Accreditation Letter Glows With Praise

It takes most of us a time or two to get something just right, so it would be hard to criticize the College of Education at the University of Arkansas at Fort Smith if it had been given a so-so rating for its first-ever attempt at receiving accreditation.

The college did quite a bit better than that. It received a glowing report and its planning document on how to address department goals and accreditation issues was chosen by the accrediting agency as a model nationally for others to follow.

Congratulations are in order for Roland Smith, dean of the College of Education, and his staff for such an extraordinary showing.

Smith is quick to say that it was not only a department and university effort but a community effort as well, with UAFS faculty and superintendents and faculty from a score of area school districts and even college students themselves involved.

There was much riding on the visit from the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education. When the university was formed from what was Westark Community College, the university inherited an early childhood education program. The understanding was that UAFS would take that program, under conditional approval, and grow it into a college of education and receive accreditation for such. Had it not received accreditation, the college would not have continued to exist.

"Literally, the existence of the College of Education was at stake," Smith said.

The college set to work in the early days, crafting a framework, laying out the philosophy, goals and beliefs that permeate the entire program and hiring qualified staff — a must from Chancellor Joel Stubblefield.

It took three years to prepare and reach goals, but when the accreditation team left after a week, members said the "magic words," as Smith put it — "You have met all six standards."

That, Smith said, was a tremendous relief, but the final vote and announcement didn't come until this month at the council's national meeting. This is not a rubber-stamp outfit, and not just a few of the institutions it visits get conditional status or worse. It was with some surprise, then, when the College of Education received its letter from the council saying it had found no areas that needed improvement.

"Let me take this opportunity to congratulate you and your professional education unit for displaying the high quality necessary to be granted national accreditation," stated the letter from council president Arthur E. Wise. "... Special congratulations are in order, because the Unit Accreditation Board has cited no official areas for improvement relative to any of the standards."

Said Sandi Sanders, interim chancellor: "The accreditation process is rigorous, and it requires hard work and a first-rate College of Education. We are extremely proud of our faculty, staff and administration."

What does the accreditation say to students? Quality program, high standards and excellence, for starters.

Smith said the college has raised its admission requirements and has set a goal of recruiting top high school candidates. In apparent response (quality begets quality), enrollment keeps going up, Smith said. There are 1,000 education majors at UAFS, the most of any major being offered. And the students, he said, "are rising to the challenge."

Smith says he tells students he wants them, when they graduate, to be able to compete with teachers anywhere in the country, but just the same, he wants them to stay in this area and teach.

"Our goal is to raise the educational level in this river valley," he said.

No doubt, the UAFS College of Education is doing just that.