National League for Nursing Commission for Nursing Education Accreditation Publishes Newly Updated Standards

Programs Seeking CNEA Accreditation Will Find Echoes of Future of Nursing 2020-2030, an Influential Report by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering & Medicine

Washington, DC — Following an extensive review and analysis of priorities in nursing education today and for the coming decade, the National League for Nursing Commission for Nursing Education Accreditation (CNEA) has announced updated Accreditation Standards for Nursing Education Programs.

The intensive, nearly yearlong revision process included public comment, feedback from CNEA committee members and other stakeholders, and a thorough investigation of literature detailing current challenges and opportunities for improvement in nursing education. Among the sources reviewed was the latest iteration of the Future of Nursing (FON) report, sponsored by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and published in May 2021 by the respected National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (formerly the Institute of Medicine). This recent version covers the timeframe of 2020 to 2030.

Building on the IOM’s 2011 publication calling for nurses to have a more central role in delivery of the nation’s health care, the 2021 report urges adaptations in curricula to incorporate instruction regarding the social determinants of health. The Academies’ recommendations anticipate that this awareness, along with steps to increase diversity in nursing and nursing education, will aid in achieving health equity for traditionally underserved individuals and communities.

Reflecting similar goals and sentiments, the CNEA’s Board of Commissioners, chaired by Joan Darden, PhD, RN, ANEF, approved the standards revision in October, with Dr. Darden describing them as “supportive of curricula that demonstrate evidence of education based on health care quality, the social determinants of health, health equity, and population health, while addressing the needs of diverse learners. The standards further promote inclusivity and facilitate academic success, as students prepare for careers in nursing guided by ethical practice.”

According to CNEA Executive Director Teresa Shellenbarger, PhD, RN, CNE, CNEcl, ANEF, several key elements distinguish the 2021 standards from the 2016 standards. Chief among these is a requirement for programs to adequately instruct students in the delivery of culturally responsive care for diverse and vulnerable patient populations. Furthermore, programs must have a demonstrable level of faculty expertise in the social determinants of health; population health; health equity; and technological competence in meeting program goals.

The updated standards, Dr. Shellenbarger said, “maintain CNEA accreditation as a mark of quality and excellence in nursing education that embodies a commitment to promoting excellence and integrity in nursing education through an accreditation process that respects the diversity of program mission, curricula, students, and faculty, while emphasizing a culture of
continuous quality improvement and ensuring the preparation of a caring and competent nursing workforce. The Standards Review Committee excelled in its work and developed a timely and relevant document that may be used to guide programs in their quality improvement initiatives.”

Nursing education programs across the spectrum of higher education seeking CNEA accreditation will be expected to meet the revised standards exclusively beginning in mid-2023. To give programs time to make the necessary adjustments, an 18-month transition phase, beginning next month and lasting through May 2023, will be in effect. During that period, programs may choose either the 2021 or the 2016 standards for program assessment, evaluation, and accreditation purposes. Both the 2016 and 2021 revised standards may be found on the CNEA website.

Since its launch in 2014, the CNEA has pre-accredited or accredited a growing number of programs. There are currently 112 CNEA pre-accredited or accredited programs, representing more than 12,000 students enrolled in practical/vocational nursing, diploma (RN), associate’s, bachelor’s, master’s, and clinical doctorate programs across 29 states.

With the addition of an advanced degree program in Christchurch, New Zealand seeking CNEA accreditation, announced in March, the CNEA has truly proven its value to nursing education on a global stage. The CNEA became an official recognized federal accreditation agency of the U.S. Department of Education earlier this year after undergoing an extensive review process and demonstrating compliance with requirements.

For more information, visit CNEA.NLN.org.