



ACEN Program *of* Distinction GUIDE

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APPLICATION CRITERIA & REPORT WRITING

Revised August 2026

acenursing.org





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:

Standard 1: Administrative Capacity and Resources

Leadership qualifications, stakeholder engagement, governance participation, and innovation in partnerships and resources.

Standard 2: Faculty

Faculty credentials, certification, development, mentoring, scholarship, and institutional support.

Standard 3: Students

Student support structures, use of high-impact practices, innovation in learning technologies, and measurable improvements in retention and success.

Standard 4: Curriculum

Alignment of curriculum to outcomes, use of simulation and experiential learning, interprofessional education, and innovative instructional models.

Standard 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 check**, **application submission**, and **formal review**.

Step 1: Eligibility Check (Required)

ACEN offers one opportunity per year when ACEN-accredited programs can check eligibility to be recognized as a Program of Distinction. All programs must begin by submitting an **Eligibility Check Form** and **required evidence** 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 the eligibility period deadline. Programs confirmed as eligible will be invited to submit a full application.

Required Evidence for Eligibility for Each Program Type	
✓	Accreditation by ACEN for at least three years without stipulations (i.e., conditions, warning, good cause).
✓	Most recent status letter/document by the state or country agency that has legal authority for the nursing education program (approved without qualification).
✓	At least one ACEN Peer Evaluator from the Governing Organization.
✓	Current on all ACEN fees and expenses in accordance with Policy #27 .
✓	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.
✓	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.
✓	Default rate <15% (For ACEN Title IV programs only)
✓	Current SPE: at least three years of EPSLO and program outcome data; graduate programs must also have at least three years of Role-Specific Nursing Competency data.
✓	Public Disclosures: Program Completion Rate The program website must publicly display completion data for the three most recent years. For each year, the data must include both the numerical count (n) and the percentage. The on-time program completion rate must be 50% or greater <u>for each year</u> .
✓	Public Disclosures: Examination Pass Rate The program website must publicly display licensure or certification pass-rate data for the three most recent years; data must be clearly labeled as first-time pass rate (ultimate



	pass rates may also be included). For each year, the data must include both the total number of test-takers (n) and the percentage. The program must meet one of the following benchmarks for each year: • First-time pass rate: 80% or greater • Above the national or territorial average • Ultimate pass rate: 100%
✓	Public Disclosures: Job Placement Rate The program website must publicly display job placement data for the three most recent years. The program must meet the following benchmarks <u>for each year</u>: • Employment Rate: 90% or greater for the specific role for which graduates were prepared • Response Rate: 50% or greater for the survey or data collection method. • Both the employment rate and the response rate must display the total number (n) and the percentage. Note for RN-to-BSN and non-APRN Programs: In lieu of the above, programs must provide robust qualitative employment data that demonstrates the professional value added by the degree.

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 application fee.

Step 3: Formal 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	BOC Review	Board Decision Notification
January 15	April 15	July	August

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

Application Fee

Programs deemed eligible for Program of Distinction recognition will be invoiced upon receipt of a completed application submitted by the application due date. Fee is non-refundable.

Application Fee: \$550



Program of Distinction Fee

Programs recognized by the Board of Commissioners as Programs of Distinction are assessed a fee.

- \$1,000 for U.S. programs; \$380 for each additional program within the same Nursing Education Unit
- \$1,150 for international programs; \$470 for each additional program within the same Nursing Education Unit

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 the year following the comprehensive review.

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):

- The narrative should describe how the program meets or exceeds the required and/or selected ACEN Program of Distinction Criteria for each Standard.
- The report should clearly identify the selected Criteria chosen by the faculty, and faculty are discouraged from addressing additional Criteria beyond those required and selected.
- The application must include evidence to support the narrative for each required and selected criterion.

For criterion referencing “innovation,” the narrative must explicitly describe why and how the initiative is innovative for the specific program and community. The Board of Commissioners recognizes that innovation is relative to a program’s environment, resources, and mission; therefore, an initiative is considered innovative if it represents a significant advancement or creative solution within your unique context (e.g., a small rural program versus a large urban center). The application must include a 1–2 paragraph justification describing the baseline (previous practice), the new approach, and the specific impact this change has had. This narrative should clearly address how the innovation resolved unique challenges, such as rural limitations or resource constraints, to demonstrate its value within the institutional context.

Jump to: [Organizing the Report and Supporting Evidence in the ACEN Repository](#)



Standards 1-5 Criteria

Standard 1: Mission and Administrative Capacity

Criteria	
REQUIRED: Two letters of support from key stakeholders (e.g., advisory board, employers, community partners). Letters should be on official letterhead and describe the specific nature of the partnership, the stakeholder's direct involvement with the program, and tangible outcomes of that relationship.	
Select TWO of the Following Criteria:	Evidence may include but is not limited to:
A. At least 10% of students enrolled in the program are actively engaged in governance and/or program assessment processes.	- meeting minutes reflecting student participation - committee rosters with student representation - documentation of student-led program assessment initiatives with evidence of how student input influenced decision-making
B. The Advisory Board has students, alumni, community, and employer representation with evidence of their contributions to program decision making.	- advisory board bylaws or membership rosters identifying role categories - meeting minutes documenting member contributions - examples of program decisions or changes resulting from advisory board input
C. At least one innovative stakeholder/community partnership which may include but is not limited to formal pathways for mentorship, employment, and/or career development.	- memoranda of understanding - partnership agreements - documented outcomes demonstrating the partnership's impact on students Note: The narrative must include a justification of innovation as described in the Elective Criteria guidelines.
D. An accredited simulation laboratory supporting experiential learning.	- proof of accreditation or certification - lab usage data demonstrating integration into the curriculum - student learning outcomes linked to simulation experiences
E. The Nurse Administrator is actively engaged in at least two local, regional, and/or national initiatives.	documentation of active participant, leadership roles, presentations, publications, or committee service in



	local, regional, or national organizations, with evidence of how this engagement benefits the program
F. Documented success in securing and managing external grant funding and/or one other unique funding model to support the program mission.	• grant award letters, budget summaries showing fund allocation • narrative describing how funding directly supports the program mission • documentation of a unique funding model with evidence of sustainability



Standard 2: Faculty

Criteria	
Select TWO of the Following Criteria:	Evidence may include but is not limited to:
A. At least 50% of faculty (full and part-time) hold a CNE certification.	- A faculty profile table for each full- and part-time faculty - Copies of the CNE, CNEcl, CNEpv, or CNEen certification status and expiration dates, or a summary report from the human resources/credentialing system
B. At least 50% of faculty (full and part-time) are certified in their nursing specialty.	- A faculty profile table for each full- and part-time faculty demonstrating specialty certification held by each faculty member (e.g., CCRN, FNP-BC) and its relevance to their teaching assignment. - Copies of the nursing specialty certification type, status, and expiration date
C. A certified simulation coordinator actively managing the simulation program.	- The coordinator's current certification (e.g., CHSE, CHSOS) - Job description outlining their management responsibilities and documentation of their active oversight of simulation activities
D. A comprehensive faculty development program (individualized, tracked, and evaluated) with evidence of participation by at least 50% of the faculty.	- A formal faculty development plan - Individualized professional development records - Tracking system or participation roster demonstrating that at least 50% of faculty engaged in the program within the last academic year
E. A formal, structured, and active peer-mentoring program for full and part-time faculty.	- Formal mentoring agreements - Handbooks - Schedule of mentoring activities - Evidence of active participation (e.g., meeting logs, peer-review feedback, or program evaluations from mentors and mentees)



F. The Governing Organization supports, and at least 50% of faculty actively engage in clinical practice, service, scholarship, and/or research.	• Institutional policies showing support for these activities (e.g., release time, funding) • Faculty profile table or portfolio summaries documenting the specific practice, service, or scholarly contributions of at least 50% of the faculty
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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. Evidence may include orientation agendas; presentation materials; student handbooks; documentation of student attendance; evaluation data or surveys demonstrating that students understand program expectations and available resources.	
Select ONE of the Following:	Evidence may include but is not limited to:
A. At least 50% of nursing courses include <u>high-impact practices (HIPs)</u> for student support and success.	- Course syllabi or curriculum maps identifying specific HIPs (e.g., service learning, learning communities, or collaborative assignments) - Summary table demonstrating integration across at least 50% of nursing courses
B. At least one example with supporting documentation of an innovative student support service that improved student retention or progression.	- Narrative describing the unique support service and its implementation - Comparative data (e.g., retention or progression rates before and after implementation) that documents the service's impact Note: The narrative must include a justification of innovation as described in the Elective Criteria guidelines.
C. At least one example with supporting documentation of the innovative use of technology that supports course student learning.	- Documentation of the specific technology used - Evidence of how its application directly supported student learning outcomes or course engagement Note: The narrative must include a justification of innovation as described in the Elective Criteria guidelines.
D. Evidence of using predictive analytics to inform student support and retention strategies.	- Examples of data reports or dashboards used to identify at-risk students - Documentation of the specific interventions or support strategies implemented based on those analytic findings



E. 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.	• Mentoring program guidelines or training materials • Participation logs • At least one specific example—supported by survey data or qualitative feedback—illustrating how the program improved the student experience or curriculum progression
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Standard 4: Curriculum

Criteria	
REQUIRED: - Complete curriculum mapping (Criteria 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, and 4.10) that demonstrates substantial alignment with the student learning outcomes. - A Program of Study for each program option that demonstrates course sequencing through a term-by-term breakdown of all required nursing and general education courses. This document must provide a clear breakdown of the total credits for each course, including the specific allocation of contact hours for classroom, laboratory/simulation, and clinical/practicum experiences.	
Select TWO of the Following	Evidence may include but is not limited to:
A. Use of innovative assignments and/or clinical experiences that support student learning achievement in at least 50% of the nursing courses.	- Course syllabi - Curriculum map explicitly links each course and its associated learning activities to the course/end-of-program student learning outcomes - Summary table demonstrating integration across at least 50% of nursing courses Note: The narrative must include a justification of innovation as described in the Elective Criteria guidelines.
B. Integration of in-person, hands-on evidenced-based simulation into at least 50% of the nursing courses with tracked hours.	- Course syllabi identifying simulation requirements - Program of Study, tracking log or report demonstrating that simulation is integrated into at least 50% of nursing courses with the specific hours recorded for each
C. 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.	- Course syllabi for the practicum course(s) - Narrative description of the practicum model, clinical objectives - Mapping documentation showing how the experience directly aligns with and measures end-of-program outcomes Note: The narrative must include a justification of innovation as described in the Elective Criteria guidelines.
D. Use of a Competency-Based Education (CBE) curriculum framework or elements of CBE	A curriculum framework document outlining the CBE model



incorporated throughout the program of study.	List of defined competencies and how these competencies are assessed and tracked throughout the student's progression
E. Structured interprofessional classroom and/or laboratory/simulation experiences in a minimum of two nursing courses.	- Lesson plans - Simulation scenarios - Clinical schedules - Narrative description that identifies the specific healthcare disciplines involved - Collaborative objectives for the nursing students
F. At least one example of ongoing student engagement in faculty-led research, presentations, and/or publications.	- Co-authored publication citations - Conference programs listing student presenters - Research assistantship agreements with a summary of the student's specific contributions to the faculty-led project
G. 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.	- Course-level assessment reports - Meeting minutes showing the analysis of summative data - Specific curricular or instructional changes made as a result of the data



Standard 5: Outcomes

Criteria	
REQUIRED: • Systematic Plan for Evaluation documenting at least three years of EPSLO and program outcome data. • Graduate programs must also document at least three years of Role-Specific Nursing Competency data. • The plan should clearly show data analysis and any actions taken, when applicable. If this information is not located in the plan, then the meeting minutes/reports that include these details must also be provided.	
Select ONE of the Following:	Evidence may include but is not limited to:
A. 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).	• Descriptions for the specific performance-based assessments used • Rubrics • Summary of student performance data Note: The narrative must include a justification of innovation as described in the Elective Criteria guidelines.
B. 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.	• An aggregate data report identifying a specific area for improvement • Narrative describing the <i>faculty-developed</i> strategy • Documentation of the post-implementation outcome
C. 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.	• A disaggregate data report (e.g., by campus, program option, or student demographic) identifying a specific achievement gap • Narrative describing the <i>faculty-developed</i> strategy • Documentation of the resulting outcome



** The narrative must demonstrate a faculty-led strategy where the innovation is the specific instructional or curricular change implemented by faculty. The mere adoption of a third-party or proprietary product does not constitute an innovative strategy; if such a tool is used, the narrative must describe the unique, faculty-driven method of integration used to improve outcomes.*



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.

NOTE: If the nursing education unit is submitting an application for more than one program type, there will be a separate folder for each; the narrative and evidence must be organized and submitted separately as each program type will be assessed individually.

- 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 (comprehensive yet concise) for each Standard that includes required and selected Criteria
- Create subfolders for each Standard and upload all supporting evidence into the appropriate subfolders separately for each program being considered for distinction.
 - 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.