

Virtual Site Visit Policy

With the global impact of COVID-19 the ACEN Board of Commissioners, acting under its authority per Part B, Article II, Section 2 of the Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing, Inc. Bylaws September 2018, implemented the following emergency measures to allow for virtual site visits. This policy was effective upon passage in April 2020, reauthorized in March 2021 and January 2022, and shall sunset one year after approval/reauthorization is made by the ACEN Board of Commissioners; or until updated or reapproved by the ACEN Board of Commissioners at a date to be determined before then.

This policy has been implemented in keeping with the guidance provided by the United States Department of Education (USDE) on March 17, 2020, allowing temporary flexibility to use virtual site visits to help accrediting agencies serve governing organizations, nursing programs, and students through the period of COVID-19 interruption. The USDE also allowed adoption of a temporary virtual site visit policy without a public comment period.

The purpose of this policy is to:

1. protect the health and safety of ACEN peer evaluators, students, governing organization/nursing program representatives, the public, and other stakeholders; and
2. continue advancing quality nursing education through the function of accreditation without compromise.

The ACEN may schedule a virtual site visit when:

1. a manmade, natural disaster, or other public health emergency, prohibits the customary in-person site visit format;
2. the health or safety of peer evaluators is in question;
3. it is not feasible for the peer evaluators to reach a location; or
4. there are special cases as approved by the ACEN CEO.

The ACEN Chief Executive Officer (CEO) reserves the right and has the authority to determine when to conduct a virtual site visit and when to conduct a customary in-person site visit. While the ACEN staff will seek input from the governing organization/nursing program representatives, the CEO's determination is not appealable.

The ACEN CEO reserves the right and has the authority to determine whether a delay of the initial accreditation or continuing accreditation site visit is warranted. If the CEO determines a delay of the initial accreditation or continuing accreditation site visit is warranted, then the delay shall not exceed one calendar year. While the ACEN staff will seek input from the governing organization/nursing program representatives, the CEO's determination is not appealable.

Use of Virtual Site Visit

A virtual site visit is not the customary format used by the ACEN to conduct the review of a nursing program seeking initial accreditation or continuing accreditation. When the ACEN

conducts a virtual site visit, all or some of the peer evaluators are not physically present at the governing organization/nursing program.

A virtual site visit shall use an engaged, interactive format; it shall not rely solely on a review of documents or exchanges of emails. The rigor, quality, and process of the site visit as well as the opportunity for the governing organization/nursing program to provide evidence as well as verify, clarify, or amplify evidence must be comparable to a customary in-person site visit. Therefore, a virtual site visit requires the use of video or web conferencing tools, which allow real-time synchronous communication among participants and visual display of individuals, groups, documents, and/or physical spaces.

A virtual site visit will be scheduled accordingly to accommodate time zone(s) of all ACEN peer evaluators conducting the virtual visit and the time zone(s) of the nursing program hosting the visit, with the understanding that adjustments to schedules will be needed of all participants involved in the visit.

Full or Hybrid Virtual Site Visits

A full virtual site visit is where all ACEN peer evaluators conduct their review of the governing organization/nursing program using only real-time synchronous video or web conferencing tools, which can be supplemented by telephonic conferencing tools.

A hybrid virtual site visit is where some ACEN peer evaluators (e.g., 1-2) conduct their review of the governing organization/nursing program using real-time synchronous video or web conferencing tools, which can be supplemented by telephonic conferencing tools; while other ACEN peer evaluators (e.g., 1-2) conduct their review of the governing organization/nursing program in-person.

Eligibility for a Virtual Site Visit

1. All governing organizations/nursing programs seeking initial accreditation or continuing accreditation with the ACEN are eligible for a virtual site visit. Continuing accreditation includes all governing organizations/nursing programs with the current accreditation status of continuing accreditation, continuing accreditation with conditions, continuing accreditation with warning, or continuing accreditation for good cause.
2. Under the direction of the CEO, ACEN staff will review a governing organization's/nursing program's accreditation history, annual reports, and the reason for considering a virtual site visit to determine whether a governing organization/nursing program is eligible for a virtual site visit.
3. For all governing organizations/nursing programs seeking initial accreditation or continuing accreditation where 100% of the peer evaluators conducted their review virtually, the ACEN must conduct a follow-up in-person verification site visit to the governing organizations/nursing programs (though not necessarily a full peer-review site visit) within a reasonable period of time following the virtual site visit.

Evidence, Technology Infrastructure, Facilities, and Support Services

1. All virtual site visit activities shall be scheduled using the governing organization's real-time synchronous virtual meeting system or the ACEN's real-time synchronous virtual meeting system.
2. Regardless of which real-time synchronous virtual meeting system is used, the governing organization/nursing program is responsible for ensuring that its technology infrastructure, facilities, and support services can accommodate a fully engaged, real-time interactive virtual site visit.
3. Whether a full or hybrid virtual site visit, the governing organization/nursing program must ensure that there are adequate meeting spaces (facilities) for governing organization/nursing program representatives to meet with the ACEN peer evaluators, including simultaneous meetings as needed with individuals and groups.
4. Whether a full or hybrid virtual site visit, the governing organization/nursing program must use the ACEN Document Repository to upload the program's report and supporting evidence.
5. Whether a full or hybrid virtual site visit, the governing organization/nursing program must provide virtual access to all interviewees (simultaneously as needed with individuals and groups) that is comparable and sufficient to the access normally found during a customary in-person site visit.

ACEN Reserve Rights and Applicability to Current Policies

1. In no way does this Virtual Site Visit Policy alter the reserve rights and authority of the ACEN Board of Commissioners.
2. Unless specifically stated in this document, all ACEN policies, processes, procedures, practices, and protocols apply and remain in force.
3. All applicable initial accreditation and continuing accreditation fees, policies, processes, procedures, practices, and protocols shall be the same as a full in-person site visit.
4. ACEN reserves the right to cancel a full or hybrid virtual site visit at any time prior to or during the scheduled visit and schedule a full in-person site visit instead. An in-person site visit will be scheduled within a reasonable period of time following the canceled virtual site visit.
5. If there is a technology failure that significantly impairs the peer evaluators' ability to have an engaged, real-time interactive review then the team chair shall terminate the virtual site visit immediately, and the governing organization/-nursing program cannot be visited/accredited using the virtual site visit format. A full in-person site visit will be scheduled within a reasonable period of time following the terminated virtual site visit.
6. If the team chair and team members determine that the program's report and supporting evidence provided in the ACEN Document Repository are inadequate and the inadequacy significantly impairs the team's ability to conduct a review comparable to an in-person site visit then the team chair, in consultation with ACEN staff (before or during the virtual site visit), shall terminate the virtual site visit and the governing organization/nursing program cannot be visited/accredited using the virtual site visit format. A full in-person site visit will be scheduled within a reasonable period of time following the terminated virtual site visit.

7. The governing organization/nursing program shall not audio and/or video record any portion of the virtual site visit. Based on ACEN Policy #3 I Integrity, if evidence of recording is discovered, the team chair shall terminate the virtual site visit immediately, and the governing organization/nursing program cannot be visited/accredited using the virtual site visit format. Per Policy #3 I, if evidence of recording is discovered then this may adversely affect the governing organization's/nursing program's accreditation status with the ACEN.

Document History

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