Professor Lois Brink presents studio work to the LAAB accreditation team in November.

It takes place every six years and beware to those caught unprepared. It’s the reaccreditation process, and not only will strict self-evaluation come into play, but also outside experts who investigate every angle to ensure students are receiving the best possible education. The Department of Landscape Architecture in the College of Architecture and Planning recently underwent this reaccreditation process – and aced it.

Professor Gene Bressler, department chair, explained that the process enlisted by the Landscape Architecture Accreditation Board (LAAB) involves many stages including a very thorough self-evaluation of the program that involved students, faculty, practitioners, and external constituents. “The program was required to respond to specific questions and provide detailed data as prescribed in the half-inch thick double-sided LAAB Self-Evaluation Report Manual,” he explained. The completed self-evaluation report is twice that size, covering such areas as curriculum, administration, program mission, quality of faculty and the department’s relationship with the professional and local community. After months of preparation on the part of the department and the four 14-hour days of review by the three-person accreditation board, the report was filed and finalized. The result? Under “Recommendations Affecting Accreditation,” where any program deficiencies would be noted, the only word listed is “NONE.”

The Landscape Architectural Accreditation Board visiting team members included Marcha Johnson, PhD,
ASLA, from New York City Parks and Recreation, Jack Crowley, dean, University of Georgia College of Environmental Design, and Professor Les H. Smith, ASLA, educator and team chair from Ball State University. In their overall analysis, the experts stated, “The review team found the program to be vital and healthy, fueled by highly competent faculty and an energetic student body. The team observed ‘a program united in forwarding the unique and essential role of landscape architecture in promoting new and cutting-edge urbanization practices.’”

Says Bressler, “You can see in this report that we have met every standard. We scored 100 percent. [The team] had collectively visited 21 other schools prior to their visit here and they told us unofficially that we the first and only school to have scored 100 percent.”

As part of the preparations for the reaccreditation team’s visit, the department was required to exhibit course syllabi, student-generated studio work and research papers and projects representative of all its courses – the very best as well as what they deemed second best. “They said the work they saw exhibited by the students can hang on the walls of any university in the country and be competitive,” Bressler said. The team further told Bressler that graduates of the landscape architecture department could compete very well in the job market with graduates from any other institution in the country including those in the Ivy League.
The strengths of the Department of Landscape Architecture, as cited by the LAAB, lie in the productivity of its faculty, students, and graduates; the quality of the program’s curriculum; depth, collaboration, and delivery; a supportive administrative structure within the college, and its involvement in significant issues associated with Colorado’s rapidly growing urban landscape. The final report by the accreditation board recognized that “student projects indicate a focus on the department’s mission and objectives to concentrate on issues of concern to the expanding Denver area, particularly ecological changes in an urbanizing region, water conservation and management of water resources, attention to underserved segments of the urban community, historic and cultural preservation, and research supporting the design professions.”

Bressler said innovations and research by faculty members are aspects that put the department on top. He cited Lois Brink, associate professor, as an example of a dedicated faculty member who, over the past eight years, has designed and implemented about $10 million worth of “learning landscapes” that enable Denver Public School elementary students to take an active learning role while they play and exercise.

About the students, the final LAAB report states that they “demonstrated through several types of studio, research, and design projects, and through built works via the Learning Landscape design projects that they are being well-prepared to enter the profession. Student work indicated graduate level research applied to practical situations, competence in technical skills, facility with both hand and computer graphics, and imaginative conceptual work at a variety of scales.”

The graduate-level program is capped at 85 students given the current faculty ratios and physical space. The Master of Landscape Architecture program has grown from about 45 students in 1997 when Bressler came on board to the 85 currently enrolled. “We were generating 750 credit hours a semester, now we’re at about 1,350 credit hours, which represents about a 45 percent increase in enrollment.”

Skylines is produced for the Chancellor’s Office of the University of Colorado at Denver and Health Sciences Center. Questions or ideas should be sent to Skylines@cudenver.edu.