FIU's business dean sets mission, retains accreditation

BY PAOLA IUSPA

When Joyce Elam became dean of the school of business administration at Florida International University four years ago, she was entrusted with saving the school's national accreditation for excellence.

Her colleagues said Ms. Elam did not let them down. The new dean, who taught previously at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School and the University of Texas, led the school to win reaccreditation — one of 398 business schools worldwide with the status.

The 29-year-old university in 1983 received its first such accreditation — a stamp of approval highly sought-after by administrators at institutions of higher learning — but the honor was not automatically renewed in 1997. It was not until this year that the school learned it had successfully passed a three-year review to retain the status.

The International Association for Management Education, which accredits programs around the world, changed its evaluating standards in 1991, said Karen Martinez, director of business accreditation.

The change caught FIU off guard, staffers said, because the new criteria required schools to set and meet goals over a specific period. Before Ms. Elam came aboard, the department seemed to be struggling to meet stricter demands.

The accreditation, said Dinesh Batra, who leads the university's graduate management-information-system program, assures FIU's status as a school with a quality image that promotes excellence in undergraduate and graduate education in business administration and accounting — a status that seemed to be at risk in 1997.

"That's when they hired Ms. Elam as the dean of the business school," he said.

She and her staff spent the first two years developing a strategy and identifying goals and the college's mission, Ms. Elam said.

The process, she said, drove her to redesign the curriculum of all graduate and undergraduate programs so that the association could measure whether the college was accomplishing its goals.

The mission and the goals revolve around globalization, technology and the expansion of the graduate program throughout Europe and the Americas, Ms. Elam said.

"We conducted a survey among students to see what they thought we needed to change to improve each program," she said. "That helped a lot."

When restructuring the business school, Ms. Elam said she kept one thing in mind — she wanted to make it possible for full-time working professionals to go back to school for a master's degree.

Under her leadership, the school created fast-track courses held in the evenings or weekends and brought in latest in information technology, Mr. Batra said.

"We live in Miami," said Ms. Elam, who was a Marvin Bower Fellow at the Harvard Business School from 1987-88.

"It is," the dean said, "an urban area with a lot of professionals, managers and executives who can not afford to take time off to get their master's degree."

One of the first things she did was create an executive master's in business administration, a 21-month weekend program for mid- to senior-level executives, Mr. Batra said.

Eventually her school started offering a Saturday master's in business administration for those who hold a bachelor's degree earned at FIU. An international master's in business administration for those interested in studying full-time for 12 months was started a year ago. A part-time evening program and a global 13-month course over the Internet for executives in Latin America were also created under Ms. Elam.

FIU recently ranked No. 8 of the 398 accredited business schools offering part-time master's degree programs, based on student enrollment, the accrediting organization reports.

Ms. Elam, who graduated in 1970 from the University of Texas with a bachelor's degree in math and computer science and sees herself as a pioneer in the field, said she wanted to make FIU a place where employers can hire professionals with knowledge and experience. For her, information technology is the key to the students' success and their employers, she said.

She shows her interest in information technology by open-handedly allocating money for the school's technology center, computer labs and knowledge management lab, Mr. Batra said. Multimedia classrooms have modern equipment and support for the students and an e-business virtual demonstration site is on its way.

Information technology companies, in partnership with the school, provide millions of dollars in software, training and technical support for the students to keep updated in the latest technology.

In a time of globalization, Ms. Elam said, she and her staff created partnerships with other universities abroad and have opened graduate programs. The school started a program in Jamaica two years ago and now there are plans to start others in Bolivia, Argentina, Chile and Paris, she said.