narrative **Candidacy Presentation** that includes:
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- Faculty academic and experiential qualifications;
- The curriculum/program of study;
- Information regarding the fiscal, physical, and learning resources;
- The systematic plan of evaluation; and
- Catalog (where appropriate).

See Guidelines for Candidacy Presentation available on the ACEN website (www.acenursing.org) under Resources for Nursing Programs.

All materials submitted are reviewed by the ACEN professional staff. Applicants are notified if approved for candidate status or given a deferral. A program that has achieved candidate status must complete the accreditation process within two (2) years by scheduling an initial accreditation site visit. Candidate status does not guarantee that a program will achieve initial accreditation. If deferred, the program has up to one (1) year to resubmit the Candidacy Presentation for reconsideration without incurring an additional fee. Upon resubmission, the program is either granted candidacy or disapproved. Disapproval occurs when the program has not provided sufficient evidence of the ability to become compliant with the ACEN Standards and Criteria during the candidacy period.

Programs that have achieved candidate status may indicate the following to potential students and interested members of the public:

“This nursing education program is a candidate for accreditation by the Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing.’’

If a program’s candidacy expires prior to scheduling an initial accreditation site visit, then the program must restart the candidacy process to renew its candidacy status. The candidacy process can be restarted at any time after either being disapproved or when the program’s candidacy has expired.

*Additional information related to the preparation of the Candidacy Presentation is available online at www.acenursing.org.

INITIAL ACCREDITATION

A governing organization that offers a program not previously accredited by the ACEN initiates the Candidacy process through its chief executive officer and nurse administrator. The chief executive officer of the governing organization for the nursing program/nursing education unit as well as the nurse administrator must authorize the ACEN to conduct the accreditation process by submitting the Official Authorization for Candidacy Process Form. Once candidacy status has been achieved, the chief executive officer of the governing organization and the nurse administrator must authorize the scheduling of the initial accreditation visit using the Information Form For Accreditation Site Visit. A program seeking initial accreditation must achieve candidacy status prior to scheduling the initial accreditation visit. (See section on Candidacy Process above)

A nursing program may discontinue the initial accreditation process up to 12 weeks prior to the date of the site visit. Changes within 12 weeks of the scheduled site visit will result in the program being responsible for all expenses incurred for the site visit. A program seeking initial accreditation can also withdraw from the process at any point prior to being reviewed by the Board of Commissioners.
NOTE:

In order for the ACEN to properly discharge its responsibilities to the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) pursuant to 34 CFR Section 602.28, an applicant for candidacy must certify that neither the governing organization nor the nursing program is the subject of:

1. A pending or final action brought by a State agency to suspend, revoke, withdraw, or terminate the institution’s legal authority to provide postsecondary education in the State;
2. A decision by a recognized agency to deny accreditation or pre-accreditation;
3. A pending or final action brought by a recognized accrediting agency to suspend, revoke, withdraw, or terminate the institution’s accreditation or pre-accreditation; or
4. Probation or an equivalent status imposed by a recognized agency.

The program will be required to certify this information at the time that Official Authorization for Candidacy Process Form is signed and again when the program applies for the initial accreditation visit. Information submitted by the program will be kept confidential and will only be utilized by the ACEN in its report to the USDE as required. The information provided by the governing organization/nursing program will not be utilized in determining the program’s candidacy or its initial accreditation with the ACEN. The achievement of a Candidate status as well as achieving initial accreditation will be based upon the program’s ability to demonstrate compliance with the current ACEN Standards and Criteria.

CONTINUING ACCREDITATION

Planning for continuing accreditation is an ongoing process. A program must be visited and re-evaluated at specified intervals to ensure continuing compliance with the Accreditation Standards and Criteria. The ACEN staff notify the program of a pending visit approximately one (1) year in advance. Dates for the site visit are scheduled in consultation with the nurse administrator, as the program must be in full operation during the visit.

Official authorization to conduct the ACEN accreditation process is secured from the chief executive officer of the governing organization and the nurse administrator for the nursing program. The Information Form for Accreditation Site Visit is available on the ACEN website for the program to complete approximately one (1) year before the visit is to take place.

If an ACEN-accredited program seeks to delay or reschedule a visit, refer to Policy #6 Delay/Advancement of Continuing Accreditation Visit. If an ACEN-accredited program seeks to voluntarily withdraw from ACEN accreditation refer to Policy #7 Voluntary Withdrawal from ACEN Accreditation. Per Policy #7 the ACEN will deem as a voluntary withdrawal from accreditation any refusal or failure of an accredited program to submit required information or any refusal or failure of an accredited program to pay its fees and expenses when due. See ACEN Policy #6 and #7 on the ACEN website (www.acenursing.org) under Resources for Nursing Programs, Accreditation Manual, Section II - Policies.
ASSISTANCE

The ACEN professional staff are available to assist programs preparing for accreditation site visits.

Self-Study Forums are offered annually to provide information about the accreditation processes and details regarding the preparation of the Self-Study Report. All programs seeking initial accreditation are encouraged to attend a Self-Study Forum; programs planning a continuing accreditation site visit are also encouraged to attend a Forum. Dates and locations are posted on the ACEN website: www.acenursing.org.

Advisory Review is a one-time opportunity for an ACEN-accredited program to receive feedback from an ACEN professional staff member assigned to the Advisory Review regarding draft accreditation documents as the program prepares for a continuing accreditation visit. Examples of documents could include the Self-Study Report, faculty profile table, or systematic evaluation plan. This is an optional resource for currently accredited programs and is not a requirement for continuing accreditation. Professional staff 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. An advisory review may be conducted in one (1) of three (3) formats, which include teleconference, videoconference, or in-person. Additional information about this service is accessible on the ACEN website, including the fee for an Advisory Review. See Schedule of Accreditation Fees available on the ACEN website (www.acenursing.org) under Resources for Nursing Programs. The Advisory Review is not a mock visit.

Observer Opportunities provide a nursing program with the opportunity to send a faculty member on an accreditation visit as an observer. This typically occurs one (1) year to 18 months prior to an upcoming accreditation visit. The opportunity enables the faculty member to observe the site visit process, including team preparation and orientation, prior to having the experience. A nursing program submits a request to have an observer on an upcoming visit to a nursing program who has consented to have an observer. The governing organization for the observer is responsible for all costs of the observer in this experience. See ACEN Policy #32 Observer on Site Visit Team on the ACEN website (www.acenursing.org) under Resources for Nursing Programs, Accreditation Manual, Section II - Policies.

SELF-REVIEW AND SELF-STUDY REPORT

Any program preparing for accreditation must submit a Self-Study Report to demonstrate the extent to which the program meets the ACEN Accreditation Standards and Criteria. The Self-Study Report is submitted a minimum of six (6) weeks prior to the scheduled accreditation site visit.

The process of self-study represents the combined efforts of the governing organization administrators, nursing program administrators, faculty, staff, students, and other individuals concerned with the nursing program(s). All those associated with the program(s) should participate in the self-study process. Broad participation leads to an understanding of the total program.

The Self-Study Report is a primary document used by the site visit team, the Evaluation Review Panel, and the Board of Commissioners to understand the nursing program.
The report must be based on the ACEN Accreditation Standards and Criteria in effect at the time of review and the most recent edition of the ACEN Accreditation Manual. Accreditation Standards and Criteria become effective on the Commission's approval date. Programs scheduled for review within 12 months of revision of the Standards and Criteria may elect to use the current or the former version of the Standards and Criteria.

Faculty and administrators are responsible for presenting narrative and evidence that clearly indicates how the Standards and Criteria are being met. Members of the site visit team will use the Self-Study Report in preparation for their visit to the program.

Guidelines for the Preparation of the Self-Study Report are available online at www.acenursing.org under the Resources tab/Resources for Nursing Programs.

THE SITE VISIT

The purpose of the accreditation site visit is to evaluate the nursing education unit by clarifying, verifying, and amplifying program materials as presented in the Self-Study Report. Based on these data, the site visit team will make a recommendation relative to the accreditation status of the nursing program(s).

The onsite visit is an essential part of the accreditation process. It gives the program(s) an opportunity to demonstrate and highlight information presented in the Self-Study Report and provides for interaction among all concerned: administrators, faculty, students, staff, and peer evaluators. In addition, the onsite visit allows peer evaluators an opportunity to see the nursing program(s) first-hand. The peer evaluators conduct an independent analysis and make professional judgments on the program's compliance with the Standards and Criteria; the findings are documented in the Site Visit Report. The peer evaluators verify congruence between the Self-Study Report and the actual practices of the program(s) so that the members of the Evaluation Review Panel and Board of Commissioners have a clear and complete understanding of the program(s).

Multiple Nursing Programs Within a Nursing Education Unit

The ACEN encourages nursing education units offering more than one (1) type of nursing program (clinical doctorate, master's, baccalaureate, associate, diploma, and/or practical) to request that all programs be reviewed for accreditation at the same time. The nursing education unit will prepare one (1) Self-Study Report.

Collaborative and Coordinated Site Visits With Other Agencies

The ACEN welcomes the opportunity to cooperate with other accreditation and approval-granting agencies. The goal is to increase efficiency and decrease faculty workload while maximizing outcomes. Two (2) options are available: the collaborative and the coordinated visit.

To arrange either a collaborative or coordinated visit, the nurse administrator initiates the process by submitting a request to the ACEN. The staff then works with the nursing education unit to achieve their goal.

Collaborative Visit

The collaborative visit involves the establishment of one (1) site visit team that incorporates representatives from the ACEN and the other accreditation or approval-granting agency. Using the standards and criteria from both agencies, the program prepares one (1) Self-Study
Report. A single agenda is established for the visit. At the conclusion of the site visit, the representatives of each agency on the visit team write individual reports that assess compliance with their respective standards and criteria or regulations.

Coordinated Visit
For a coordinated visit, the program prepares materials separately for each agency team. The two (2) teams share an agenda and conduct a site visit that meets each agency's requirements. However, the representative from another agency is not a member of the ACEN site visit team. The ACEN team and the other representative may participate jointly in such activities as conferences with faculty, students, and other groups. Many of the activities of the ACEN team and the representative will be carried out separately as the purposes of ACEN accreditation may differ from those of other accrediting/approval-granting bodies. At the conclusion of the visit, each visit team develops a report that assesses compliance with its standards and criteria or regulations.

Length of Visit
Accreditation visits are typically scheduled for a minimum of three (3) days. However, the length depends on several factors, including size and complexity of the nursing program, geographical locations of the various resources used for student learning experiences, the number of nursing programs involved, and coordination of the visit with other agencies. Correspondence from the ACEN will indicate the inclusive dates of the visit.

Assignment of Site Visit Team
Each site visit is conducted by a team of nursing educators with program-specific expertise and, when appropriate a clinician. A site visit team for review of a single program typically has a minimum of three (3) members. Graduate programs offering advanced practice nursing options will have at least one (1) team member with current advanced practice certification.

The ACEN staff will select a team and notify the nurse administrator in advance of the visit. The nurse administrator is invited to contact ACEN staff if a possible conflict of interest is identified among team members. If a team member becomes ineligible or unable to serve, another peer evaluator with comparable qualifications will be appointed.

The ACEN staff will assign peer evaluators considering their expertise with multiple program factors, including but not limited to:
- Program type(s)
- Size of program(s) and governing organization
- Method(s) of program delivery
- Carnegie classification
- Setting (urban, suburban, or rural)
- State
- Governance of the governing organization (public, private, religious affiliation, etc.)

Team Chairperson
A peer evaluator is eligible to be a team chairperson for an accreditation visit after serving in the role of team member a minimum of three (3) times.

Responsibilities of the Team Chairperson
The team chairperson assumes the following responsibilities:
- Acts as official spokesperson for the team
- Reviews all content of the ACEN accreditation information packet upon receipt
• Coordinates planning with the team members
• Conducts the team orientation and subsequent team meetings and conferences
• Receives and reviews the electronic files from the nurse administrator listing information on all individuals and groups interviewed by the team and all documents reviewed in the evidence room
• Allocates responsibilities for various activities to ensure optimum utilization of team members and adequate coverage of all areas during the visit, including interviews and conferences with key personnel on and off campus
• Requests additional information as necessary
• Notifies the nurse administrator of the arrival of the team and plans the time for the first meeting
• Conducts periodic conferences with the nurse administrator
• Arranges for the exit meeting with the nurse administrator and any persons the nurse administrator invites to be present
• Collates and edits the Site Visit Report to ensure completeness and clarity
• E-mails the completed Site Visit Report to the ACEN within one (1) week following the site visit
• Is available for telephone contact by the Evaluation Review Panel at the time of the program’s review
• Assumes the additional responsibilities stated under “Responsibilities of the Team Members”

Responsibilities of the Team Members
The team member assumes the following responsibilities.

When the ACEN accreditation information packet is received:
• Reviews all content of the packet

When the materials from the program are received:
• Reviews all materials
• Prepares a draft copy of the Site Visit Report/Follow-Up Visit Report/Focused Visit Report findings and submits draft to the team chair for areas as assigned
• Makes a list of findings from the Self-Study Report/ Follow-Up Report that require additional verification, amplification, or verification at the time of the site visit

Upon arrival at the site:
• Assumes responsibility to collect data cooperatively and make observations
• Further develops Site Visit Report/ Follow-Up Visit Report/ Focused Visit Report based on findings of the onsite visit
• Participates in the exit meeting with the nurse administrator and any persons invited to be present
After the visit:
- Retains a copy of the Self-Study Report, Catalog, Site Visit Report/Follow-Up Visit Report/Focused Visit Report, and any other resource materials used/developed during the site visit until the Commission’s decision is finalized
- Reviews materials in preparation for contact by the Evaluation Review Panel
- Is available for telephone contact by the Evaluation Review Panel at the time of the program’s review

Responsibilities of the Nursing Program
- Provides the team chair with an electronic file that lists the names, credentials, and titles of individuals and group members interviewed by the peer evaluators onsite
- Provides the team chair with an electronic file listing all documents available in the evidence room by defined category
- Provides computers and printer(s) for the team to use throughout the visit
- Establishes a room in which materials for the peer evaluators are assembled, where the team can read and work during the period of the visit
- Obtains any necessary written permissions required prior to the visit (e.g., review of records and visits to clinical agencies)
- Assembles the following materials in the evidence room:
  - Annual reports to the administration of the governing organization and to the state regulatory agency for nursing
  - Budgets
  - Class and clinical schedules for the current academic term
  - Complete course syllabi, outlines, and materials, including samples of examinations and evaluation forms
  - Faculty handbook
  - Faculty curricula vitae
  - Minutes of faculty and committee meetings for the past two (2) to three (3) years
  - Most recent accrediting agency report and approval letter for the governing organization
  - Results of standardized tests, licensure examinations, and/or certification examinations
  - Most recent state regulatory agency for nursing report(s) to the program and approval letter
  - Samples of student and faculty projects
  - Student handbook
  - Clinical agency contracts
  - Data/evidence to support the systematic evaluation plan
  - Other materials the faculty deem essential to the peer evaluators’ understanding of the nursing education unit and its program(s)

These materials will be used during the visit and left with the nursing program upon completion of the visit. Peer evaluators will ask to review records of faculty, students, and recent graduates. The student records include both academic and financial aid. These records will be reviewed in the offices where they are filed.

Programs for which all or part of the curriculum is delivered in a language other than English should make provisions for an interpreter to be present throughout the site visit and to make certain that all program documents are available in English for review by the site visitors.
Additional information related to the materials for the evidence room is available online at www.acenursing.org.

Visit Arrangements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Nursing Education Unit</th>
<th>Peer Evaluators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lodging</td>
<td>Nurse administrator will make hotel reservations for the peer evaluators and notify the team chair.</td>
<td>Individual peer evaluators will pay for the hotel accommodations and be reimbursed by the ACEN.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Each peer evaluator is to have a separate hotel room in close proximity to each other; availability of restaurant facilities is essential.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The program is responsible for additional housing costs above $150.00 per night unless approved by the ACEN.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Travel</td>
<td>The program is responsible for arrangements for all ground transportation such as transportation to and from the airport/hotel.</td>
<td>All persons traveling on ACEN business are expected to use common carriers (economy/coach class or equivalent rates).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Any intra-visit travel expenses and arrangements are also the responsibility of the program.</td>
<td>Reservations, whether by air, bus, or train, are to be reserved and purchased through the ACEN-designated travel agency and in advance of the site visit per the timeframe noted in the ACEN travel policy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>A written request to use a personal automobile is required in advance of the visit.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Food</td>
<td></td>
<td>Food during the visit is the responsibility of each peer evaluator and will be reimbursed by the ACEN after the visit based on current ACEN travel policy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fees</td>
<td>The ACEN will invoice the program according to the prevailing fee schedule prior to the accreditation visit.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Payment is required prior to the visit, or the accreditation visit will be canceled.</td>
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**Agenda for the Visit**

At least six (6) weeks prior to the scheduled visit, a tentative agenda for the visit is prepared by the nursing program/nursing education unit and sent to the team chairperson along with a copy of the class and clinical laboratory schedules and the completed technology assessment form. Activities typically planned to take place during the visit include for all locations and methods of delivery:

- Preliminary, interim, and closing meetings with the nurse administrator (and assistants)
- Meetings with:
  - faculty
  - administrative officers of the governing organization
  - nursing students
  - general education faculty (as appropriate)
the public for third-party comments
student support service personnel
nursing service personnel (as appropriate)

- Visits to:
  - appropriate on-campus and off-campus facilities and resources
  - selected clinical agencies to observe and meet with students

- Review of:
  - curricular and other materials prepared by the faculty
  - appropriate records of faculty, students, and recent graduates
  - additional data to clarify and amplify the Self-Study Report

- Classroom and clinical observations for on-campus and off-campus locations and methods of delivery:

**Visiting Off-Site Location(s) of the Nursing Program**
Prior to the visit, programs with branch campuses or off-campus instructional sites must discuss with the team chairperson alternative methods for the visiting team to evaluate additional locations on which the program is offered. If locations are more than one (1) hour apart in driving distance, the nurse administrator should communicate with the ACEN professional staff regarding visits to the additional locations.

**THE SITE VISIT REPORT**

The site visit team chairperson is responsible for presenting an accurate, complete, and well-organized Site Visit Report/Follow-Up Visit Report/Focused Visit Report to the ACEN one (1) week after the conclusion of the site visit. Team members review the final report prior to submission to the ACEN.

Additional information related to the preparation of the Site Visit Report is available online for peer evaluators as well as the nursing program/nursing education unit at [www.acenursing.org](http://www.acenursing.org).

**ACEN Staff Review**
All Site Visit Reports/Follow-Up Visit Reports/Focused Visit Reports are reviewed by the ACEN professional staff. If questions arise, the team chairperson is contacted for clarification.

A draft copy of the Site Visit Report/Follow-Up Visit Report/Focused Visit Report is emailed to the nurse administrator of the nursing program/nursing education unit for review and correction of errors of fact within eight (8) weeks after the conclusion of the site visit. An e-mail with the completed *Nurse Administrator Response Form* attached must be received by the ACEN within one (1) week after the nursing program/nursing education unit receives the draft report. Substantive comments are shared with the team chairperson, who then decides whether the report is to be changed. The corrected final Site Visit Report/Follow-Up Visit Report/Focused Visit Report and the *Nurse Administrator Response Form* will become part of the permanent materials relating to the accreditation visit.

The final Site Visit Report/Follow-Up Visit Report/Focused Visit Report will be sent to the nurse administrator and the site visit team members prior to the Evaluation Review Panel meeting.
EVALUATION REVIEW PANEL

The Evaluation Review Panel (ERP) is appointed by the ACEN Board of Commissioners. The role of the ERP is to ensure that the process of peer evaluation has been carried out according to the Accreditation Standards and Criteria. The Evaluation Review Panel (ERP) makes professional judgments based on its own independent analysis for compliance with the Standards and Criteria and to ensure the consistent application of the Standards and Criteria among programs of the same type. The Panel members review the findings of the site visit team as presented in the Site Visit Report/Follow-Up Visit Report/Focused Visit Report compared to the Self-Study Report of the program(s) and catalog and make a recommendation for accreditation status to the Board of Commissioners.

The role of the Evaluation Review Panel is to validate the work of the site visit team and extend it by noting points of agreement and raising any questions where disagreement or a lack of clarity exists. In the latter case, the site visit team is available by telephone during ERP deliberations and may enter into discussion with the Panel to assure an accurate understanding of the Site Visit Report/Follow-Up Visit Report. The aim is to provide consistency in the recommendations for the program type. The role of the professional staff is to facilitate the work of both review groups.

Panelists determine the adequacy of the evidence to support each Standard and Criterion. The purpose is to see that the ACEN Standards and Criteria are applied consistently across all programs reviewed by the Panel. Finally, they make a recommendation to the Board of Commissioners on the accreditation status of each program.

Nursing Program Representative Attendance at the Evaluation Review Panel Meeting
The nurse administrator and one (1) additional program representative may attend the deliberations of the Evaluation Review Panel about the program in person or the program may participate in the Evaluation Review Panel Meeting by telephone conference. The attendees are observers during the presentation of the program, ERP deliberations, and vote; attendees will not be asked to respond to questions or to clarify information. At the conclusion of the ERP deliberations, the nurse administrator is invited to address the Panel with regards to the overall process.

BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS

The Board of Commissioners has the sole authority to determine the accreditation status of programs. Composed of nurse educators, nursing clinicians/practitioners, and public members, the Board of Commissioners bases its decisions on its own independent analysis and professional judgment for complete and consistent application of the Accreditation Standards and Criteria within and across program types. The full Board of Commissioners makes the final accreditation decision at its next regularly scheduled meeting. To assist the nursing program in future planning, a copy of the Summary of Deliberations of the Evaluation Review Panel is forwarded to the program along with the Commission decision letter. Documents relative to developments occurring after the site visit may be used in the deliberations. In cases where accreditation is denied, programs have the opportunity to present their case in a full and impartial hearing before an independent Appeal Panel.
PEER EVALUATORS

Peer evaluators make recommendations to the Board of Commissioners. Peer evaluators are knowledgeable about common, contemporary, and best practices within the various program types, appropriate curricula, and conventions as well as current trends in healthcare, nursing education, and/or nursing practice.

Eligibility for Selection as a Peer Evaluator

Eligibility to serve as an ACEN peer evaluator is dependent on the following requirements:

See ACEN Policy #1 Code of Conduct and Conflict of Interest http://www.acenursing.net/resources/policy01.pdf

See ACEN Policy #2 Representation on the Site Visit Teams, Evaluation Review Panels, and Board of Commissioners http://www.acenursing.net/resources/policy02.pdf

See ACEN Policy #1 and #2 on the ACEN website (www.acenursing.org) under Resources for Nursing Programs, Accreditation Manual, Section II - Policies.

Academic Credentials:
Clinical Doctorate Programs
Earned doctoral degree from a regionally accredited college/university and a graduate degree with a major in nursing

Master’s Degree Programs
Earned doctoral degree from a regionally accredited college/university and a graduate degree with a major in nursing

Baccalaureate Degree Programs
Earned doctoral degree from a regionally accredited college/university and a graduate degree with a major in nursing

Associate Degree Programs
Graduate degree with a major in nursing

Diploma Programs
Graduate degree with a major in nursing

Practical Programs
Graduate degree with a major in nursing

Nurse Clinician
Graduate degree with a major in nursing

Experience:
Nurse Educator
1. Currently hold a full-time faculty or administrative appointment in an ACEN-accredited program.
2. Previously held a full-time faculty or administrative appointment in an ACEN-accredited program and now holds a part-time faculty or administrative appointment in an ACEN-accredited program.
3. Held a full-time faculty or administrative appointment in an ACEN-accredited program and is retired for no more than two (2) years from this position.

4. Held a full-time faculty or administrative appointment in an ACEN-accredited program and then held a part-time faculty or administrative appointment in an ACEN-accredited program and is retired for no more than two (2) years from the part-time position.

- Knowledge of postsecondary and/or higher education; curriculum and instructional methods; current issues in nursing education and practice.
- Expertise in communication, group dynamics, information literacy, use of technology, best practices in educational and clinical settings.
- Contributions in scholarship/research, practice, community service, professional service.

**Nurse Clinician**

Full-time or part-time time position in a clinical practice environment

- Knowledge of current nursing practice, contemporary issues in healthcare settings, transition of new graduates into nursing practice.
- Expertise in communication, group dynamics, information literacy, use of technology, best practices for patient health and safety.
- Contributions in scholarship/research, practice, community service, professional service.

We encourage you to self-nominate or nominate nurse educators and nurse clinicians/practitioners to serve as a peer evaluator. Please send your nomination to peer_evaluator@acenursing.org

**Selection, Appointment, and Maintaining Eligibility as a Peer Evaluator**

**Selection**

All peer evaluators are selected through mechanisms and criteria established by the ACEN.

Individuals identified by staff, nominated by a colleague, or self-nominated must submit a letter of interest, current curriculum vitae/resume, and a letter of recommendation. After ACEN staff review of submitted materials, selected individuals will be invited to become peer evaluator and must participate in the peer evaluator professional development offered by the ACEN.

**Appointment**

Peer evaluators are eligible to serve for an indefinite period of time if they receive ongoing positive site visit performance evaluations, remain current with the accreditation process, and continue to be employed with an ACEN-accredited nursing program or work as a nurse clinician. A list of the current program evaluators is accessible on the ACEN website.

**Continuing Eligibility**

A peer evaluator who:

- Retires may continue to serve up to two (2) additional years if she/he remains current in nursing education and the accreditation process.
- Is no longer affiliated with a nursing education program or nursing service will be ineligible to continue as a peer evaluator.
- Accepts a position in a nursing program not accredited by the ACEN will be ineligible to continue as a peer evaluator.
**Evaluation**
Peer evaluators are evaluated by the members of the site visit team and the nursing education unit following each site visit.

**Preparation**
Briefing sessions are conducted by telephone conference call for all peer evaluators prior to the assigned visit each accreditation cycle.

**Honorarium**
An honorarium will be provided to the peer evaluator after a visit is completed.

**Evaluation Review Panel Members**

**Selection**
Members of the ERP and alternate members are program-specific and appointed by the Board of Commissioners. The ACEN professional staff review candidates based on information from current members of the ERP, peer evaluators, Commissioners, and accredited programs and recommend their names to the Board of Commissioners. Members of the ERP and alternate members must be eligible peer evaluators.

**Appointment**
Members of the ERP serve for a three-year term and may be appointed to a second consecutive term. Alternate members of the ERP may serve indefinitely. Panel vacancies are filled by program-specific peer evaluators selected from the list of alternate members.

**Preparation**
Members of the ERP are expected to participate in a briefing session held prior to each ERP to orient new Panel members and update the continuing Panel members.

**Appeal Panel Members**

**Selection**
Members of the Appeal Panel must have knowledge of and experience with the peer-review process. The nurse educator and nursing clinicians/practitioners members must be currently eligible peer evaluators. Commissioners cannot serve on the Appeal Panel.

**Appointment**
The Appeal Panel consists of individuals drawn from a Board of Commissioners-approved list of the individuals qualified to serve as members of the Appeal Panel. See ACEN Policy #10 Appeal Process and Submission and Review of New Financial Information Subsequent to Adverse Action. A list of the individuals who have been appointed to the Appeal Panel is accessible on the ACEN website.