AC, WT garner recognition
Graduate, adult innovation programs honored

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Amarillo College and West Texas A&M University recently received national recognition for programs implemented to better student success at their perspective colleges.

U.S. News and World Report recently ranked West Texas A&M University’s online graduate MBA program No. 1 in the nation in the area of student services and technology and No. 4 for a regional university in the western United States.

“This is our first year to be in the rankings and we’re very excited that we earned a spot there,” LaVelle Mills, Ph.D., SPHR, WT associate dean of graduate programs and professor of management in the college of business, said. “We think this is good for our students, the employers and the Panhandle,” she said.

Mills said WT also was ranked No. 37 in student engagement and No. 51 in faculty credentials and training.

Amjad Abdullah, WT associate dean of undergraduate programs, attributes the recognition to a variety of changes made within the college of business, such as upgrading the quality of faculty credentials/faculty research and higher admission requirements.

“One thing this ranking indicates and validates is the quality of the program that the college of business and WT offers,” Abdullah said. “For us to be ranked by the U.S. News and World Report is an indication that WT’s College of Business is able to compete with major universities around the United States.”

Business programs at WT also can add Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business accreditation to its list of accomplishments.

According to its website, fewer than 5 percent of the 13,000 business programs across the world have earned AACSB accreditation.

“This doesn’t happen overnight,” Abdullah said. “This is the work that has been done over the past seven years to obtain AACSB accreditations. This is the fruit of it.”

Both Mills and Abdullah said the business program at WT is poised to be a recognized program in the Southwest.

“The future goal for online graduate program is to go back and earn higher rankings,” Mills said.

As for Abdullah, his future goal is for WT’s College of Business to become one of the best programs in the Southwest, he said.

At Amarillo College, the Adult Basic Education Innovation program received honorable-mention recognition by the National Council of Instructional Administrators in its 24th annual 2012 Exemplary Initiatives Competition. This recognition comes from a $320,000 state grant from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, the regulatory agency for higher education and the funding source for the grant. The grant specifically was designed to take students who have low literacy levels and provide them with basic skills training and work-force training simultaneously with the basic skills support embedded into the training class.
"We had students that had functioning literacy levels of fifth/sixth-grade," AC Dean of Academic Success Dr. Tamara Clunis said. "But they are now state licensed certified nursing assistants because on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, they went to their training classes and had extra support classes on Tuesdays and Thursdays."

The normal process in higher education is to first satisfy all basic courses, before advancing to training classes, but this grant allowed the to do it at the same time, giving people the opportunity to move forward faster, Clunis said.

The data submitted to the NCIA competition was based on the Fully Integrated Instructional Model, which is based on a national practice called Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training from Washington State University. The I-BEST program is a model bridge program that integrates education in basic skills with technical instruction, Clunis said.

"This model is a lot more time-intensive and it's a national research-based practice," Clunis said. "Programs and colleges all over the country now are replicating it and all we've done is taken I-BEST and brought it to Amarillo College. We've implemented this model here and put a Texas Panhandle twist on it."

A big emphasis of the work Clunis performs focuses on developmental education and ESL. She has written federal and state grants for AC, all related to accelerating student readiness and trying to help low skilled adults complete workforce training programs.

The Adult Basic Education Innovation program is slated for an extension by the state to get a third year and AC is absorbing some of the cost to keep it going, she said.

"I'm hoping that this particular project can help our college reimagine how we provide training and support to our students," Clunis said. "This particular model served as a foundation for the College's Department of Labor award ... so we're expanding it from the state grant to now operating it on the federal project beginning in the fall of 2013."

A grant from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board led to the ABEI program receiving a $2.5 million grant from the U.S. Department of Labor in 2012.

This program is only open to AC students enrolled in specific workforce programs.

"We're offering it for certified nursing assistants and phlebotomy," Clunis said. "We'll be adding patient care technician and EKG technician — out at east campus we're offering machining, welding, industrial maintenance, and automotive.

"We need more types of degree plans that are in it so that the students have more options," she said. "That way, more students are being served."

On April 10, Clunis will travel to Ponte Vedra, Fla., for the annual NCIA awards luncheon, where this award will be presented.

Clunis said the process for this award was rigorous, but will start all over again in August.

"We are going for an all outright win of the category next year, and I feel really strongly that we'll be able to do it," she said. "We'll have more numbers, bigger cohorts and more evidence of how the students are doing. With the data that we have for now, we are in good position to win the category." Hundreds of community colleges across the nation applied for this competition. Aside from AC, only one other Texas school, El Paso Community College, was recognized by NCIA this year, Clunis said.