

An Update on Education Amidst the Pandemic

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Two years ago, life as we know it changed—and it continues to evolve. What effect has the pandemic had on nuclear medicine technologist (NMT) educational programs and students?

In 2020, NMT programs were faced with the challenge to convert in-person programs to virtual almost overnight. Needless to say, programs have faced numerous challenges over the past two years. The pandemic left programs in a scramble to adopt an online delivery platform and learn how to engage an anxiety-ridden population virtually, and clinical rotations were suspended. Educators and students alike are still learning how to navigate this new world and its continuously evolving changes.

According to data provided by the American Registry of Radiologic Technologists, the total number of first-time examinees in nuclear medicine technology in 2020 was down 29% compared to 2019 (pre-pandemic). In 2021, it was up 150% compared to 2020 and up 9% compared to 2019. Similarly, the Nuclear Medicine Technologist Certification Board reported a total of 637 candidates for the entry-level Certified Nuclear Medicine Technologist exam during the 2021 year compared to 715 in 2019 and 601 in 2020. The 2021 exam data showed an 11% decrease in the total number of candidates from the pre-pandemic 2019 data.

Over the past two years, programs have cycled in and out of a seminormal routine with the occurrence of each new COVID-19 variant. Clinical requirements have undergone a constant succession of updates, and programs have battled to keep students informed. Fortunately, most programs are now reporting enhanced communication with their clinical affiliates. In addition, many programs are reporting that clinical affiliates are now typically providing the personal protective equipment necessary for clinical rotations.

Today, students are learning to live and learn in a new environment. Many programs have returned to fully on-site operations and are falling back into a more routine operation, while others have embraced a virtual world. Those that are in-person have expressed that their biggest concern at this time is attendance. Intermittent periods of absence of faculty and students through COVID-related illness, isolation, and quarantine have proved difficult to navigate.

COVID policies are most often driven by the academic institution rather than by individual academic programs; in addition, programs are required to follow COVID policies of their affiliated clinical sites if the policies are related to clinical education. What do vaccine requirements look like for nuclear medicine programs and their students? Colleges

and universities vary greatly on their vaccine requirement status. At first glance, it seems that state-operated facilities are less likely to require vaccination than privately run universities; this is because of the laws associated with state-run facilities. Regardless of ownership status, however, students must abide by medical affiliate requirements in order to participate in clinical rotations. The vaccine mandate was recently upheld, and clinical facilities are requiring employees, students, and program faculty to be vaccinated.



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The SNMMI-TS has been working to identify ways in which we can help. SNMMI-TS provides students free membership throughout their time in a nuclear medicine program; this provides them access to numerous FREE online courses and sessions. In 2021, the SNMMI-TS offered the first ever focused full-day *student* course, which provided the opportunity to connect with leaders in the field while learning about the next steps in their career path, how to stand out from their peers (resume building and networking), and the numerous career opportunities available to them as NMTs. A similar program is planned for 2022, again aiming to help students as they transition into the work world. In addition, the SNMMI-TS has a FREE online review course and mock exam available to SNMMI-TS students studying for their certification exam. Finally, the SNMMI-TS has a dedicated Student and Recent Graduate Task Force focused on creating programming and benefits to support early career professionals.

The field of nuclear medicine and molecular imaging continues to grow and expand with new therapeutic agents, and the demand for highly skilled NMTs has increased, despite the challenges created by the pandemic. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Outlook Handbook (www.bls.gov/ooh), “employment of nuclear medicine technologists is projected to grow 8 percent from 2020 to 2030 ... About 1,500 openings for nuclear medicine technologists are projected each year, on average, over the decade.” The SNMMI-TS is excited about this growth, but we know that educators and students need more support, more funding, and more time to teach the critical skills needed to be a highly qualified NMT. If students or program directors have ideas that they would like considered, we encourage them to email memberinfo@snmmi.org to share them with the Task Force.