The ACEN reviews any complaint it receives against an accredited program that is related to the ACEN Standards, Criteria, or policies, and resolves the complaint in a timely, fair, and equitable manner using established timelines for each step of the complaint procedure.

A complaint is an expression of dissatisfaction about something or someone that is the cause or subject of protest. The ACEN will only act on complaints about program quality that may, if substantiated, indicate areas of non-compliance with Accreditation Standards and Criteria. As a formal allegation against a party, program, nursing education unit, or governing organization, a complaint is expressed as a written, signed statement by the complainant. It may be concerned with the rights of an individual, program, nursing education unit, and/or governing organization; or the interpretation or application of rules, regulations, or policies of an accredited program. In addition, it may include concerns from recognized state or federal agencies.

In addressing a complaint, the ACEN does not serve as arbitrator or mediator of internal disputes within nursing programs or between nursing programs. It will not intervene on behalf of an individual complainant regarding such matters as admission, progression, grades, appointment, promotion, or dismissal of faculty members or students. The ACEN’s role is to ensure that the policies and procedures of an institution and/or a nursing program regarding complaints are implemented fairly and as written, or if policies are not present, to make certain that such policies and procedures of a program, nursing education unit, or governing organization are developed and implemented. A potential complainant should use all available appeal or grievance means at the program, nursing education unit, or governing organization before filing a complaint with the ACEN.

A complaint may be filed by any of the following representatives of ACEN communities of interest including:

- Student(s) currently enrolled in an accredited nursing program, nursing education unit, or governing organization;
- Applicant(s) to an accredited nursing program or nursing education unit; and/or
- Other interested parties.
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<th>PROCEDURE</th>
<th>TIME LINE</th>
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<td>The complaint is presented to the ACEN as a written, signed, and dated statement with supporting evidence.</td>
<td>Within 14 business days of receipt</td>
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<td>The ACEN responds to the complainant in writing that the complaint has been reviewed. Additional information may be requested. If complete, the complainant is notified that a copy of the complaint is being forwarded to the nurse administrator, and if appropriate, the Chief Executive Officer of the governing organization.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The ACEN sends a copy of the complaint to the nurse administrator along with a request for verification that the complainant has used all available institutional avenues to address the complaint.</td>
<td>Within 14 business days of receipt</td>
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<td>The nurse administrator’s response to the complaint is submitted to the ACEN.</td>
<td>Within 30 days</td>
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<td>If the analysis by the ACEN finds that the policies and procedures have been implemented fairly and as written, the Chief Executive Officer will complete the file by sharing this finding in writing with the complainant and the nurse administrator.</td>
<td>Within 14 business days</td>
</tr>
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<td>If the analysis by the ACEN finds that (a) the policies and procedures were not in place or (b) the policies and procedures were not implemented fairly and/or completely, the complaint will be submitted to the Commission for corrective action.</td>
<td>At the next scheduled meeting. Complaints are to be referred to a subsequent Commission meeting if the next scheduled meeting does not allow the 14–to-30-day response time by the ACEN Chief Executive Officer and the 30-day response time by the nurse administrator.</td>
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The Board of Commissioners can (a) accept the recommended corrective action, (b) change the accreditation status, (c) request a Focused Visit, and/or (d) place the program on conditional or warning status.

The ACEN will only act upon substantiated complaints against an accredited program that indicate:

1. A governing organization’s and/or nursing program’s non-compliance with the ACEN Standards and Criteria;
2. A governing organization’s and/or nursing program’s non-compliance with ACEN policy; and/or
3. A governing organization’s and/or nursing program’s non-compliance with its own published policy as said policy relates to the ACEN Standards and Criteria.

The ACEN will not interpose itself as a reviewing authority in individual matters such as but not limited to admission; grades; granting or transferability of credits; application of academic policies; fees or other financial matters; disciplinary matters; contractual rights and obligations; personnel decisions; or similar matters. The ACEN will also not seek any type of compensation, damages, re-admission, or other redress on an individual’s behalf. The ACEN will not respond to or take action upon any complaint that is defamatory, hostile, or profane. In addition, the ACEN will not involve itself in collective bargaining disputes. The ACEN does not accept complaints about individuals.

In addition, the ACEN may act upon concerns from a recognized state or federal agency.

An individual interested in submitting information regarding a nursing program to be considered during an upcoming initial or continuing accreditation review should follow ACEN Policy #8 Opportunities for Third-Party Comments on Programs Scheduled for Evaluation. The ACEN reserves the right to review and act upon incoming complaints or third-party comments under either ACEN Policy #8 or Policy #20 as appropriate to the circumstance.

Records of individual complaints will be maintained by the ACEN for eight (8) years. If a number of individual complaints suggest a pattern of concern not evident from any single complaint, the ACEN may renew its consideration of a matter for whatever action may be appropriate.

The ACEN expects an individual to attempt to resolve an issue through the governing organization’s and/or nursing program’s own published grievance policy/procedures (if
applicable) before submitting a complaint to the ACEN. Therefore, an individual must use all available grievance and appeal means with the governing organization and/or nursing education unit before filing a complaint with the ACEN. The ACEN will not consider a complaint while institutional proceedings or litigation thereto appertaining are ongoing. However, if the ACEN determines that the complainant raises issues so immediate that a delay may jeopardize the nursing program’s accreditation status or cause harm to nursing students, the ACEN may, at its discretion, choose to proceed with its review.

The ACEN will not review or act upon a complaint to which the governing organization’s and/or nursing program’s published grievance policy/procedures apply if it is formally filed with the ACEN more than one (1) year after the completion of the policy/procedures. The ACEN will not review or act upon a complaint to which such policies/procedures do not apply if it is formally filed with the ACEN more than one (1) year after the circumstances leading to the complaint.

SUBMITTING A COMPLAINT

1. The complaint must be presented to the ACEN as a written, signed, and dated statement with supporting documentation. The ACEN will not review or act upon complaints that are not presented in writing.
2. All complaints must be submitted using the ACEN’s official Complaint Form, completed in its entirety. The ACEN’s official Complaint Form is available at http://www.acenursing.net/resources/Policy20_FormForComment_Oct15.doc. Complaints submitted without the official Complaint Form completed in its entirety will not be reviewed or acted upon.
3. The completed Complaint Form and the required supporting documentation must be submitted to the ACEN via the United States Postal Service or an express carrier (e.g., UPS, FedEx, DHL, etc.).
4. The completed Complaint Form and the required supporting documentation may be submitted to the ACEN in paper format or using a USB storage device.
5. The ACEN will not review or act upon anonymous complaints, nor will it review or act upon complaints submitted by an individual or agency on behalf of another individual. For example, the ACEN will not review or act upon a complaint from a parent, spouse, child, sibling, co-worker, or friend of a complainant, or from an attorney.
6. The ACEN must be the original intended recipient of the complaint and will not review or act upon complaints that are forwarded to the ACEN.
7. The ACEN will not accept or discuss complaints via telephone.
8. All written materials, including the submitted Complaint Form, required supporting documentation, and any other printed materials, must be presented in English.

Each governing organization and nursing education unit is required to have in place written student complaint policies and procedures that are reasonable, fairly administered, and well publicized. The ACEN also requires, in accordance with federal
regulations, that each governing organization and nursing education unit maintain a record of complaints received. This record must be available to the ACEN upon request. The record(s) for the nursing program will be examined by the ACEN as part of the program’s initial or continuing accreditation review.

ACEN PROCEDURE FOR PROCESSING COMPLAINTS

1. The ACEN will acknowledge a complaint within 15 business days of its receipt.
2. Within 60 business days after acknowledging receipt of the complaint, the ACEN staff will review the complaint and determine whether:
   a. it is related to the program’s accreditation status
   b. it is within the scope of ACEN policy
   c. it demonstrates the governing organization’s and/or nursing program’s non-compliance with:
      i. the ACEN Standards and Criteria
      ii. an ACEN policy
      iii. the governing organization’s and/or nursing program’s own published policy as said policy relates to the ACEN Standards and Criteria
   d. there is adequate evidence in support of the allegations made in the complaint
3. If the complaint does not have sufficient substance to warrant further review, the ACEN will communicate this to the complainant, in writing, within 15 business days of reaching this conclusion.
4. If the complaint has sufficient substance to warrant further review, the ACEN will make every effort to expedite its review; however, the time required to conduct its review may vary considerably depending on the circumstances and nature of the complaint.
5. When a complaint is reviewed further, a copy of the complaint will be forwarded to the nurse administrator of the nursing program, who will be asked to respond to the ACEN within 20 business days. Upon receipt of a response from the nurse administrator, the ACEN reserves the right to request additional materials, as needed, from the complainant and/or nurse administrator.
6. If there is insufficient evidence of non-compliance, the complaint will not be processed further. The decision of the ACEN Chief Executive Officer is final, and the complainant and nurse administrator will be notified of this outcome.
7. If there appears to be sufficient evidence of non-compliance or if the ACEN staff are unable to determine compliance, the following actions may be taken by the ACEN Chief Executive Officer (the complainant and nurse administrator will be notified of this outcome):
   a. Forward the complaint directly to the ACEN Board of Commissioners for review and action.
   b. Authorize a Focused Visit to evaluate the governing organization/nursing program. The Focused Visit Team will examine documents and interview institutional personnel to analyze and make a judgment regarding compliance, after which they will prepare a Focused Site Visit Report. This
Report will be forwarded to the ACEN Board of Commissioners for review and action at the next meeting of the Board. Following that meeting, the complainant and nurse administrator will be notified of the decision of the Board.

c. Review the complaint allegations as part of an upcoming scheduled visit to the nursing program. The site visitors will examine documents and interview institutional personnel to analyze and make a judgment regarding compliance, after which they will prepare a Site Visit Report. This Report will be forwarded to the ACEN Board of Commissioners for review and action at the next meeting of the Board. Following that meeting, the complainant and nurse administrator will be notified of the decision of the Board.

For items 7a, 7b, or 7c above, the decision of the ACEN Board of Commissioners is final unless appealable as delineated in ACEN Policy #10 Appeal Process and Submission and Review of New Financial Information Subsequent to Adverse Action.

Document History
Revised November 2015