



WHAT MAKES A SUCCESSFUL QEP IN RELATION TO STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES

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Let's talk quality enhancement and how this emerging concept has influenced accreditation in the southern region. Accrediting organizations like the Commission on Colleges have conducted institutional accreditation reviews for years. Some observers have asked, why tinker with the old process by substituting something new? There are some very good reasons for revisiting the accreditation review format. Several member institutions in our region have indicated that they were not getting all they could based upon the manner in which reviews were conducted before the introduction of the Quality Enhancement Plan. They saw the previous format of self-appraisals as looking back. With an emphasis on the QEP, institutions are forced to look toward the future as part of the reaffirmation experience.

Other officials observed that following a ten-year reaffirmation review under the old system, many of the institutional reports and appraisals that had been developed were often shelved to await the next reaffirmation review. Under the old system, many individuals and campus groups were not involved in the institutional review and did not grasp the importance of the reaffirmation process. The introduction of the Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) as a requirement for accreditation is an attempt to address many of these concerns.

Again, the Quality Enhancement Plan is future-oriented and requires the institution to plan for the future. Not all regional accrediting agencies have a requirement similar to

the QEP, but SACS viewed the QEP as an improvement to regional accreditation. The QEP asks institutions to consider what they are trying to accomplish in the way of student learning at the respective campuses. In effect, the Quality Enhancement Plan is a way of demonstrating how institutions of higher education marshal limited resources and enable students to optimize learning opportunities. It engages the institution over a period of time and demands broad-based participation on the part of different institutional support groups.

In terms of the student learning outcomes, three approaches are often considered: (1) determine whether students have gained knowledge in a particular area; (2) focus on skill development; or (3) determine whether or not students have changed attitudes or shifted their beliefs or behaviors as a result of a specific educational experience. The QEP requires that institutions plan for and assess the extent to which these learning outcomes have been achieved.

Prior to the introduction of the QEP, it was common practice for peer reviewers to focus only on institutional compliance indicators. Ten to twelve team members were assigned specific sections of the SACS standards in evaluating compliance. This type of review is no longer required. Instead, SACS asks member institutions to develop Compliance Certifications (and include supporting evidence) which should provide a critical institutional assessment of compliance for each accreditation standard. A further review of the compliance document is conducted at a distance by peer reviewers. This phase is called an Off-site Review and is designed to verify an institution's assessment of compliance in terms of institutional personnel, resources, and planning structure. Each of these areas are precursors for institutions being able to identify and implement a viable Quality Enhancement Plan and to assess student learning outcomes.

The Commission's staff plays a major role during the reaffirmation of each school. One of the important responsibilities for COC staff members is to interact with institutions of higher education and clarify the aims of an institutional Quality Enhancement Plan. The QEP incorporates many of the educational issues that an institution has wanted to address for some time and makes it part of the reaffirmation process.

An important phase of reporting to the Commission is the Fifth-Year Interim Report. The Commission asks institutions that have recently undergone reaffirmation to provide a five-year update concerning what has actually occurred during the implementation stages of the Quality Enhancement Plan and to examine: achievements, problem areas, assessment findings, and successful learning strategies. The Commission does not insist or demand that each plan be successful. The Commission would like for all of our institutions to be very successful, but understands that institutions do not operate in a controlled vacuum. The aim then is to hold each institution accountable for providing evidence that directed efforts have been made to achieve the stated student learning objectives, including a discussion of adjustments that were made to environmental demands and exigent circumstances.

Let me summarize: What I have said thus far is that the Quality Enhancement Plan must be directed toward improving an aspect of student learning. Your institution should decide the content of the plan and whether it relates to the enhancement of knowledge, skills or behavioral changes or perhaps some combination. The QEP is actually a demonstration project, reflecting the tenets of your institution's mission. SACS wants you to create an important mission-related endeavor, something that you consider important in terms of moving the institution forward.

Let's stand back for a moment and ask a question: If you were evaluating a Quality Enhancement Plan, what would you look for? Peer reviewers look at certain things as we have stressed in this discussion such as an alignment of the QEP with the institution's mission. Objectives and desired outcomes of the plan should be clearly delineated. What SACS finds in a number of instances, however, is that institutions often start out wanting to accomplish a myriad of objectives (often more than one QEP). When this occurs, the ends to be achieved may be overwhelming, diffuse, and without focus.

The QEP should also have broad-based support. It is very important to have not only the faculty, the CEO and students involved in the process, but also other campus constituencies as well. SACS considers an institution's capacity to implement the Quality Enhancement Plan based upon the information and evidence outlined in its planning document. If you examine the SACS handbook, you will find statements that suggest the need for allocating

a) adequate funding and other resources b) a timeline and work schedule, and c) an organization chart illustrating lines of authority and communication. Often, peer reviewers make recommendations related to the QEP based upon an institution's failure to demonstrate multi-year commitment and sustainability for its plan. Furthermore, as part of the overall planning scheme, school officials should indicate who is assigned responsibility for implementing the plan. It is not necessary to develop a QEP that requires a great deal of funding. Instead, identify worthwhile learning goals that are within reach and that are important to student learning improvements on your campus that are consistent with your institutional mission.

Members of the board of trustees must be kept informed in terms of what is occurring during the development and implementation of the Quality Enhancement Plan. An institution's Board of Trustees is crucial to demonstrating broadly based support, as well as internal capability and commitment to the plan. As part of the board's responsibility, members should not become involved in the day-to-day activities of implementation. The board should maintain its oversight and policy position while the school's administration is responsible for implementing, assessing and reporting the different phases of the QEP.

There are at least two things that institutions should keep in mind in terms of assessment. First, develop a data collection process that is manageable and make sure that you identify personnel who are able to conduct the needed analysis. You don't want to embark upon a plan that will overwhelm you. Any good plan will allow you to make assessments and adjustments over time in terms of what you are achieving, including a review of benefits and the necessary expenditures. Second, be sure to have the broad engagement of your entire campus in the development of the plan. Remember, without the involvement of faculty, the Quality Enhancement Plan will not be successful. Members of the faculty must be front and center and committed to the direction and purpose of the plan. After all, these are the individuals who are being asked to deliver important learning components of the QEP.

Quality Enhancement Plans are unique. Each plan should reflect the needs and realities and mission of your campus. When you submit your plan to SACS, your institutional integrity is at stake. SACS standards speak to institutional integrity. Make sure that your Quality Enhancement Plan is uniquely anchored at your institution and not simply an updated version of yet another plan.