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VWCC halts effort to regain nursing accreditation

The school said that the endorsement from a national nursing association wasn't worth the cost of getting it.

By Ray Reed 981-3351

Virginia Western Community College has ended its effort to regain accreditation by a national nursing association.

The accreditation's value to graduates didn't equal the cost of earning it, even if it could have been earned, the college has decided. Virginia Western said in April it had lost the recognition from the National League for Nursing Accrediting Commission in 2006.

The association requires a master's degree for all faculty members, including those who instruct students during their hands-on clinical training in hospitals. Most of Virginia Western's clinical instructors have only bachelor's degrees.

"Virginia Western has determined that the endorsement of the NLNAC does not provide added value to the nursing program or to our students, and will therefore no longer pursue it," the school said in a news release.

The association's accreditation is voluntary, and many colleges don't have it, Anne Kornegay, Virginia Western's dean of natural science, mathematics and health technology, has said.

Other nursing authorities suggested the accreditation's value may be debated.

"NLNAC, contrary to their PR, is not the final word on whether or not a student's education is of value, and even California (which has one of the highest licensure standards) does not require this of the registered nurse, nor of our nursing schools," wrote Genevieve Clavreul, speaking for Working Nurse Magazine, a Los Angeles-based employment publication that chose to weigh in on the Virginia Western issue.

Clavreul said graduates of the Virginia Western program shouldn't back down in their efforts to be admitted into bachelor's degree programs at other schools.

"They should challenge" any school's requirement that an associate-level degree come from a NLNAC-accredited school, Clavreul said.

"I think that prerequisite is useless because, definitely, this is not a seal of good housekeeping," Clavreul said. "It doesn't make any change in the quality of the school."

Nurses with master's degrees rarely have the hands-on involvement in training that typically is provided by bachelor's-level nurses, Clavreul said.

The association's accreditation doesn't affect other qualities of Virginia Western's program, the news release said. The program holds approval until 2015 from the Virginia Board of Nursing, and Virginia Western itself remains accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools.

Virginia Western students score well on the state's nurse licensing examination; 98 percent of the 2006 graduates passed on their first try, VWCC spokeswoman Margaret Boyes said. The national pass rate was 88 percent, and in Virginia it was 85 percent that year, she said.

"We elected to stop pursuing accreditation after assessing the situation, and our press release does refer to the ongoing requirement for master's-prepared faculty. We don't see that situation changing in the near future," Kornegay said.

All eight of the school's full-time faculty will have master's degrees as of August, Kornegay said, although one of those degrees is in a health-related field other than nursing.

Most of the 12 instructors in the Virginia Western clinical program have only bachelor's degrees, Kornegay said. A nationwide shortage of master's-qualified clinical instructors apparently presented an insurmountable barrier under the rules of the National League for Nursing Accrediting Commission.

The certification's loss didn't sit well with many of the 63 current and former nursing students who, through Roanoke lawyers Jeff Dorsey and John Fishwick, filed a \$7 million claim with the state because of the school's lost certification.

"We are disappointed to learn that Virginia Western will no longer pursue NLNAC accreditation," the lawyers said in a statement. The accreditation would have ensured the students of greater employment and continuing educational opportunities, they said.

"Significantly, when Virginia Western lost the accreditation, they hid that fact from the nursing students for several months. When Virginia Western was forced to acknowledge the loss, the school responded by playing down the loss and insisting that it had applied for reaccreditation. Now, Virginia Western has switched to yet another tack," Dorsey and Fishwick said.