Quality

Quality

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-

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-

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),

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