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Systematic Plan of Evaluation Part I: Assessment of End-of-Program Student Learning Outcomes

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ABSTRACT

As an accrediting agency recognized by the U.S. Department of Education and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, the Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing has established the Accreditation Standards and Criteria for the evaluation of nursing programs, including the evaluation of outcomes. This article outlines the essential elements and structure of a systematic plan of evaluation for a nursing program, and it describes assessment and evaluation processes for end-of-program student learning outcomes.

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Introduction

To paraphrase Mitchell (2016), former U.S. Department of Education Under Secretary of Education, the achievement of accreditation indicates that a program provides worthwhile education to its students and prepares graduates for employment. Therefore, the Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing (ACEN) process emphasizes student outcomes as a primary measure of a meaningful education and the preparation for employment. In July 2016, the ACEN adopted the revised Standards and Criteria, which were developed to clarify requirements for accreditation and to emphasize programmatic evaluation processes, end-of-program student learning outcomes, and program outcomes. For ACEN-accredited programs and programs seeking ACEN candidacy, mandatory implementation of the 2017 Standards and Criteria begins on January 1, 2018.

The most frequent inquiries to the ACEN professional staff relate to the ACEN Standard 6 Outcomes. Standard 6 Outcomes and the supporting Criteria were significantly revised when the Board of Commissioners approved the 2017 Accreditation Standards in 2016. Standard 6 Outcomes states, “Program evaluation demonstrates that students have achieved each end-of-program student learning outcome and each program outcome” (ACEN Accreditation Standards and Criteria, Standard 6 Outcomes, 2016a). Because the focus of Standard 6 Outcomes includes assessment of end-of-program student learning outcomes and program outcomes, as well as the development of a systematic plan of evaluation, the purpose of this article is

to distinguish the end-of-program student learning outcomes from program outcomes, outline central components of the systematic plan of evaluation, and describe assessment of end-of-program student learning outcomes. This is the first article in a two-part series that describes the required components of a systematic plan of evaluation. This article emphasizes the assessment of end-of-program student learning outcomes. The second article, *Systematic Plan of Evaluation Part II: Assessment of Program Outcomes*, will address the assessment of program outcomes.

ACEN Outcomes Definitions and Requirements

A premise central to this discussion is the adage “faculty own the curriculum” and, therefore, the assessment of its outcomes. While the ACEN Accreditation Standards include a standard specific to curriculum (Standard 4 Curriculum), faculty must understand that curriculum development and implementation are interwoven with the assessment and evaluation of the end-of-program student learning outcomes. Curriculum development should not occur without consideration of how the end-of-program outcomes are assessed and ultimately evaluated through the implementation of the systematic plan of evaluation.

End-of-program student learning outcomes are defined in the ACEN Accreditation Manual Glossary (2016b) as follows: “Statements of learner-oriented expectations written in measurable terms that express the knowledge, skills, or behaviors that the students should be able to demonstrate upon completion of the nursing program regardless of the nursing program option. End-of-program student learning outcomes must be consistent with standards of

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contemporary nursing practice” (p. 11). Particularly, nursing faculty develop end-of-program student learning outcomes based on contemporary nursing practice, established professional practice guidelines, educational philosophy, the mission, and the goals of the nursing program. Documentation of the assessment and evaluation of end-of-program student learning outcomes is required within the program’s systematic plan of evaluation.

The assessment and evaluation of program outcomes are also required in the program’s systematic plan of evaluation. *Program outcomes* are defined as follows: “Measurable indicators that reflect the extent to which the purposes of the nursing program are achieved and by which nursing program effectiveness is documented” (ACEN Accreditation Manual, Glossary, 2016b, p. 10). The ACEN requires nursing faculty to document the assessment of licensure examination pass rates, program completion rates, and job placement rates; faculty may elect to assess additional program outcomes as desired or required by other agencies. In addition to documenting achievement of required program outcomes for ACEN accreditation, licensure pass rates, program completion rates, and job placement rates must be accessible to the public. According to the *ACEN Policy #29 Advertising, Publication, Promotional Literature*, the program must publish the required program outcome data based on the ACEN definitions of each outcome, and at a minimum, the program must publish annualized, aggregated student achievement outcome data from the assessment cycle of the most recent cohort(s). A program’s compliance with the 2017 ACEN Standard 6 Outcomes is an essential measure of the program’s quality. The publication of program outcomes provides comparative data, which the public can use to evaluate a program’s performance on outcome metrics that are consistent across nursing education programs.

Plan for Systematic Evaluation of Outcomes

Stephen Covey (1989) suggests that, in order to be successful, we must start with the end in mind. To follow Dr. Covey’s advice for success, the development of a written systematic plan of evaluation is an essential faculty process that allows the nursing program to identify, develop, and organize its end-of-program student learning outcomes and program outcomes. In other words, when the nursing faculty establish the end-of-program student learning and program outcomes, the goals of the nursing program are explicit to the students and the public. Once the end-of-program student learning outcomes and program outcomes are identified, a written plan, which establishes expected levels of achievement, appropriate assessment methods, and intervals for assessment must be developed.

The ongoing, systematic, structured, and documented analysis, assessment, and evaluation of the program’s end-of-program student learning outcomes and program outcomes provide the nursing faculty with data, which should be used for the maintenance and improvement of the program. The analysis of assessment data provides faculty with objective information about the items assessed, while the evaluation of the assessment data allows the faculty to make a determination about the quality of the data obtained. For purposes of this article, the term *assessment* is inclusive of analysis, and the term *evaluation* is used to describe the process of determining that the assessment data are useful and valid. The authors view assessment and evaluation as separate and distinct processes necessary to ensure that the program’s systematic plan of evaluation is effective and to verify that program graduates achieve the end-of-program student learning outcomes. The assessment and evaluation process should be used by the faculty to inform decision making for program improvement. Finally, documentation of outcomes assessment and evaluation processes provides verification, or evidence, that the program is using data to improve the quality of the nursing program.

The systematic plan of evaluation is an operational document created, owned, and driven by the faculty. Although a requirement for ACEN accreditation, some state agencies stipulate use of an evaluation plan outlining compulsory elements, which may also be included in the systematic plan of evaluation. While this discussion focuses on the ACEN’s expectations for the systematic plan of evaluation, faculty should refer to their state agency(ies), governing organization, and institutional accrediting agency for any additional requirements for program evaluation. As required in the 2017 ACEN Accreditation Standards, the systematic plan of evaluation consists of deliberate and planned assessment and evaluation of six elements, including assessment methods, expected levels of achievement, assessment frequencies, sufficient data, analysis of the assessment data, and documentation of decision making on the basis of the use of the assessment data. Recognizing that the systematic plan of evaluation must include these six elements, the format of the systematic plan of evaluation may differ from program to program. Nursing faculty have autonomy in developing the format for documenting the program’s systematic plan of evaluation. However, the ACEN has an optional template on the Web site that could be utilized.

Assessment of a program’s end-of-program student learning outcomes must be completed systematically, and it may occur as often as necessary to collect sufficient data for comprehensive evaluation. In addition, the assessment and evaluation of the end-of-program student learning outcomes should be conducted at regular intervals. The ACEN does not require annual assessment and evaluation of each end-of-program student learning outcome. Depending upon the program type, the student population (demographics), the number of end-of-program student learning outcomes, and the types of assessment methods selected, the faculty may analyze and evaluate annually, every 2 years, or even every 3 years; however, regular intervals of assessment and evaluation for each end-of-program student learning outcome are expected. As faculty develop a schedule for assessment and evaluation of the end-of-program student learning outcomes, sufficiency of data should be considered.

Whereas the systematic plan of evaluation describes the faculty’s planning and implementation of its assessment and evaluation of end-of-program student learning outcomes and program outcomes, the remaining sections of this article will focus on the development, assessment, and evaluation of only the end-of-program student learning outcomes. A subsequent article, *Systematic Plan of Evaluation Part II: Program Outcomes*, will provide additional details regarding the evaluation of program outcomes for ACEN-accredited programs and programs seeking ACEN accreditation.

End-of-Program Student Learning Outcomes

Since 1991, the ACEN has included the assessment of student learning outcomes in its Accreditation Standards. Therefore, nursing faculty have been expected to assess, analyze, and evaluate end-of-program student learning outcomes for decades. Expanding upon the expectation for assessment and evaluation of student learning outcomes, the ACEN Criterion 6.1 (2017) now clearly conveys the expectation of deliberate, thoughtful, and intentional assessment of each end-of-program student learning outcome. As a guide for assessment of learning, the *National Institute for Learning Outcomes and Assessment (2016)* offers five principles for effective assessment of student learning outcomes: development of specific, actionable learning outcomes statements, connection of learning goals with student assignments and work, collaboration with faculty, creation of assessment approaches that generate actionable evidence about student learning, and improvement and compliance. Although the National Institute for Learning Outcomes and Assessment’s principles are insightful, they underscore three gaps in knowledge some nursing faculty experience in the assessment and evaluation of end-of-

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