SACS-COC Accreditation Reaffirmation
Quality Enhancement Plan

Background

The subcommittee’s first task was to gain a better understanding of a Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) and SACS-COC expectations. The chairperson of the QEP subcommittee and other LSCS representatives attended last summer’s Institute on Quality Enhancement and Accreditation, the Annual Meeting in December 2009, and the Leadership Orientation Meeting in January 2010.

To help them stay on target, the committee frequently reviewed the following QEP information provided by SACS-COC. According to the 2010 SACS reaffirmation handbook, an institution’s QEP should be,

“a carefully designed course of action that addresses a well-defined and focused topic related to enhancing student learning and is designed to positively affect overall institutional quality and effectiveness of educational programs.”

Additional information describes the QEP as:
• Targeting long-term improvement of student learning and/or the learning environment,
• Being an initiative that does not currently exist in any significant way in the system,
• Arising from the institution’s ongoing institution-wide planning and evaluation process; linking to strategic academic planning,
• Having strong faculty involvement,
• Being broad-based to the extent that it can be positioned to affect multiple constituencies, locations and curriculum areas yet focused narrowly enough so as to be attainable within a five year implementation period (i.e. find a clearly defined niche that can be consistently applied system-wide),
• Being assessable and measureable; producing system-wide results; implies consistent implementation of strategies (multiple measure assessments must be built into the proposal with both formative and summative assessments), and
• Demonstrating institutional capability to implement the plan (i.e. sufficient resource allocation over and above normal program operations), and
• Being implemented after the onsite SACS-COC committee visit and plan approval.

QEP Process
• Identify the topic
• Define the student learning outcomes
• Fully research the selected topic (literature review and exploring other institutions)
• Identify the actions to be implemented that address the defined student learning outcomes
• Draft a plan for assessing achievement of stated learning outcomes
• Develop an implementation plan that includes needed resources (personnel, equipment, supplies, etc.), timeline and budget
• Submit QEP
• SACS-COC onsite visit
• Implementation of QEP

Identifying the Topic

During the 2009/2010 academic year, the QEP subcommittee sought input from community members, students and LSCS employees. Initially, ideas were solicited related to what Lone Star College does well and what gaps were perceived to exist. This initial input was received through a variety of means.

QEP subcommittee members attended on-campus meetings to describe QEP and gather feedback. Other subcommittee members used their Facebook accounts to acquire information from LSCS colleagues while others setup computer kiosks at community events and in all of the college libraries. Lastly, an email was sent to all LSCS employees seeking their input via an online survey. More than 500 responses were received in this preliminary investigation.

At the same time, other subcommittee members were collecting and synthesizing existing data. These reports came from the recently completed strategic planning process, results from the Community College Student Success & Engagement (CCSSE) survey, regularly produced reports from the Office of Research & Institutional Effectiveness (ORIE), reports generated for LSCS’ Achieving the Dream (AtD) initiatives, and others.

In December 2009, subcommittee members compiled all of this information and then sorted ideas into categories or themes. The following emerged as “the top ten” ideas for a LSCS’ Quality Enhancement Plan topic:

- Academic Support
- Project Graduation
- Creating “The Right Place” for Students
- Student Engagement
- First Year Experience
- Student Resources
- Innovation in Communication
- Student Writing Skills
- Preparing Students for “the Real World”
- Working in Higher Education in the 21st Century

In January 2010, the LSCS community was once again contacted via email and was asked to rank order the top 5 themes based on which ones would be the most important or have the greatest potential for enhancing student learning. Nearly 700 responses were received from this online survey. Based on this feedback, three general topics were identified for further exploration. These topics were:

• Services for Student Success (S3)
• First Year Experience (FYE)
• Student Engagement (SE)
The following pages outline the results of the committee’s brief exploration of these three topics. The summaries include general descriptions, preliminary literature reviews including examinations of QEPs with similar themes, previous LSCS activities or initiatives and the LSCS strategic goals that may be addressed by a QEP from that theme or category.
Services for Student Success

Services for student success could include academic support services, non-academic support services (student services) or both. In the context of community colleges, academic support describes any activity that supports and enhances instruction to make that instruction more efficient and effective and could include products or services that directly assist academic functions. It may include enhancement of academic administrative functions or personnel development provided to academic curriculum areas. It could also refer to services provided to students to help them succeed academically, enhancing their reading, writing, math or general study skills.

On the other hand, this topic could also encompass non-academic support services; student services that more fully support those students so they stay in school longer and transition more successfully to either 4-year schools or the workforce. A QEP in this area might look at new forms of advising, career counseling, mentoring or financial aid.

Summary of Research that Informs the Topic

One component of student success services is the academic support area. Although, many of the LSCS survey responses alluded to various needs related to student support services as well. Correspondingly, existing QEP projects and activities in this area vary widely and involve various academic disciplines.

For example, Martin Community College initiated the Improving Reading Comprehension through Cross-Curriculum Strategies project. It involved students in every credit-bearing course in every curriculum program and focused on reading comprehension. Martin set the following objectives: 1) students across the curriculum will demonstrate an increase in reading comprehension, and 2) students will document an increase in reading practice outside the classroom in every course in which they enroll.

Another broad-based project was River Parish Community College’s QEP which established the goal of improving students’ information literacy skills. Their plan defined an information literate student as one who 1) determines the nature and extent of the information needed, 2) accesses needed information effectively and efficiently, 3) evaluates information and its sources critically and incorporates selected information into his or her knowledge base and value system, 4) uses information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose, and 5) understands many of the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information and accesses and uses information ethically and legally.

Other colleges who have chosen a student success services themed QEP have concentrated their efforts on improvements in student advising. Community colleges with similar goals of improving student success via student support services have chosen QEP projects and activities ranging from admissions to orientation courses.

One example is Elizabethtown Community and Technical College. With a goal to improve academic advising, the college developed the Personalized Advising for Student Success (PASS) initiative. The QEP is designed to “strength[en] the environment supporting student learning” through three major initiatives: 1) promoting student success through new student orientation, 2) improving advisor training through professional development, and 3) improving student success to personalized advising through the establishment of an advising center.
While Elizabethtown CTC focused on advising more broadly, Horry-Georgetown Technical College focused on specifically one aspect of advising. Their project emphasized the Guided Plan for Success (GPS) which focused on three major initiatives: 1) students develop personal academic plans for their educational goals 2) students seek and utilize support services to address academic challenges 3) students apply their academic plans in order to achieve their educational goals.

Other SACS colleges who have chosen a theme similar to this for their QEP include: Virginia Highlands CC (Strengthening Advising & Retention), Louisiana State-Shreveport (Enhancing Student Learning through Advising), River Parish CC (Student Support through Improved Literacy Skills), Columbus Technical College (Instructional & Support Services), Miami Dade CC (Student Success-Math). See Attachment I for details.

Previous LSC projects involving Student Success Services  (not all inclusive)

• Faculty advising (North Harris)
• Advisor II intrusive case management advising (System-wide)
• Online student services support (LSC online)
• Supplemental instruction (SI) (LSC-Kingwood, LSC-Tomball, LSC-North Harris, AtD)
• Expanded Early Alert with academic coaches and faculty tutors
• Degrees of reading power (Martha Whitley, LSC-North Harris)
• Early college high school faculty-to-faculty collaboration to increase academic rigor
• Introduction of THECB/TEA college and career readiness standards

Possible Impact

Although outcomes for this QEP theme, services for student success, are highly divergent for SACS schools, other colleges have used this topic to increase course completion and success rates that lead to higher GPAs and to improve retention that may lead to enhanced graduation rates (see Attachment 1).

This QEP theme might be tailored to support the following LSCS Strategic Goals:

1.3 Increase accessibility and opportunity diverse populations in the region.
1.4 Promote more financial aid opportunities to students.
4.1 Strengthen all academic support services.
4.2 Focus on discipline-specific advising opportunities.
6.2 Strengthen and improve visibility of student and online support services.
6.3 Offer non-English student service assistance to speakers of other languages.
**First Year Experience**

Recognizing the importance of the first year of a student’s academic experience “is a late twentieth century phenomenon (including) many factors that span a continuum from institutional survival and self-interest to ‘doing the right thing’ for students themselves.” (Barefoot, 2000).

One objective of first year experience activities is to address some of the many challenges that students face and improve their opportunity for academic success (part/full time jobs, child care/ transportation/ financial issues etc.). Responses from the LSCS survey ranking possible QEP topics pointed to the need to address various issues arising from this transitional period for students. During the preliminary research phase of this project, participants’ comments ranged from the need to address entering students’ lack of preparation for the college environment to the importance of the first year as a crucial part of students’ academic success.

John Gardner of the National Resource Center for The First Year Experience cites another important objective of first experience activities, which is “to give students a chance to mature as they move toward making important choices that will influence the rest of their lives.” (U.S. Fed News Service). Because the first year of college shapes not only the student but also his future, it is imperative to select programs and activities that have the greatest impact on the students’ success.

**Summary of Research that Informs the Topic**

As colleges and universities respond to the challenges of entering students, Betsy Barefoot, a fellow with the National Resource Center, finds that many of the programs and activities have research-based objectives such as increasing student to student interaction, increasing academic expectation and levels of academic engagement, and assisting students who have insufficient academic preparation for college (Barefoot, 2000). While this list of objectives is not exclusive, it is illustrative of current QEP activities.

First year experience programs that strive to increase student-to-student interaction often create cohorts of students. This design increases the opportunities for peer interaction. Learning communities are one example of this type of interaction. In learning communities, students are linked to others through ongoing social interactions afforded by being with the same students for an extended period of time. “As a result, students become members of a community focused on academic content which allows them to further develop their identity and discover their voice as well as to integrate what they are learning into their world view and other academic and social experiences” (Zhao 2004).

One example of this student-to-student interaction is Flagler College’s QEP which creates first year learning communities of three linked courses. In the executive summary, Flagler College explains the goals focus on building a campus ethos that not only fosters student engagement but that is also clearly focused on the goals of cultivating the value of academic challenge, improving written and oral communication skills, promoting an integrated, interdisciplinary approach to learning, and fostering deep learning. The college sees the QEP as a beginning for incorporating learning communities throughout students’ entire academic experience.

Other first year experience programs increase academic expectation and levels of academic engagement. Barefoot finds that many colleges develop new student orientations “to change student
attitudes and expectations by including academic programs and activities during the time period when new students form initial impressions of what college is going to be about” (2000).

As a means of preparing students for intense academic engagement, many colleges are including a reading focus to these first year orientation courses or activities. For example, Maysville Community and Technical College’s QEP focuses on incorporating critical reading strategies into the first year experience course. These strategies will not only be taught in this orientation course but also be implemented in discipline specific courses. Thus, the orientation course only introduces the college and academic environment but also teaches the foundations of content reading.

Still other first year experience programs assist students who have insufficient academic preparation for college. Barefoot finds that some of these programs take the form of workshops, study skills courses, and summer programs while others extend into the high schools. These first year experience programs recognize that many students are not prepared for the rigors of college level study. Therefore it is common for first year experience activities to attempt to bridge the gap between where students are academically and where they should be. One focus of Big Sandy Community and Technical College’s QEP involves working with high school partners to align curriculum and to assist with student placement in entry-level collegiate course with the goal of increased success rates for the students.

Other colleges who have chosen a theme similar to this for their QEP include: College of Charleston (FYE), Northern Michigan University (FYE), Rappahannock CC (FYE). See Attachment I for details.

Previous LSCS first year experience projects (not all inclusive)

• Foundations of Excellence (North Harris)
• Student success course (AtD)
• New student orientations (system-wide)
• Minority male initiative (AtD)
• Students’ right start (from SENSE workshop) taskforce headed by Rebecca Riley

Possible Impact

The First Year Experience (FYE) process tends to focus on student success fostered by a positive learning environment and early intervention, where warranted. FYE can also be used improve communication and on-campus attitude/culture.

This QEP theme may support the following LSCS Strategic Goals:

1.3 Increase accessibility and opportunity to diverse populations in the region.
3.4 Increase electronic communications to support activities in a multi-site environment.
6.1 Develop mandatory student orientation programs to meet needs of diverse student population.
8.1 Strengthen innovative relationships with local industries, healthcare community, state agencies, educational partners and civic organizations.
**Student Engagement**

The more actively engaged students are — with college faculty and staff, with other students, with the subject matter being learned — the more likely they are to persist in their college studies and to achieve at higher levels.

This connection has been emphasized in a number of major research studies and reports on the undergraduate experience. The Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) website, sponsored by the Center for Student Engagement at the University of Texas at Austin, poses the question: why focus on student engagement? In response, it states “[s]tudent learning and student retention correlate strongly with student engagement. The more actively engaged students are — with college faculty and staff, with other students, with the subject matter being learned — the more likely they are to persist in their college studies and to achieve at higher levels.” (CCSSE Survey, 2009).

A widely used assessment of student engagement, CCSSE identifies benchmarks highlighting institutional practices and student behaviors that promote student engagement — and that are positively related to student learning and persistence. The 2009 key findings identified five benchmarks of effective educational practices in community colleges. These benchmarks are: 1) active and collaborative learning which measures students’ participation in class, interaction with other students, and education outside of the class; 2) student effort which measures students’ preparation for class, time on task, and use of services; 3) academic challenge which measures students engaging in challenging mental activities; 4) student-faculty interaction which measures the extent to which students and faculty communicate about academic performance, career plans, and course content and assignments; and 5) support for learners which measures students’ perceptions of their colleges and assesses their use of advising and counseling services.

**Summary of Research that Informs the Topic**

The research findings are explicit in stating that student learning and student retention are correlated strongly with student engagement. The more actively engaged students are — with college faculty and staff, with other students, with the subject matter being learned — the more likely they are to persist in their college studies and to achieve at higher levels. This connection has been emphasized in a number of major studies and reports on the undergraduate experience.

For example:
- **Involvement in Learning**, a 1984 report sponsored by the National Institute of Education, clearly states “two fundamental principles about the conditions of educational excellence everywhere.” Those principles are:
  1. The amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program.
  2. The effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement in learning (p.19).

- **In “Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education” (1987)**, Chickering and Gamson provide this oft-quoted guidance:
  Good practice in undergraduate education:
1. Encourages student-faculty contact.
2. Develops reciprocity and cooperation among students.
5. Emphasizes time on task.
6. Communicates high expectations.
7. Respects diverse talents and ways of knowing.

- In How College Affects Students (1991), Pascarella and Terenzini affirm from their examination of 20 years of research that “students who are actively involved in both academic and out-of-class activities gain more from the college experience than those who are not so involved.”

- In Leaving College (1993), Tinto summarizes recent evidence by saying:
  Simply put, the same forces of contact and involvement that influence persistence also appear to shape student learning. Though the research is far from complete, it is apparent that the more students are involved in the social and intellectual life of a college, the more frequently they make contact with faculty and other students about learning issues, especially outside the class, the more students are likely to learn (p. 69).

Student engagement occurs when the student makes a psychological investment to learn and attempt to learn about what the school offers, student engagement involves not only traditional success indicators (i.e. grades) but also the personal development of life skills like persistence under adverse conditions, communication, teamwork, and critical thinking. It involves an emphasis on building relationships, faculty to student, student to student, and among faculty, staff and students. It shows the students’ willingness to participate in routine school activities like attending class, submitting assignments and following directions. But it has also come to mean increased student involvement in curriculum design and classroom work (i.e. active learning). Additionally, it promotes the benefit of extra-curricular activities as related to educational achievement. In this sense, student engagement involves all benefits derived from the students’ college educational experience, including but not limited to academic achievement.

Examples of Student Engagement – QEP Activities

One way to engage students is through communication. Gadsden State Community College developed this idea by using technology to engage students. Using an across the curriculum approach, the college’s goal is to engage students in learning in four major areas: 1) students connecting with other students; 2) students connecting with faculty; 3) students connecting with their curriculum, courses, and content areas; and 4) students connecting to the institution.

Walters State Community College addresses many of these benchmarks of effective practice in its QEP. The focus of the college’s project is to improve student learning by increasing student engagement and increasing student mastery of course competencies. This project helps students identify their learning styles and helps students learn how to use their learning styles to successfully master course outcomes. Because course activities are designed to incorporate students’ learning styles, students will be more
engaged in the course. Walters State Community College will use the CCSSE to measure students’ engagement in this project.

Other SACS colleges who have chosen a theme similar to this for their QEP include: Virginia Commonwealth University (Enhancing Student Engagement in Learning), University of West Florida (Student Engagement and Active Learning), Owensboro CC (High Expectations and Engagement). See Attachment I for details.

Previous LSCS Student Engagement Projects (not all inclusive)

- Student activities departments/functions (system-wide)
- Student Engagement in the Distance Learning Environment: Lindell Chapman (LSC-Tomball)
- Increase Student Engagement and Effort Outside of the Classroom: Heather Gamber (LSC-Cy Fair)

Possible Impact

A QEP related to student satisfaction might have the most dramatic effect on engagement both in and out of the classroom and could positively affect both student and faculty perception of the learning environment. Because of its focus on academic challenge, a QEP topic related to student engagement could have the greatest positive influence on high achieving/transfer students.

This QEP theme may support the following LSCS Strategic Goals:

3.5 Enhance the infrastructure and visibility of extra-curricular and student organizations across the system.
5.1 Strengthen stakeholder interactions within system.
6.5 Improve Internet and web based media and communication formats to promote student engagement.
10.1 Build innovative and high tech learning facilities while considering environmental sustainability.
Works Cited


CCSSE Survey Results, (2009). Key Findings.


LSCS Strategic Goals 2009-2011 http://www.lonestar.edu/strategic-goals.htm

Office of Research and Institutional Effectiveness (ORIE reports).

