Quality Enhancement Plan

The Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) is the component of the reaffirmation process that reflects and affirms the commitment of SACSCOC to enhancing the quality of higher education in the

region and to focusing attention on student learning. The QEP describes a carefully designed course of action that addresses a well-defined and focused topic or issue related to enhancing student learning and/or student success. The QEP's topic should be identified through or in concert with the institution's ongoing integrated institution-wide planning and evaluation process. Hence, the QEP standard (7.2) is closely related to Core Requirement 7.1 (*Institutional planning*).

Developing a QEP as a part of the reaffirmation process is an opportunity for the institution to demonstrate its commitment to continuous improvement of student learning and student success – the most fundamental role of any institution of higher education. The On-Site Reaffirmation Committee will expect the Quality Enhancement Plan to present a clear and comprehensive analysis of the importance of the selected topic to the institution. Responding to this reaffirmation requirement may also provide an impetus for focusing critical and creative energy. Institutions report that the QEP "has caused us to become much more intentional and focused about an important element of our mission" and "helped us put in motion our creativity."

As noted in Part II of this *Handbook*, narratives in the Compliance Certification focus on the past and the present; the QEP, however, looks to the future. Because the topic evolves from the institution's on-going planning processes, the QEP may have been born from an existing initiative and/or it may be in the early stages of development and/or implementation at the time the on-site review. Standard 7.2 requires the QEP to have five essential elements:

- The QEP is derived from institutional planning and evaluation processes.
- The QEP has broad-based support of institutional constituencies.
- The QEP focuses on improving specific student learning outcomes and/or student success.
- The institution is committing and will continue to commit resources needed for the QEP to have a good chance of success.
- The QEP includes a plan to assess the level of that success.

Leadership for Institutional Development of the QEP

The institution's Leadership Team is charged with providing oversight for both the development of the Compliance Certification and the development of the Quality Enhancement Plan. After the institution has identified the topic for the QEP, the Leadership Team may wish to assign the day-to-day responsibility for its development to a select group or committee representing those individuals who have the greatest knowledge about and interest in the ideas, content, processes, and methodologies currently in place or being developed with regard to the QEP initiative. Since the QEP addresses enhancing student learning and/or student success, faculty, as well as academic and student support staff, often play a primary role in this phase of the reaffirmation process.

If not already in place as a result of the institutional planning process, the institution may also decide to establish a QEP steering committee with the task of drafting a document for review. This committee frequently establishes sub-committees that focus on particular aspects of the development process; for example, one group might conduct the literature review, another might flesh out the strategies for professional development, a third could develop the assessment plan, and a fourth detail the resources to be utilized.

Institutional Support

The development of a QEP that successfully addresses the quality of student learning and/or student success requires significant commitment from the institutional community. An institution's support of the Quality Enhancement Plan should be evident through:

- Consensus among key constituency groups that the QEP, rather than being merely a requirement for reaffirmation of accreditation, can result in meaningful improvements in the quality of student learning and/or student success.

- Broad-based institutional support of appropriate campus constituencies for the topic or issue to be addressed by the QEP.

- Careful review of research and best practices related to the topic or issue.

- Identification of adequate resources to develop, implement, and sustain the QEP.

- Implementation strategies that include a clear timeline and assignment of responsibilities; for most institutions, this will have both forward and backward-looking elements relating the QEP to the institutional planning process.

- A structure established for evaluating the extent to which the goals of the plan are attained.

Review committees expect an institution to demonstrate its commitment to the QEP by providing realistic operational details for implementing, maintaining, and completing the project.

Developing the Quality Enhancement Plan: Suggested Steps

Processes for developing the QEP will differ among institutions, depending on such factors as size, campus culture, internal governance structures, mission, the focus of the QEP, physical and human resources, and numerous other variables that may define what is appropriate or even possible. Because the QEP arises from on-going broad-based institutional planning processes, the QEP may be an existing project. There is not an expectation that the institution must wait for SACSCOC review to initiate efforts to address the QEP topic. While On-Site Reaffirmation Committee members recognize the role that institutional culture plays in shaping the development process and the wide range of possible acceptable approaches, they do expect the process to have been methodical, logical, and inclusive.

If the QEP is centered on a current, on-going initiative to enhance student learning and/or student success, part of the QEP narrative should be directed toward an explanation as to how work on the project is expanding the initiative upon which it is being built. Essentially, the origins, the current status, and the expected future direction of the initiative should all be addressed. If the topic is a new initiative, more discussion of the origins of the topic may be necessary, as well as a clear explanation of the expected direction of the effort.

An important distinction for institutions to understand at the outset is that the QEP is an action plan; it is not a timeline for subsequent planning. Planning needs to be completed during the months prior to the arrival of the On-Site Reaffirmation Committee on campus. Further, prior initiation or piloting of the plan is fully acceptable. It is important, however, that institutions not be so far along in the implementation of their QEP that they are not able to benefit from the input

provided by the On-Site Reaffirmation Committee. Institutions may not submit a QEP that describes initiatives that are fully realized.

There is no set way to develop the QEP, especially since the nature of institutional planning differs greatly across the SACSCOC membership. The following steps offer an example; institutions may choose to organize their QEP development process in whatever manner best suits their culture and resources.

Step One: Selecting a Topic

Because the QEP topic arises from institution-wide planning and evaluation processes, the institution's current strategic plan (or institutional equivalent) is the logical place to begin. Given that student learning and student success are central to the goals of higher education, most strategic plans will already include items related to student learning outcomes or student success. If not, an institution might have additional planning/evaluation work to do to identify an appropriate topic. Assuming such goals are already present in the planning process, the QEP topic becomes a matter of choosing which aspect of those goals to address. This may require an internal review process, but certainly the institution must narrow the choices available to keep the QEP manageable. While the QEP is representative of the institution's efforts for continuous improvement; it should not be the only effort to enhance learning and success.

If the institution is just beginning to initiate a new strategic or academic plan, then it may view that effort and the choice of a QEP topic as complementary activities. Essentially, the broad-based involvement of campus constituents in the planning process could also serve as the process for identifying the QEP. Institutions need to identify a process that harmonizes with their size and governance structure. Whatever the process used for selecting the topic for the QEP, one of SACSCOC's primary concerns is that the institution ensure widespread support of the project and participation of all pertinent institutional constituent groups – faculty, administrators, students, staff, and perhaps even alumni, trustees, and/or community members. Broad-based support needs to be self-evident to on-site evaluators, who expect institutions to demonstrate that various institutional constituencies have been involved in the identification of and/or development of the topic for the QEP. Since faculty members shoulder primary responsibility for student learning, and both faculty along with academic and student support personnel are central to student success initiatives, these groups should be appropriately represented throughout the development and implementation of the QEP.

Institutions are encouraged to base their selection of the topic for the QEP on an analysis of empirical data. The institution may wish to examine best practice studies in higher education as well as national and peer group data derived from other carefully designed research. A QEP topic based on a needs assessment, for example, will have more validity and credibility than one stemming from anecdotal evidence. Recognized, substantive issues will likely have a good chance of getting the institutional stakeholders to support both the development and implementation of the plan. Executive summaries of QEPs that have been or are in the process of being completed can be found on the SACSCOC website under Institutional Resources. These may serve as valuable resources both in terms of ideas and contacts with others who have implemented or are implementing similar projects.

Whatever the source of inspiration, institutions should ensure that the QEP clearly establishes the importance of the topic so that on-site evaluators can understand its value and appropriateness to the institution. The On-Site Reaffirmation Committee will expect the institution to have selected an issue of substance and depth.

Scope. A critical factor in the selection of the topic is the determination of the scope of the initiative. While the QEP is not expected to touch the life of every student at the institution, the topic does need to be perceived as significant to the institution and as a major enhancement to student learning and/or student success. On the other hand, it also needs to be tailored and provide a manageable framework for development and implementation. One might argue that an institution has the right to select a broad, complex issue for its QEP, and certainly it does. However, evaluators will be looking for evidence that the institution is reasonably capable of implementing and completing the plan as described.

Of particular importance to on-site evaluators is a clear and concise description of the critical issue(s) to be addressed. Viable QEP topics may focus on areas such as enhancing the academic climate for student learning, strengthening the general education curriculum; developing creative approaches to experiential learning; enhancing critical thinking, writing, or math skills; introducing innovative teaching and learning strategies; increasing student engagement in learning; fostering academic tenacity; enhancing student job placement; targeting completion in gateway courses; increasing student engagement, retention, and degree completion; and building informational, cultural, or technological literacy. In all cases, goals and evaluation strategies must be clearly and directly linked to improving the quality of student learning and/or student success.

Before institutions move on to the second step, developing student learning outcomes, they need to pause and consider whether or not the selected topic requires definition. The appropriateness of topics such as "Critical Thinking" and "Academic Literacy," for example, may be self-evident, but the precise meaning of these terms may not be quite so apparent because both topics include a range of knowledge and skills. Developing operational definitions of terms such as these will pay dividends when establishing student learning outcomes and assessment plans.

Step Two: Defining the Outcomes

Within the context of the QEP as a requirement for reaffirmation, SACSCOC broadly defines student learning as changes in (1) knowledge, (2) skills, (3) behaviors, or (4) values. Student success is also defined broadly as improvements in key student outcomes such as student retention, completion, time-to-degree, placement in field, or performance in "gatekeeper" courses. Within the context of its own particular Quality Enhancement Plan, an institution must specify realistic, measurable student learning outcomes and/or student success outcomes appropriate for its topic.

The institutional planning process will usually include some goals and objectives related to the chosen QEP topic. While these goals may need more specificity than what is collected for the broader planning process, they are an excellent place to start in identifying the outcomes for the QEP.

Keeping colleagues focused on student learning outcomes and/or student success outcomes at this stage sometimes requires a conscious effort to distinguish between the process of enhancing

student learning and/or student success as opposed to the activities undertaken to achieve the desired enhancements. Initial excitement about the QEP topic frequently results in enthusiasm about actions that might be taken – for example, developing a freshman seminar, establishing learning communities, implementing intrusive advising, or expanding job fairs. While the freshman seminar and job fairs may be viewed as outcomes of the QEP (after all, the intent is to create them), they are not student learning outcomes nor evidence of student success. Rather, as elements of a new process (the "action" portion of the QEP), they are the means to the end – not the end itself.

Notice how the process outcomes listed below describe *what institutions will do* as they implement their QEPs rather than *what students will be able to do or achieve* as a result of the implementation of the QEP.

- The college will establish baseline performance measures for mathematics skills.

- The faculty will use technology resources to develop and implement at least twelve web-enhanced classes over a five-year period.

- The Graduate School will provide professional development opportunities for faculty and staff.

- The student affairs office will initiate a mini-grants program.

Actual student learning outcomes or student success outcomes stem from the impact of strategies such as these on the knowledge, skills, behaviors, and values of students, or, in the case of the mini-grants, the completion rate of students. What should students know post-implementation of the QEP that they don't know now? What should students be able to do then that they can't do now? How should their behavior change? What changes in values are anticipated? Will indicators of success be better than they are now? Consider the following statements in contrast to the earlier list:

- Graduates will be able to describe the fundamental elements of the social, political, and economic reality of a country or region other than [their own].

- Graduates will be able to describe a single event from their own cultural point of view and from that of another culture.

- As the sender, the graduating student will generate respectful communications that have a clear purpose and are well organized, grammatically correct, and appropriate to the audience and mode of communication.

- Students who take the developmental math courses will show significant increases in success in the next level math course.

- At least five students per year will graduate who would have left school without having access to a mini-grant.

- D-F-Withdraw rates in ECO101 will decrease by 7.5 percentage points over the following three years.

The first four statements focus on changes in knowledge, skills, behaviors, or values. The last three are indicators of student success. These statements are (1) specific, (2) focused, and (3) measurable. On-site evaluators expect a QEP to provide relevant and appropriate goals and objectives to improve student learning outcomes and/or student success that can be expected to lead to observable results.

Step Three: Researching the Topic

Like any good research proposal, the QEP should be grounded in a review of best practices and provide evidence of careful analysis of the institutional context in which the goals will be implemented and of consideration of best practices related to the topic. Nobody has time to reinvent the wheel (and SACSCOC does not expect that the QEP constitute "original" research), so the institution should take full advantage of the available literature on the topic. Library staff can offer valuable assistance in assembling a bibliography of current literature on the topic. Many institutions use this step as an opportunity to build a broad base of support for the initiative by engaging a wide range of colleagues in the development of executive summaries of the items on the bibliography, thus reducing the burden of work and building broad-based involvement into the process. If the QEP has been initiated prior to the writing of the QEP, then this process should have taken place as part of the implementation of initiatives within the institutional planning process.

Researching the topic has the added benefit of helping to uncover potential QEP lead evaluators for the On-Site Reaffirmation Committee. Investing in attendance at conferences and workshops is a valuable strategy for involving key individuals in an immersion orientation to the identified topic and it offers yet another opportunity to find a QEP lead evaluator. Identifying prospective evaluators early on carries with it the obvious advantage of getting the on-site visit onto the evaluator's calendar early. Many institutions that delay this search discover that their leading choices are already booked for the dates of the visit.

Step Four: Identifying the Actions to be Implemented

In light of identifying best practices related to the selected topic, institutions now need to identify the actions and the activities implemented and planned to be implemented to bring about the desired enhancement of student learning and/or student success. Of particular importance at this point is ensuring that the list is both complete and affordable. For example, On-Site Reaffirmation Committees expect institutions to provide professional development for participating faculty and staff when QEPs take an institution in a new direction. They also want to know that the institution has looked at each action from multiple perspectives (such as impact on students, and faculty, resources for oversight, cost, and complexity) and addressed all of the ramifications of the plan, such as modifications to related policies and procedures, adjustments to faculty workloads, reallocations of funds, and development of a support infrastructure.

The QEP should identify the realistic resources, including personnel, needed for successful implementation and should explain how the institution will marshal these resources. Depending on whether the QEP project is a completely new initiative, this may be both forward and backward looking, and the case for a commitment of resources may build upon previous successful implementation of similar activities. Because the QEP is a demonstration of continuous improvement at the institution, however, there should definitely be clarity as to future plans related

to the chosen topic. In some cases, the QEP is designed to remain active for a specified period of time and then conclude. For others, the QEP, if successful, becomes an ingrained part of the institution's activities and culture. In that sense, the concept of "completion" refers to what will be reported to SACSCOC within the institution's Fifth-Year Impact Report.

Step Five: Establishing the Timeline for Implementation

Establishing the project timeline should result from a thoughtful integration of the activities needed to produce the desired enhancement of student learning outcomes and/or student success outcomes throughout the life of the QEP. The timeline might begin with the development of the QEP topic within the strategic planning process (or even earlier). The length of time necessary to implement and sustain the project will vary among institutions; therefore, SACSCOC does not prescribe a set timeframe for the duration of the QEP.

Institutions should ensure that all key activities are included on the timeline and that the implementation of future activities is planned in an orderly and manageable sequence. Evaluators need to feel confident not only that institutions have identified a series of actions with the potential to generate the desired learning outcomes, but also that institutions have developed realistic timelines whose schedules for implementation and assessment they will be able to meet. Furthermore, Committees expect institutions to move with sufficient dispatch to have meaningful results to report in the Fifth-Year Interim Report.

Step Six: Organizing for Success

Early in the process, there is a tendency to concentrate on *organizing to develop* the QEP. The main focus of the On-Site Reaffirmation Committee, however, will be to see the extent to which the institution has *organized to implement* the QEP. Institutions must take care to detail the infrastructure for the implementation and the continuation of the QEP. Who is responsible for each activity? Are they qualified and empowered to fulfill those responsibilities? To what extent do future plans build on past activities? If piloting or initial implementation has already begun, what have you learned that will affect future continuation of the plan? Who is responsible for monitoring progress or for modifying the plan? Do these individuals have sufficient time to complete their tasks?

Step Seven: Assessing the Success of the QEP

The institution's evaluation of its QEP should be multifaceted, with attention both to assessing its success at reaching the desired enhancements in student learning outcomes and/student success outcomes (the ends of the QEP), as well as assessing the process of implementing the actions and activities put in place to achieve those outcomes (the means of the QEP).

In evaluating the overall goals of the QEP, primary emphasis is given to the impact of the QEP on the quality of student learning and/or student success. Since On-Site Reaffirmation Committees must be convinced that institutions have developed the means for assessing the success of their QEPs, they expect details – names of assessment instruments, timelines for the administration of those instruments, processes for the review of the assessment results – rather than general descriptions of intentions to develop instruments at some point in the future. If the QEP is already being piloted or implemented, then the reviewers would expect to see evidence of those early

assessment activities. As is generally considered good institutional effectiveness practice, multiple assessments using both quantitative and qualitative, as well as internal and external measures should be considered. The comprehensive assessment plan should be flexible enough to accommodate, if necessary, subsequent changes made to implementation activities and timelines as a result of the analysis of previous assessment results. On-Site Reaffirmation Committees also expect institutions to have developed a system for monitoring progress in implementing its QEP and to describe the process by which the results of evaluation will be used to improve student learning or success.

Step Eight: Preparing the QEP for Submission

The QEP should be clear, succinct, and presented in a reader-friendly font. It may not exceed one hundred pages of size 11 Times New Roman font, including a narrative of no more than seventy-five pages and appendices of no more than twenty-five pages. A page header, right aligned, should identify the institution; the footer, centered, should indicate the page number. The title of the QEP, the name of the institution, and the dates of the On-Site Review should be prominently displayed on the title page. Institutions may organize QEPs in whatever format best conveys the ideas of the project and addresses all of the components of the standard. One possible approach is as follows:

I. **Executive Summary** (one page)

II. **Focus of the QEP:** A topic that is creative and vital that focuses on improvement of student learning outcomes and/or student success (providing compliance with Standard 7.2, parts c and e)

III. **Identification of the Topic**: Relationship of the QEP to the institution's ongoing comprehensive planning and evaluation process (providing compliance with Standard 7.2 part a)

IV. **Support for the Topic** Evidence of broad-based support of institutional constituencies for the topic (providing support for compliance with Standard 7.2, part b)

V. **Institutional Commitment to the Topic**: Review of best practices from the literature, organization of the QEP with actions to be taken and timeline, outline of resources to be committed [might be multiple sections for readability] (providing support for compliance with Standard 7.2, part d)

VI. **Assessment**: A comprehensive evaluation plan as well as preliminary findings if piloting or initial implementation has begun (providing support for compliance with Standard 7.2, part e)

VII. **Appendices** (optional)

Ultimately, there is no one "best" format applicable to every plan. It is imperative, however, that the plan provide full coverage of all the component parts of the QEP standard, regardless of its organization.

Handbook for Institutions seeking reaffirmation (2018) https://sacscoc.org/