

Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) Implementation For Inquiry/Research-based Education of Undergraduates

As we develop an implementation plan for the refined QEP, it is worth placing this activity within the context of what is expected from the university by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) and how QEP is being used to reach those ends. Our accrediting agency has as an overarching requirement that we will strive to be as effective as possible in the delivery of our educational objectives. These expectations for Institutional Effectiveness (IE) now have two components: program outcomes and student learning outcomes. Requiring assessment of student learning outcomes is a recent change from past requirements that focused only on program outcomes and is where the QEP activities are meant to have their greatest impact. In the new SACS accreditation process, we select a theme or imperative that will increase student learning thereby increasing our effectiveness and providing a better education to our students. *The imperative selected is meant to have the potential for broad institutional impact that will be sustained after the QEP project period has concluded.*

Since there is an expectation that all programs are continuously engaged in activities to assess the attainment of their targeted student learning outcomes and to continuously improve all of the educational goals and services that they are offering to their students, QEP should be viewed as another tool available to these programs in this on going endeavor. It should be clear that units have the complete freedom to develop independent IE plans, however if they can cast their IE efforts within the refined focus of the QEP, they may have access to additional resources. As the QEP for the next several years is modified to focus our institutional efforts on improving our student learning outcomes through research/inquiry guided learning, we have developed an implementation plan to help guide this refined process.

QEP Implementation Plan Ground Rules

Before describing the implementation plan, the subcommittee thought it important to provide the following ground rules that any implementation plan should respect:

1. **Supporting Prior QEP Projects:** There are a number of existing activities that have been developed in response to the previous QEP which focused on the areas of research, diversity, globalization and technology. Any programs that wish to sustain activities developed in response to the earlier program will be allowed to continue them and report these activities as part of our on-going QEP. Any new activities must be connected to the new QEP focus of research/inquiry guided learning.
2. **Evaluating QEP Projects:** Different initiatives across campus have led to evolving sets of terminology and programs related to ascertaining the effectiveness of the QEP. However, despite different terminologies, there has emerged a more or less "common" set of underlying principles from conversations related to these different initiatives. We first must identify and agree upon a set of *learning outcomes* and methodology that guide data collection when determining the extent to which program goals are being met. Hence, programs are encouraged to develop a list of *learning outcomes* that they will use as their standard when evaluating the effectiveness of their QEP projects. TAMU may first want to develop an overall list of potential *learning outcomes* and then to work with departments and colleges to develop their specific lists. As a potential course of action programs might start with learning outcomes developed by the Task Force for Enhancing the Undergraduate Experience.
3. **Evaluating Student Learning Outcomes:** Faculty judgment with respect to student performance is the final arbiter. Assessment methods that assist with

systematic, systemic, and documented application of faculty judgment is required to support evaluation of QEP projects.

4. **Starting with Undergraduate Experience Task Force:** Following on the work done by the Research Subcommittee of the Task Force on Enhancing the Undergraduate Experience, we recommend that their recommendations /implementation plan be used as a *guide* for the development of new QEP proposals. Given that the implementation of these recommendations will also likely be part of the implementation phase of the Task Force activity, it makes sense to take advantage of this overlap to expand the opportunities available to our students. The Research Subcommittee report made the following recommendations:
 - a. Make the **Inquiry/research-based learning paradigm** the standard for as many of our undergraduate courses as is practicable. To accomplish this, they proposed identifying existing courses of this type and developing new courses where necessary, with inquiry/research guided learning as a key element.
 - b. It was proposed that all undergraduate degree programs contain a "summary research experience" **option** for students who desire such an experience. This option could be satisfied by either a capstone course/project, a research intensive experience (on or off campus), through a senior thesis or through other suitably constructed independent creative activity that will allow the students to bring together multiple elements of their undergraduate education.
 - c. Appropriate resources must be devoted to this activity to assist our faculty in developing these courses, their student learning outcomes, and their corresponding QEP data collection, interpretation, and use of results.

It is expected that the activities that colleges/departments choose to work on as part of the redefined QEP will ultimately become part of their long term offering to their students and not just be "one shot" activities.

QEP Implementation Plan

Based on these ground rules and conversations within and beyond the subcommittee, the following implementation plan is recommended.

Step 0 – Each Program Compiles a List of Their Existing Inquiry-based Courses: In most programs across the university, this model of teaching/learning is used in many of our upper division courses for our majors already. In addition, it is clear that existing laboratory courses would also fall into this class of course. The challenge in expanding the use of this paradigm throughout our various curricula will most likely be in bringing this mode of instruction into our lower division courses, where we expect the impact to be even greater for our students learning outcomes. As we begin this new phase of the refined QEP it is important to have an accurate accounting of these courses in order to establish the *baseline* for these QEP activities. This inventory, designed to identify inquiry-rich courses, will be conducted in the fall of 2006.

Step 1 – Ask Each Program to Formulate Targeted Learning Outcomes: Each unit will be asked to develop a list of learning outcomes that will be used as a basis for evaluating existing inquiry-based courses as well as new QEP projects being planned. To support this step, and as a starting point, a list of possible targeted learning outcomes can be used from the Task Force Report. Programs should be free to add, delete, and revise to obtain the list to be used in evaluating QEP projects. Using the list of outcomes developed in each program, they will devise a plan for carrying out a baseline assessment in the list of inquiry-based courses already being offered to their students. This baseline assessment serves as the starting point for future QEP assessment activities in that program. This assessment will be carried out during the fall

term of the 2006-07 academic year in order to develop or refine the QEP proposal for the 2007-08 academic year. Funds needed to make this initial assessment will be made available in part from the QEP budget for this period.

Step 2 – QEP Proposal Solicitation: In the 2006-2007 academic year, a solicitation will be issued to all colleges and departments for QEP proposals aimed at addressing the learning outcomes that the college or department has identified. Having identified the learning outcomes to be addressed, each department or college may develop a proposal that describes how it will enhance the education of their students. A funding model for supported programs is attached.

QEP Proposal Criteria

Based on experiences with the previous version of the QEP, the subcommittee identified several requirements that each future QEP proposal must address.

QEP Proposal Criteria No. 1 – Assessment Plan: A critical element of the supported proposals/activities is that they contain a well defined assessment plan and include opportunities to provide feedback while these programs are being developed. The results of these assessments will be reported on an annual basis to the Deans of the colleges involved and College QEP Councils, as well as to the University QEP council and the Provost. These reports will also include a description of any actions being taken in response to these assessments. Recommendations for continued funding will be based on a review of these annual assessment reports.

QEP Proposal Criteria No. 2 – Sustainability and Impact: Since QEP projects should result in change that continues after QEP funding, each QEP should address questions of how the proposed changes are sustained after funding expires. Each proposal should contain an estimate of how many students will be affected if the proposed pilot project is funded as well as a projection of the numbers affected once the project is fully developed. Sustainability will be a critical criterion in deciding which QEP proposals to fund.

QEP Proposal Criteria No. 3 -- Institutional Involvement: QEP proposals are the responsibility of the Department and College. Proposals should be submitted from a department or program to the College's QEP Council, which will review the proposals from their college and forward its top choice or choices to the University's QEP Council for final review and funding decisions. In addition, each QEP proposal should indicate how the Department Head and Dean will be involved in reviewing and revising the project on a continuing basis, if the proposal is funded.

QEP Proposal Criteria No. 4 -- Adaptability: In an effort to have the largest impact on as many programs as possible during the period of this QEP, proposals that aim at developing plans that have the potential for broader applications within programs and/or colleges or beyond are encouraged.

QEP Proposal Reporting Requirements

In order to insure the maximum impact of these QEP supported activities, the reporting procedure needs to be improved over the ad hoc system currently being used. The reporting procedure envisioned here is one originating in each program or department, moving from there to the College QEP Councils and to the appropriate college Dean and then on to both the University QEP Council and the Provost for final review