

River Valley Community College nursing program on track to regain national accreditation

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By Matt Nanci Sentinel Staff

River Valley Community College is on track to regain national accreditation for its associate degree nursing program, the college's president announced Tuesday.

The college received full approval of its registered nurse program from the N.H. Board of Nursing in mid-October. Under administrative rules, the approval lasts for five years.

As a result, River Valley's nursing program can now receive candidacy status from the Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing and move closer toward regaining national accreditation for its associate degree nursing program.

College officials submitted a self-study on the nursing program to the accreditation commission with the expectation of receiving candidacy status by the middle of December. River Valley officials hopes the college will regain its national accreditation in time for May 2016 graduates.

The nursing program currently consists of 32 students, with 16 attending River Valley's main campus in Claremont and 16 in Keene.

The commission suspended the college's national accreditation in August 2013, due to low scores on the state licensing exam over a five-year-period. River Valley failed to prove that faculty develop and regularly review curriculum and failed to show that instruction meets best practice standards, according to the accreditation website. In addition, the college was not adequately measuring student learning, the website says.

River Valley then suspended classes for first-year nursing students and did not admit freshmen into the program in the fall of 2013. Also, in January, the college hired Dr. Patricia Shinn as nursing department chairwoman to help regain accreditation.

Since her hiring, the nursing program has gone through a major overhaul.

"We started from the bottom up" and "rewrote everything," Shinn said.

Some of the improvements made to the nursing program include rewriting course objectives, adding a human development course, adding one-credit seminars and hiring new faculty. Shinn says college officials hope to hire another faculty member for the Keene campus in the spring.

National accreditation is important because "the state board of nursing requires it," Shinn said.

"If you don't have that national accreditation, you need to be getting it or you won't be approved by the state (as a nursing program)," she said.

Being nationally accredited also adds to the quality of the program because it shows the program has met the standards of an external review, Shinn added.

Accreditation is also important for nursing students when they apply for jobs.

Shinn said that it is possible to get a nursing job after graduating from a program that is not nationally accredited, but having that accreditation helps students be more competitive and get the jobs they want.

“This is tremendous news for the college and a testament to the hard work of our faculty and administration,” said River Valley President Dr. Alicia Harvey-Smith in a news release. “Dr. Shinn and the faculty were committed to achieving this outcome and I could not be prouder of them and the reinvigorated teaching and learning environment they are creating for our nursing students.”

Shinn attributes the accreditation issues partially to a lack of stability in the college’s administration. She said in the past six years, there have been six different directors of nursing.

She also said previous nursing directors had too many teaching duties in addition to the responsibilities associated with maintaining the program’s accreditation. Shinn said maintaining accreditation is a full-time job in and of itself.

“I’m finding that there is more support for this program through resources and support for the director’s position,” she said. “I have a lighter teaching load and am able to put more effort into the accreditation.”

Matt Nanci can be reached at 352-1234, extension 1439, or mnanci@keenesentinel.com.