ACEN Program *of* Distinction
GUIDE

acenursing.org

ACEN®
Accreditation Commission
for Education in Nursing

Overview

This guide provides detailed information about the ACEN Program of Distinction application process, fees, renewal expectations, along with the application criteria and report guidelines.

Applications for the Program of Distinction are reviewed using a structured, evidence-based rubric aligned with the ACEN Standards:

1. **Mission and Administrative Capacity**
   Leadership qualifications, stakeholder engagement, governance participation, and innovation in partnerships and resources.
2. **Faculty**
   Faculty credentials, certification, development, mentoring, scholarship, and institutional support.
3. **Students**
   Student support structures, use of high-impact practices, innovation in learning technologies, and measurable improvements in retention and success.
4. **Curriculum**
   Alignment of curriculum to outcomes, use of simulation and experiential learning, interprofessional education, and innovative instructional models.
5. **Outcomes**
   Demonstrated achievement of completion, licensure/certification, and employment outcomes, along with innovative use of data to improve student learning.

Each criterion is evaluated as *Met* or *Not Met* based on clear, documented, and verifiable evidence, with emphasis on sustained performance rather than one-time initiatives.

Jump to: ACEN Program of Distinction Application Criteria

Application Process

The ACEN Program of Distinction application process is designed to be structured, evidence-based, and consistent across all application periods. Programs progress through three primary steps: **eligibility confirmation**, **application submission**, and **formal review**.

Step 1: Eligibility Check (Required)

ACEN offers three yearly eligibility periods. All programs must begin by submitting an **Eligibility Check Form** and **required evidence (next page)** to confirm they meet the baseline requirements for the Program of Distinction. This step ensures that only eligible programs proceed to the full application step.

Note: Eligibility determinations are issued within two weeks after eligibility period deadlines. Programs confirmed as eligible will be invited to submit a full application.

Required Evidence for Eligibility
✓ Accreditation by ACEN for at least three years.
✓ Current SPE: at least three years of EPSLO and program outcome data; graduate programs must have at least three years of Role-Specific Nursing Competency data.
✓ Accreditation without stipulations (i.e., conditions, warning, good cause).
✓ Most recent status letter/document by the state or country agency that has legal authority for nursing education program (demonstration approved without qualification).
✓ At least one ACEN Peer Evaluator from the Nursing Education Unit.
✓ Two letters of support from key stakeholders (e.g., advisory board, employers, community partners).
✓ Be current on all ACEN fees and expenses in accordance with Policy #27.

Begin by completing the **Eligibility Check Form**.

Step 2: Application and Fee Submission

Eligible programs submit an application that includes required evidence aligned with Program of Distinction Application Criteria, along with the applicable application fee.

Step 3: Review and Decision

Application reviews are conducted by the ACEN Standards and Criteria Committee, with final determinations made by the **ACEN Board of Commissioners**.

Application Process Dates At-A-Glance

Eligibility Period* (forms due by date below)	Application & Fee Due Date for Eligible Programs	Board Decision Notification
January 15 [†]	April 15	July
April 1	June 1	September
October 1	December 1	May

* Eligibility notifications are issued within two weeks of Eligibility Period deadline.

[†] Not available in 2026

Application Fees

Fees cover application review and evaluation of supporting evidence.

Initial Application Fee

- $1,500 for U.S. programs

- $900 for each additional eligible program within the same NEU

International Program Application Fee

- $1,650 for international programs

- $990 for each additional eligible program within the same governing organization

Renewal Timing

The Program of Distinction designation remains valid through the program's next comprehensive accreditation review cycle. Programs seeking to maintain the designation must complete a renewal process.

Renewal Timeline

- **Renewal Eligibility Due Date:** January 15 (year following the comprehensive review)

- **Renewal Application and Fee Due Date:** April 15

- **Renewal Decision Notification:** July

Programs must continue to meet all eligibility requirements to maintain Program of Distinction status.

Begin the Process
Programs interested in pursuing the ACEN Program of Distinction should begin by completing the **Eligibility Check Form.** This form serves as the first step in the application process and confirms readiness to apply.

Application Criteria & Report Guidelines

Once a program has been notified of their eligibility, they can begin preparing their written report based on ACEN Standards (1-5), describing:

- how the program meets or exceeds the required ACEN Program of Distinction Criteria for each Standard;
- which additional criteria the faculty selected for each Standard and how the program meets or exceeds the criteria;
- evidence to support the narrative for each required and selected criteria.

Jump to: Organizing the Report and Supporting Evidence in the ACEN Repository

Standards 1-5 Criteria

Standard 1: Mission and Administrative Capacity

Criteria
REQUIRED: Nurse administrator credentials: • **Practical, Diploma, Associate programs:** graduate degree in nursing, and certification in education or leadership. • **Baccalaureate, Master's, Clinical Doctorate programs:** graduate degree in nursing, doctoral degree, and certification in education or leadership.
Must Demonstrate Two of the Following:
• At least 10% of students enrolled in the program are actively engaged in governance and/or program assessment processes. • The Advisory Board has students, alumni, community, and employer representation with evidence of their contributions to program decision making. • At least one innovative stakeholder/community partnership which may include but is not limited to formal pathways for mentorship, employment, and/or career development. • An accredited simulation laboratory supporting experiential learning. • The Nurse Administrator is actively engaged in at least two local, regional, and/or national initiatives. • Documented success in securing and managing external grant funding and/or one other unique funding model to support the program mission.

Standard 2: Faculty

Criteria
REQUIRED: Faculty credentials: • **Practical:** 50% full-time faculty hold graduate degrees.   • **Diploma, Associate, Baccalaureate:** 100% full-time faculty hold graduate degrees.   • **Graduate programs:** 100% full-time faculty hold doctoral degrees.
Must Demonstrate Two of the Following:
• At least 50% of faculty (full and part-time) hold CNE certification.   • At least 50% of faculty (full and part-time) are certified in their nursing specialty.   • A certified simulation coordinator actively managing the simulation program.   • A comprehensive faculty development program (individualized, tracked, and evaluated).   • A formal, structured, and active peer-mentoring program for full and part-time faculty.   • The Governing Organization supports, and at least 50% of faculty actively engage in clinical practice, service, scholarship, and/or research.

Standard 3: Students

Criteria
REQUIRED:
• A structured, comprehensive program orientation for students that builds academic readiness and ensures students understand program expectations, are aware of resources for their success, and are introduced to the key program stakeholders.
• Default rate <15% (*For ACEN Title IV programs only*)
Must Demonstrate One of the Following:
• At least 50% of nursing courses include high-impact practices (HIPs) for student support and success.
• At least one example with supporting documentation of an innovative student support service that improved student retention or progression.
• At least one example with supporting documentation of the innovative use of technology that supports course student learning.
• Evidence of using predictive analytics to inform student support and retention strategies.
• A structured peer mentoring program with at least one example of how the program improved the student experience within the curriculum with documentation of the outcome.

Standard 4: Curriculum

Criteria
REQUIRED: Complete curriculum mapping (Criteria 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, and 4.10) that demonstrates substantial alignment to the achievement of student learning outcomes.
Must Demonstrate Two of the Following
• Use of innovative assignments and/or clinical experiences that support student learning achievement in at least 50% of the nursing courses. • Integration of hands-on evidenced-based simulation into at least 50% of the nursing courses with tracked hours. • Evidence of a creative RN-to-BSN and/or non-APRN practicum experience model that aligns with course and end-of-program student learning outcomes. • Use of a **Competency-Based Education (CBE)** curriculum framework or elements of CBE incorporated throughout the program of study. • Structured interprofessional classroom and/or laboratory/simulation experiences in a minimum of two nursing courses. • At least one example of student engagement in faculty-led research, presentations, and/or publications. • Summative assessment of **course** student learning outcomes for each nursing course that are used to inform course level decision-making to maintain or improve student learning outcomes.

Standard 5: Outcomes

Criteria

REQUIRED:
Most recent three years of program Outcomes data published on the program website demonstrating:
• Average Program Completion rate: >50% on-time based on the most recent three academic years.
• Licensure/Certification pass rate (as applicable based on program options):
   o >80% first-time pass rate
         OR
   o pass rate above national/territorial average
         OR
   o 100% ultimate pass rate
• Employment:
   o >90% employment rate in the role for which graduates were prepared while maintaining >50% response rate.
   o For RN-to-BSN/non-APRN programs: Provide robust qualitative employment data related to value added for the degree awarded.

Must Demonstrate One of the Following:
• Implementation of an innovative application/performance-based assessment method for each end-of-program student learning outcome (and/or role specific nursing competency for graduate level programs). • At least one example of how aggregate data were used to develop and implement a faculty-led innovative strategy in an effort to improve end-of-program student learning outcome achievement (and/or role specific nursing competency for graduate level programs) with documentation of the outcome. • At least one example of how disaggregate data were used to develop and implement a faculty-led innovative strategy in an effort to improve end-of-program student learning outcome achievement (and/or role specific nursing competency for graduate level programs) with documentation of the outcome.

Organizing the Report and Supporting Evidence in the ACEN Repository

Prepare a report organized by the ACEN Standards. For each Standard, describe how the program meets or exceeds the required ACEN Program of Distinction Criteria. The application should clearly specify the additional criteria chosen by the faculty and detail how the program meets or exceeds these requirements. The application must provide supporting evidence for each required and chosen criterion.

The application and all supporting documents must be uploaded in the ACEN Document Repository and the application review fee paid by the specified deadline. Once the application period concludes, the repository folders will be locked. If an application is incomplete or payment is not submitted by the deadline, the Board of Commissioners will not review it.

The nurse administrator will receive the program's Document Repository username and password after eligibility is confirmed; the nurse administrator will create, organize, and label the required sub-folders.

- In the "Application & Evidence" Folder: Upload the written application and ensure the title clearly identifies the document as the "**Application**." The report and supporting evidence should be in Microsoft Word or searchable PDF format, not scanned files.
  The application should be one continuously paginated document consisting of the:
    - Program Demographic Information
        - Governing Organization name, city, and state
        - Nursing Education Unit name
        - Program type(s) for review
    - Narrative for each Standard that includes required and selected Criteria

- Create subfolders for each Standard and upload all supporting evidence into the appropriate subfolders.
    - Standard 1 Administrative Capacity and Resources
    - Standard 2 Faculty
    - Standard 3 Students
    - Standard 4 Curriculum
    - Standard 5 Outcomes

  When uploading the evidence, please consider the following:

    - Each piece of supporting evidence should be an individual document and labeled using a standardized naming convention that is easy to understand and relates to the evidence (e.g., Nurse Administrator's CV; Full-time Faculty Certification; Curriculum Map).
    - Supporting evidence should be referenced accurately and consistently throughout the application using the naming convention to easily identify uploaded evidence.
    - Do not upload any private or personally identifiable confidential information to the repository. Make sure all sensitive details, such as Social Security numbers or birthdates on transcripts, are removed before uploading.