

Accreditation Problem Causes Graduation Delay For Health Info Students

(Continued From Page 1-A) disappointment, confusion and inconvenience" at the news.

The students and BCC staff are after the same thing: Both want to see the program accredited with the least amount of inconvenience to students possible.

"This is a major inconvenience for us," said Keefer. "I'm confident they will be able to work it out, but some of the other students aren't. Considering how bad the situation is they really are trying to accommodate everyone as best as is possible."

At each of the three campuses involved in the regional program, staff met with students to find out what would best serve their needs and reduce hardships created by the delay. BCC students chose to delay one summer quarter course until fall quarter.

BCC To Waive Tuition

On Monday BCC reached agreement with students on how the extension will be handled, agreeing to waive tuition for the one class that will be held over until fall quarter and to offer it as an independent study.

Most if not all of the 18 second-year students on the three campuses knew upon entering the program that it was new and not accredited. They and faculty members anticipated the program would receive accreditation before the first classes were due to graduate this summer.

Materials Misleading?

Keefer said she and several other of the nine second-year students at BCC didn't know the program's status until shortly after enrolling. "Most of us then considered the time that we had already spent in the program and the assurances that we were receiving about accreditation and we decided that our best option was to continue in the curriculum," the students wrote in their statement.

Keefer said she and some others felt misled by materials received in advance of enrollment. No where in BCC's 1992 catalog, the first BCC program brochure and a flyer published by the Southeastern Regional Allied Health Consortium did it state that the program was not accredited. Some applicants inferred that it was because of vague wording in the documents. The 1992 course catalog stated, for example, "A graduate of an accredited program is eligible to write the national qualifying examination for certification as an Accredited Record Technician (ART)."

The current BCC program brochure, created about 1 1/2 years ago after a program instructor was hired, is somewhat clearer, if optimistic. It states, "When the program receives accreditation, students will be eligible to apply to write the national qualifying examination for certification as an Accredited Record Technician (ART)."

September Site Visit

The soonest the Health Information Technology program can be initially accredited is some time after a new site visit expected this September. Because they must be enrolled at the time of the site visit, second-year students must extend their enrollment by one quarter if they are to graduate from an accredited program. The students were to matriculate in August with Associate in Applied Science degrees.

On Tuesday, the Southeastern Regional Allied Health Consortium submitted a new letter seeking accreditation of the regional three-campus program from the Council for Allied Health Education through the American Health Information Management Association (AHIMA) of Chicago, Ill.

When AHIMA had questions regarding the administration of the program following the agency's first site visit last November, the three colleges voluntarily withdrew their application in order to restructure the program.

"I think what we did was the right thing," said Simpson. "It was in the best interests of the students. This way we believe they will be able to graduate from an accredited program."

BCC, Cape Fear Community College in Wilmington and James Sprunt Community College in Kenansville had anticipated the year-old program would receive either full or provisional accreditation following the November 1993 site visit.

Cooperative Effort

Health Information Technology was one of the first allied health programs offered under the umbrella of the Southeastern Regional Allied Health Consortium. It is set up with three faculty members, one at each college where courses are offered, and a shared director. BCC Instructor Polly Decker, who did not return Beacon telephone calls, is serving as acting director until the position is filled on a permanent basis.

Students at a fourth consortium campus, Southeastern Community College in Whiteville, can take some courses at SECC, then transfer to one of the other three campuses to complete the program. Students can enroll full-time or take one or two courses at a time.

The consortium was developed as a cooperative effort among the four area community colleges and the Coastal Area Health Education Center in Wilmington to identify regional health care personnel needs and to act in concert to meet those needs. The Consortium successfully applied for a \$947,400 two-year grant from the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust, of which \$421,200 was divided among the three information technology programs over

1992 and 1993.

After BCC President W. Michael Reaves and Simpson met last Friday with a group of concerned second-year students and at least one parent, BCC agreed to waive tuition for the one course to be delayed until fall.

The Health Information Seminar will be offered as an independent study class in fall quarter, which will enable students to seek employment and still complete the program. Students will be working on projects and will meet several times during the quarter with their instructor.

At Cape Fear Community College, two classes will be delayed until fall, said Susan Vinson-Greene, program instructor. The five second-year students will take Health Statistics and the Health Information Seminar, with one offered during the noon hour and the other on Saturday morning.

At James Sprunt, instructor Loraine Smith said her four second-year students will be taking the Health Information Seminar in the fall, probably at night.

Consortium Unique

The consortium has hired consultant Susan Parker to help it redesign administration of the program and to serve as liaison with AHIMA. Tuesday consortium members approved a new letter of application for program accreditation and a proposed new operating structure.

The consortium proposes to operate with an executive board composed of the presidents of the member colleges. The program director would be employed through Brunswick Community College, with all three schools sharing the cost.

"We believe this will work and AHIMA says it can work," said Simpson.

How the program budget will be controlled hasn't been worked out, but will be within the next few weeks.

Only one other consortium has been accredited by AHIMA. Located in Illinois, it operates as a

separate legal entity with its own staffing.

"They were expecting us to do something we can't do in the community college system in North Carolina, to create an independent entity," said Vinson-Greene.

"They really didn't have a problem with anything else," said Simpson. "They just couldn't get past the questions surrounding the consortium."

Coming up with a scheme that could satisfy requirements of both the state Department of Community Colleges and the accreditation agency has been a "challenge," Simpson said, but one that she said should result in "a first class program."

"There is no one like us in the United States," she said. "The model we develop will be what others look at."

Diminished job opportunities were a chief concern voiced by BCC students over the program delay.

Some employers, like Columbus County Hospital or New Hanover Regional Medical Center, either require or give preference to ARTs

over other candidates for technician jobs, but also hire clerks at lower wages.

ART status can affect starting salaries and opportunities for advancement.

"Basically all our medical record positions here require accreditation," said Deborah Dallas, employment coordinator of Columbus County Hospital in Whiteville.

CCH had anticipated hiring a graduate of BCC's program to fill a newly-approved coding technician position on its staff, she said, but probably won't be able to. The position requires either an ART or someone with two years of previous experience, with preference to an ART.

At New Hanover Regional Medical Center, said Judy O'Neal, "someone with the ART designation would have the advantage" in hiring.

"It would make a difference in the salary range," she said, "and it might make a difference in the future in opportunities for advancement if they did not obtain accreditation."

"I'm sure the college is really concerned about this and is doing everything they can," said O'Neal.

"We think very highly of the graduates of our community college system and we would not turn them away. We have employment opportunities for them here."

The most widely known organization that accredits health care facilities, the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Health Care Organizations, requires that hospitals have an ART available either on staff or as a consultant.

Medical Records Director Teresa Anderson at The Brunswick Hospital is "thrilled" BCC has the technology program and looks forward to hiring graduates. Presently the hospital uses a consulting ART available through its management company, HealthTrust Inc. Anderson said that could change when the hospital's census increases.

"An ART would be looked at first before someone else in filling any position," she said. "You can't hire someone off the street. You have to have someone with experience. An ART has a broad background in coding and transcription and those are the two areas that are really hard to fill."

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