

Southern Association for Colleges and Schools (SACS)
Reaccreditation Process Overview
Appalachian State University
September 2009

- The Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) is the regional body for the accreditation of degree-granting higher education institutions in the Southern states. The Commission’s mission is the enhancement of educational quality throughout the region and it strives to improve the effectiveness of institutions by ensuring that institutions meet standards established by the higher education community that address the needs of society and students. It serves as the common denominator of shared values and practices among the diverse institutions in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia and Latin America and other international sites approved by the Commission on Colleges that award associate, baccalaureate, master’s, or doctoral degrees. The Commission also accepts applications from other international institutions of higher education. Source: <http://www.sacscoc.org/>

- An entirely new process: no longer a comprehensive self-study as has been conducted in the past

- **Two components:**
 - **Compliance Certification Report**—Extensive evidence (narrative and supporting documentation) of compliance with the Principle of Integrity, each of the sixteen Core Requirements, each of the fifty-eight Comprehensive Standards, and each of the seven Federal Requirements (federal regulations for Title IV funding). Expects to see a mature program assessment and administrative assessment along with complete faculty credentials.
Quality Enhancement Plan—Description of a focused, well-defined activity to be undertaken by the institution and that addresses a topic or issue(s) related to enhancing student learning.

- **Leadership Team**
 - Oversees and validates the entire process; should include at least the Chancellor, Provost, SACS liaison, and a representative faculty member.

- **Compliance Certification Report**
 - “Institutions may choose to give the responsibility for conducting the institutional analysis of compliance to a committee formed specifically for this purpose, or they may assign this task to an existing committee or council. In either case, it is recommended that the group charged with this responsibility be composed of a director or chair and a relatively small number of members and involve:
 - The institution’s accreditation liaison in either an oversight or support role.
 - Individuals who have access to the data and information required to prepare a report that substantiates the institution’s assessment of compliance.
 - Knowledgeable representatives from areas such as

- Institutional research,
- Finance and business,
- Educational programs,
- Student services,
- Institutional effectiveness,
- Libraries and other learning resources,
- Enrollment management, and
- Governance.

In choosing the members of the group to conduct the institutional compliance review, the goal should be to select those individuals who understand the institution's mission and who have extensive knowledge of its history, culture, practices, policies, procedures, and data sources. Achieving widespread institutional participation for the compliance review is not a goal." (*Handbook*, p. 12)

- **Quality Enhancement Plan**

- Prepares a QEP "developed by the institution that (1) includes a broad-based institutional process identifying key issues emerging from institutional assessment, (2) focuses on learning outcomes and/or the environment supporting student learning and accomplishing the mission of the institution, (3) demonstrates institutional capability for the initiation, implementation, and completion of the QEP, (4) includes broad-based involvement of institutional constituencies in the development and proposed implementation of the QEP, and (5) identifies goals and a plan to assess their achievement." (*Principles*, p. 7)
- Ensures broad participation into the identification and selection of a topic; conducts research and writes the draft of the plan; oversees the implementation of the plan once it is developed.
- Within the context of the QEP as a requirement for reaffirmation, the Commission on Colleges broadly defines student learning as changes in
 - knowledge,
 - skills,
 - behaviors,
 - or values. (<http://www.sacscoc.org/pdf/081705/QEP%20Handbook.pdf>)
- Within the context of their own particular Quality Enhancement Plans, member institutions must specify realistic, measurable student learning outcomes appropriate for their focused topic
- The development of a QEP that successfully addresses the quality of student learning requires a significant commitment from the institutional community. Recently reaffirmed institutions note that they wish that they had realized earlier just how many people need to be involved in the development and implementation of their QEPs and the hours involved in connecting with people.
- 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 significant, even transforming, improvements in the quality of student learning.
 - Broad-based institutional participation of all appropriate campus constituencies in the identification of the topic or issue to be addressed by the QEP

- Careful review of research and best practices related to the topic or issue
 - Allocation of adequate human and financial resources to develop, implement, and sustain the QEP.
 - Implementation strategies that include a clear timeline and assignment of responsibilities.
 - A structure established for evaluating the extent to which the goals set for the plan are attained.
- Developing a QEP is a recursive rather than a linear process, much like any other important, deliberative, and reflective planning and writing. An institution should expect the focus and framework for the QEP to shift and evolve as the research, writing, talking, and campus participation occur. Over time, the focus will become sharper, the outline more certain, and the goals better defined. This consideration and reconsideration are instrumental in the development of greater confidence in the QEP. In fact, a substantial amount of ambiguity is to be expected during the creative phase of the development process.
 - Leadership. The institution's Leadership Team is charged with providing oversight for both the Compliance Review and the development of the Quality Enhancement Plan. After the institution has identified the topic or issue, the Leadership Team may wish to assign the day-to-day responsibility for its development to a select group representing those individuals who have the greatest knowledge about and interest in the ideas, content, processes, and methodologies to be developed in the QEP along with expertise in planning and assessment and in managing and allocating institutional resources. Since the QEP addresses enhancing student learning and/or the environment supporting student learning, faculty typically play a primary role in this phase of the reaffirmation process. Many institutions charge a QEP Steering Committee with the task of drafting a document for review. Steering Committees frequently establish sub-committees that focus on particular aspects of the development process; for example, one group might conduct the literature review, another flesh out the strategies for professional development, a third develop the assessment plan, a fourth detail the budget, and yet another work on a marketing plan.
 - **Step One: Selecting the Topic**
 - One way to begin the process of selecting the QEP topic is to explain the nature and purpose of the QEP to members of the institutional community. Before institutional constituents can be expected to support the development and implementation of the QEP, they must understand what it is, how it relates to other accreditation requirements, and what impact it can have on the future of the institution and its students. Some institutions tap the expertise of their public relations office in finding creative ways to get the message out; other tap the ingenuity of their faculty in establishing avenues for educating the internal community. WebPages, rallies, contests -- institutions need to identify the vehicles that will work within their campus culture.
 - Institutional Feedback
 - "Institutions should be advised...to develop well-planned communications campaigns about the QEP. Media relations offices could play a direct partnering [role]." (Level V institution, Class of 2005)

- Some institutions do some initial exploration and research that engages a limited number of faculty, administrators, and students about the topics for the QEP before involving the larger campus community. Others engage a wide cross-section of the institution's constituents to discuss potential topics and then convene a smaller working group to determine the more focused topic(s). Institutions need to identify a process that harmonizes with their size and governance structure. Whatever the process used for selecting the topic for the QEP, one of the Commission's primary concerns is that the institution ensure widespread participation by all pertinent institutional constituent groups – faculty, administrators, students, and perhaps even alumni and trustees...
- Since faculty members shoulder responsibility for student learning, they should be appropriately represented in the early phases of the development of the QEP. Faculty members, in particular, need to agree that the issues identified for the QEP are sufficiently significant to engage individuals in implementation and follow-through, not only for enhancing student learning and/or the environment for supporting student learning on an institutional level but also for engaging the long-term commitment of faculty and other individuals on whom the implementation and continuation of the plan will depend.
- Consider that the topic for the QEP need not be a brand new idea. For example, an institution might develop a QEP that extends, modifies, redirects, or strengthens an improvement that is already underway. An institution might also develop a QEP that has been in the planning stages prior to the beginning of preparations for reaffirmation. An institution may not, however, submit a QEP that describes initiatives that are fully realized.
- Institutions are encouraged to base their selection of the topic for the QEP on empirical data and an analysis of these data. The institution may wish to examine studies that have been done on best practices in higher education and other national and peer group data derived from carefully designed research. A QEP topic based on a needs assessment, for example, will have more validity and credibility than one that does not.
- **Step Two: Defining the Student Learning Outcomes**
- As the critical issue identified by the institution is refined into a QEP topic with a narrow, manageable scope, the institution needs to begin investing energy in the establishment of specific student learning outcomes.
- Actual student learning outcomes stem from the impact of strategies such as these on the knowledge, skills, behaviors, and values of students. What will we expect students to know post-implementation of the QEP that they don't know now? What will we expect them to do then that they can't do now? How do we expect their behavior to change? What changes in values do we anticipate?
- **Step Three: Researching the Topic**
- **Step Four: Identifying the Actions to be Implemented**
- **Step Five: Establishing the Timeline for Implementation**
- **Step Six: Organizing for Success (i.e., implementation)**
- **Step Seven: Identifying Necessary Resources**
- **Step Eight: Assessing the Success of the QEP**
- **Step Nine: Preparing the QEP for Submission to the COC**