ACEN Position Statement Related to Graduate Nursing Education Programs

The ACEN has been accrediting nursing education programs for over 80 years. Under ACEN practice, a master’s nursing program can also include post-master’s certificate (PMC) program options. In 2012, the ACEN began accrediting clinical doctorate programs (DNP), and in 2019, the ACEN added a DNP Specialist certificate as a component of the DNP degree.

The ACEN has accredited graduate nursing programs regardless of the specialty area(s) offered within the program; specialty areas are referred to as program options by the ACEN. The ACEN firmly believes that the level of nursing offered by an institution should be in congruence with the institutional philosophy and meet the needs of the institution’s communities of interest. Therefore, the ACEN will continue to accredit all APRN and non-APRN program options at the master’s level and DNP level.

The ACEN also accredits nurse educator program options offered as part of either a master’s or DNP program of study. The ACEN Board of Commissioners (BOC) firmly believes that the nurse educator role is a nursing practice specialty and that preparation at the graduate level is appropriate. The future of quality nursing programs is dependent upon having knowledgeable and skilled individuals with expertise in educational practice; thus, graduate programs should continue to offer well-designed nurse educator program options.

Professional Standards, Guidelines, and Competencies

The ACEN does not require graduate level nursing education programs to use a specific set of professional standards, guidelines, or competencies. Graduate programs have the autonomy to select any set of professional nursing standards that align with its mission and philosophy. Programs are also allowed to select components of multiple professional standards, guidelines, and competencies to develop an eclectic approach to curriculum development that meets the needs of the program, its student population, and the community.

Graduate programs are expected to identify the selected nursing professional standards, guidelines, and competencies used to develop the curriculum. Graduate program faculty must also identify role-specific nursing competencies for each of the program options offered. If a certification examination is available for a particular program option, then the ACEN expects the faculty to ensure that the curriculum enables graduates being eligible to attain certification in the specialty regardless of whether graduates are eligible immediately upon graduation to take
the certification examination or whether graduates must attain work experience before taking the certification examination.


The ACEN was one of 19 agencies with representation in the development of the *National Task Force (NTF) Standards, 6th Edition*. The ACEN’s BOC thoughtfully considered the increase in direct patient care clinical/practicum hours; after much discussion, the BOC voted to endorse the updated NTF Standards. The BOC recognizes that master’s and DNP programs with nurse practitioner program options will need time to implement the new *NTF Standards*, including the increase in direct patient care clinical/practicum hours to the minimum required 750 hours. ACEN-accredited programs preparing students to be nurse practitioners should begin planning for this transition and incorporating the additional clinical/practicum hours as needed. The ACEN expects programs offering any nurse practitioner program option to submit a letter of notification regarding when the program begins the transition process and the projected date of completing the transition. The letter of notification may be submitted through the non-substantive change portal on the ACEN website.

ACEN peer evaluators will review the compliance of nurse practitioner programs with the NTF Standards (2022) during the program’s initial accreditation or continuing accreditation review beginning July 1, 2025. In the interim, peer evaluators will continue to verify that nurse practitioner programs are following either the 2017 NTF Guidelines or the 2022 NTF Standards. A graduate crosswalk provides a comparison of the 2023 *ACEN Standards and Criteria* with the *NTF Standards (2022)*; this crosswalk is included in the ACEN's 2023 Program Guidelines available on the ACEN website [ACEN Resource Center](#). Effective January 1, 2024, all ACEN-accredited programs will be required to have transitioned to the *2023 ACEN Standards and Criteria*.

**Clinical Doctorate (DNP) Program’s Clinical/Practicum Hours**

The BOC reviewed DNP program clinical/practicum hours. As noted, the ACEN will continue to accredit DNP programs that offer APRN and non-APRN program options.

**APRN Program Options**

The ACEN requires that all DNP programs with APRN program options have at least 1,000 post-baccalaureate clinical/practicum hours. Students may be allowed to
obtain clinical/practicum hours during the capstone project. All clinical/practicum hours should have an appropriate clinical/practicum focus based on the program option. For students enrolled in a post-MSN-to-DNP program option, the faculty must conduct a gap analysis to ensure that each student has the required 1,000 post-baccalaureate clinical/practicum hours. Between the gap analysis document and any log journals for the clinical doctorate courses, the faculty should be able to demonstrate that each student has attained the requisite number of clinical/practicum hours. Programs may need to have independent study courses or have other means of bridging the gaps that may exist for students.

Non-APRN Program Options

The ACEN requires that all DNP programs with non-APRN program options have at least the minimum number of clinical/practicum hours required by the certifying agency administering the certification examination when applicable. If the certifying agency administering the certification examination does not have a minimum number of clinical/practicum hours, then the ACEN expects a minimum of 500 clinical/practicum hours at the DNP level that may include hours towards the DNP project. The faculty need to ensure that the practicum experiences and required hours provide sufficient opportunities to attain the role-specific nursing competencies identified for the respective program option(s).

Conclusion

If programs have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact the ACEN office at 404-975-5000. Ask to speak to one of the Directors who will be happy to assist.