



# Faculty Forum

*From the Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning*

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

CULLOWHEE, NORTH CAROLINA

Vol. 19, No. 4

December 1, 2006

## **Simply Put: A QEP FAQ**

### ***What is the QEP?***

The Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) is a new reaccreditation requirement of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). The plan must focus on some enhancement of student learning.

### ***What is the topic of WCU's QEP?***

“Synthesis: A Pathway to Intentional Learning at WCU.” The plan is to enhance student learning as it relates to synthesizing the university experience. The plan will encourage undergraduates to develop learning and career goals by reflecting on how academic and co-curricular experiences come together to lead to the achievement of post-graduation goals.

### ***How was this topic chosen?***

The QEP Committee worked for over a year to solicit topic ideas from across campus and then winnow the great variety of topics down to one. The process began with a large open forum in September 2004 that collected some 150 topic ideas. Throughout 2005, the QEP Committee focused on choosing a topic, soliciting more ideas/feedback from across campus as well as making visits to over 30 academic and staff units. In November 2005, the present topic was adopted by the committee.

### ***What does the topic mean?***

Let's consider a true tale of two students (names have been changed).

Kate came to the university and quickly settled on a pre-med major. By the end of her first year she planned to go to med school and then do her residency at Vanderbilt. She chose her major with her goal in mind and she achieved the high GPA that she knew she would need to be competitive. She chose her classes in light of the preparation she would need for the MCAT exams. Most of her university experiences, including service learning experiences, related to her major and her med school goals. She graduated from WCU, went on to med school, and completed her residency at Vanderbilt.

Don came to WCU with a nearly perfect SAT score and had the objective of a high-profile career in politics. He chose a major that had nothing to do with politics. He was fitfully involved in a few community service projects. He made A's in some classes and failed others. He took a lot of classes that had no relation to his major or minor. He considered changing majors several times but never did. After six years, Don graduated with a GPA that would not get him into graduate school even though in his last semester at WCU he decided to enroll in a graduate program. Short of getting into a graduate program, he had no idea what he might do after graduation.

The QEP means to enhance student learning that leads to a university career and outcome like Kate's. Students like Kate know how to synthesize the various aspects of a university experience (academics and co-curricular activities) into a coherent whole that leads to a goal. This synthesis of experience that flows in a clear direction is similar to what a TPR committee looks for in a candidate's agenda for teaching, research, and service.

***What are the specific learning outcomes?***

1. Students will identify their aptitudes, abilities, and interests and articulate their future goals and aspirations.
2. Students will modify behaviors and values in response to knowledge and skills gained from their academic and co-curricular experiences.
3. Students will recognize the synthesis of their university experiences and evaluate those experiences relative to their future education and career plans.

***How will these learning outcomes be assessed?***

The outcomes are recognized as being developmental. A pilot study will assess student learning and the impact of the QEP at first-year, sophomore, junior, and senior levels. Presently the QEP Committee is considering a structure that might involve four (100, 200, 300, and 400 level) special USI courses or a similar structure embedded within a department's major curriculum.

***Will all students at WCU be involved in the QEP at the start?***

No. At first, the pilot study will be small (possibly beginning with as few as 100 students). As the QEP Implementation Committee members learn more about the best structure and how to better assess the QEP learning outcomes, more students will be involved in an ever-strengthening structure.

***It looks like the QEP involves only traditional undergraduates on the four-year path—what about transfer, graduate, distance education, or non-traditional students?***

SACS expects the QEP to be focused; in fact, lack of focus is a typical problem with Quality Enhancement Plans. After careful consideration, the QEP Committee chose to focus on traditional, residential students. As part of its implementation, the plan calls for a grant program to encourage the involvement of other student populations over time.

***When will the QEP begin?***

In the summer of 2007, after feedback from SACS has been received and the plan is in its final form, implementation will begin. The present QEP Committee will dissolve and a QEP Implementation Committee will be formed, charged with monitoring the plan's progress and making adjustments as needed to strengthen the plan's outcomes. Key advisors, staff, and volunteer faculty members (instructors in the first pilot study) will be trained. The first group of students will participate in the pilot study in 2007-2008.

***Will the QEP be another "unfunded mandate"?***

No. SACS requires that the QEP be adequately funded to achieve its goals. After five years and then ten years, SACS will examine WCU's QEP to be sure the university is making good progress on the plan.

***Will the assessment of learning outcomes really matter?***

Yes. SACS requires a clear assessment plan for the QEP, to be sure the plan is being reviewed and improved as it goes on. Most important, SACS reviewers need to see that the university is committed to enhancing a particular aspect of student learning and therefore can measure that the stated enhancement is occurring.

***How do I get a copy of the latest draft of the QEP or learn more about it?***

Simply email Scott Philyaw or Brian Railsback, QEP Committee Co-chairs, or Carol Burton, WCU SACS Director, and ask to have an electronic copy of the latest draft emailed to you. If you have comments or suggestions regarding the QEP, please contact one of them.

***So really, why should I care about the QEP?***

Our university's reaccreditation partly depends on a successful Quality Enhancement Plan. If the plan is successful and over time involves higher numbers of students, we can expect some improvement in retention and graduation rates. Perhaps most important, over time fewer faculty members or department heads will have that conversation with a WCU senior that goes something like this: "So, you graduate next semester—what do you plan to do next?" The student's reply: "I don't know."

**Brian Railsback, Honors College**

*The opinions printed here belong solely to the authors and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the editorial staff or of the Faculty Center. If you would like to respond, e-mail Nienhuis by the 8th of the month.*