

# SACS, QEP, and Hindsight

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**Abstract** – As institutions in the Southeastern section prepare for reaffirmation of accreditation by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), fundamental changes have been implemented that have a significant impact on the institution and academic programs. One of the major additions is SACS core requirement 2.12 that requires an institution to prepare a Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP). The QEP should be focused on improving some aspect of the educational component process that enhances the quality of student learning. Beyond this broad statement, the institution must develop a plan, implement the plan, assess the plan, and demonstrate to SACS with measurable results the impact of the QEP on student learning, as defined in the plan. This paper describes the QEP process as it developed at the author's home institution. The author presents perspectives as a member of the QEP leadership team and as a faculty member dealing with the QEP.

*Keywords:* SACS, QEP

## BACKGROUND

Planning is a concept that engineering educators understand; however, it is surprising that other academic professionals have difficulty understanding such a fundamental principle. As each institution prepares for their SACS reaffirmation visit, core groups of faculty and university administration (leadership teams) will be responsible for different aspects of the reaffirmation process.

To address SACS Core requirement 2.12, a QEP Leadership Team (QEPLT) will be formed to manage the QEP process. The team will be responsible for 1) selecting an issue related to student learning that can be studied and improved, 2) analyzing and refining the topical areas, 3) developing a plan to increase effectiveness, and 4) documenting activities and results of the QEP.<sup>1</sup>

Each institution has unique procedures for establishing committees, empowering committees, and effecting change. Committees at the author's home institution are typically formed as the result of a university administration directive, which was the case of the QEPLT committee. The original QEPLT committee membership was composed primarily of university staff that managed campus technology. The original QEPLT committee had decided that "technology to improve student learning" would be the QEP topic. The author joined the QEPLT committee after this decision was approved. It would require many months of biweekly meetings to arrive at the conclusion that the topic could not be used to measure student learning. Once this decision was realized, different QEPLT committee subgroups began promoting their specialty areas for consideration as the QEP topic. Another period of academic debate ensued as each subgroup presented the pros and cons of their specialty area to the whole QEPLT committee.

## TOPIC SELECTION

Upon reflecting on the sequence of events, it initially appeared that nothing would materialize except special interest groups; however, common threads were being presented that eventually were formalized into a common theme. The process of arriving at this consensus was simple and might be useful to others. An external facilitator was retained by the university which allowed each QEPLT committee member to participate in an open discussion. The facilitator asked each QEPLT committee member to list three topics that were areas of concern in their

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discipline. These topics were collected and ranked by the facilitator. It was interesting that two areas of concern were common to all QEPLT members. The common areas of concern identified were written and oral communications.

After members agreed that written and oral communications would be the QEP topic, a title for the topic was needed. The facilitator again polled the QEPLT membership asking each to suggest a title for the agreed upon topic. The titles were collected and voted upon by QEPLT members. The result was *Finding a Voice: Improving Oral and Written Competencies*. Using a facilitator, the QEPLT committee accomplished in two hours what had not been possible in nine months of biweekly committee meetings. The QEPLT divided into subcommittees to conduct a literature review on the topic, presents the topic to the university community through a series of town meetings, and develop a pilot plan. Figure 1 presents the overall design process utilized by the QEPLT committee.

### **TARGET POPULATION**

After a QEP topic is selected, a target population should be identified for a QEP pilot study. The pilot study should reflect the entire university community, but should be small enough to be managed. A small pilot study allows for feedback, and modification of the QEP at minimal cost.

At the author's home institution, common course offerings are limited to university core courses, junior writing intensive courses, and senior capstone courses. These course categories must satisfy a common set of guidelines approved and managed by the university's academic council. The lack of a strong central university core created significant design problems for the QEP pilot study. The author's home institution is classified as a research extensive institution; however, approximately 50% of the undergraduates transfer from instate community colleges. When this factor was considered, as well as the lack of junior writing intensive courses when the QEP pilot was being developed, the only option available for the QEP pilot study were senior capstone courses.<sup>2</sup> Senior capstones courses, while sharing a common set of broad guidelines, are also discipline specific and usually limited to one section per semester/year. These restrictions limited the pilot study to a quasi-experimental design.

The intervention for senior capstone courses was developed by faculty in the departments of English and Speech Communications. The intervention was comprised of a series of workshops for faculty teaching senior capstone courses. The faculty in these courses agreed to modify their courses and expose their students to similar intervention experiences.

### **ASSESSMENT**

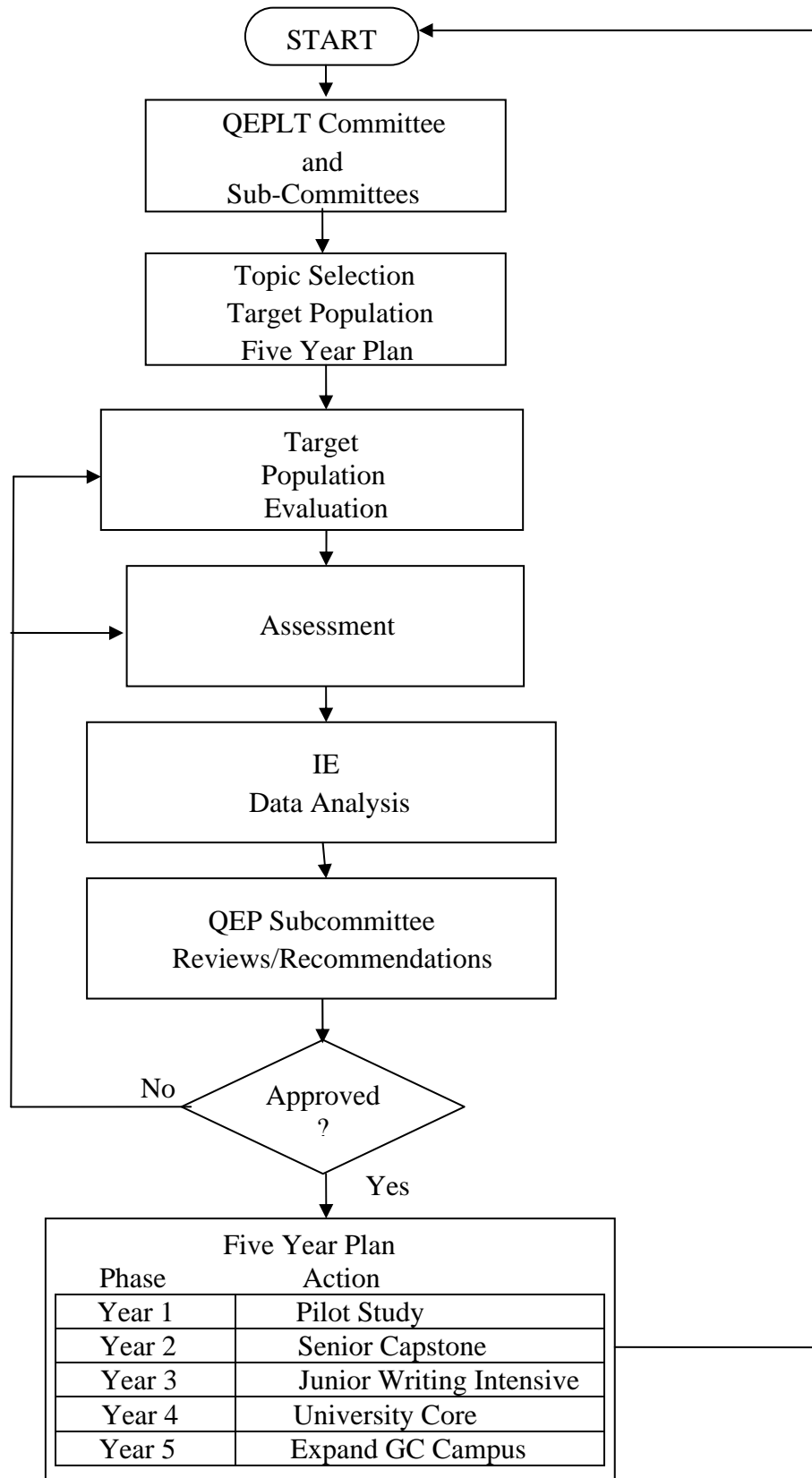
Because of the quasi-experimental design, assessment of the QEP was limited to student and faculty feedback in QEP senior capstone courses. This feedback was tied to specific student learning outcomes developed for the QEP, evaluation of sample oral and written student projects, and utilization of speech and writing laboratories. The design also allowed some student outcome measures to be delayed. These measures were in the form of surveys of QEP students after graduation as well as surveys of their employers.

The author served on the QEP assessment subcommittee and observed several problems that should be avoided as an institution's QEP pilot study evolves. It is important to develop a clear document management system. Only a select group of individuals should be allowed to update versions of the working document. Changes to the working document should be posted, but not deleted until proposed changes are agreed by everyone working on the document.

The QEPLT committee chair must enforce firm deadlines to receive information from subcommittees. In the author's experience, deadlines were not considered. This caused extended delays and resulted in a majority of the work being completed by a small group of individuals. With a small group, an error can be overlooked and replicated if it cannot be reviewed by everyone in the working group.

Because of time constraints, QEP outcome measures were not properly reviewed by all assessment subcommittee members. The results were outcomes that could not be measured, questions that should not have been asked, collected data that was not used, and lack of a common measurement rubric for oral and written student evaluation.

Figure 1 - QEP Design Process



With any pilot study changes are expected; however, the author believes that better time management could have reduced the amount of revision that was required before the formal QEP was submitted to SACS for review.

### **FINDINGS**

Most of the SACS review is conducted remotely by examining the institution's SACS website. The campus visit is necessary to resolve disputed claims and to review the QEP. A series of meetings will be scheduled for the SACS visiting team to meet with the QEPLT committee, university administrators, faculty, and students. During this visit the SACS visiting team will determine if the submitted plan is understood by the university community, determine if the QEPLT committee "really" developed the QEP, and if the QEP is "doable."

During the site visit, the QEPLT committee received feedback about the QEP and proposed measurements. Since most of the data presented was based upon student and faculty surveys, it created an atmosphere in which the SACS visiting team was not convinced that the QEP could be evaluated to determine if measurable results reflected an impact on student learning. The SACS visiting team also expected multiple measures for some parts of the data. After the site visit, the institution will receive a draft report which will require responses to all areas not found in compliance.

### **REFLECTIONS**

Most of the SACS self study is very similar to an ABET self study. In many aspects, ABET requires much more detail since it is program specific. Service on the QEP committee allowed the author to observe other higher education professionals that had no understanding of an external review, and how they struggled through the process. Strong QEP chairmanship is essential to managing a successful QEPLT committee as well as a good management plan. In the end, the author's home institution received full accreditation, but the author wonders if the stress and workload could have been reduced with proper leadership and planning.

Finally, the author strongly recommends that anyone serving on such a committee request release time. It is doubtful anyone fully understands the amount of work required on a major university committee. It is more common to not consider such an activity as a major event during the yearly faculty evaluation.

### **REFERENCES**

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- [2] *Finding a Voice: Improving Oral and Written Competencies*, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, Mississippi, 2006, pg1-104.

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