

Daytona State's QEP: Learn to SOAR (What you should know.)

This Q &A is intended to initiate awareness among the college community of the latest QEP developments. Responses to each question were prepared by the co-chairs of the QEP committee, Max Nagiel and Tom Bellomo.



What are the current plan iteration's basic features? What are the expected outcomes for students?

The QEP will be based on the original acronym *SOAR*: Students Optimizing Academic Resources. The implemented strategy will be a one credit hour SLS course that will be action-based and project-oriented. Additionally, the course will target a specified sub-group of students enrolled in ENC1101 courses. The SLS course will allow students to contextualize what they are learning in ENC by using resources available through the Learning Commons (Academic Support Center, Library, The Writing Center).

The overarching focus of the QEP and its SLOs are as follows:

"The purpose of our QEP is to increase student knowledge and use of available academic resources that are designed to increase student success."

1. Students will select appropriate resources to support academic success.
2. Students will use appropriate resources to achieve academic success.
3. Students will value academic resources for achieving college success.

How has it evolved from the original QEP proposal and why? Why is this more narrowed focus a better path to take with the QEP?

Evolution and change were inevitable. One of two principal reads authored by SACS is the Handbook¹. Stated within is the following:

Developing a QEP is a recursive rather than a linear process, much like any other important, deliberative, and reflective planning and writing project. 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 (p. 42).

¹ Handbook for Institutions Seeking Reaffirmation. SACS-COC, Aug. 2011 ed.

It should be noted that all of the pre-proposals were well thought-out, comprehensive plans based on sound research. However, they were framed at a time when teams had less understanding of QEP guidelines. In particular, focused topics were the salient feature uncovered in a subsequent review of successful QEPs. To cite one example, the following sentences were excerpted from the Midlands College QEP:

The initial QEP proposed revising the College's current orientation program, advising services, and student success course... (p. 10). However, the Reaffirmation Committee did express concern that giving attention to all three of the initiatives 'may dilute the focus of the QEP.' The Committee suggested, 'Choosing one of these initiatives and giving careful attention to it over an extended period of time might ensure a more successful QEP' (p. 11). The College's revised QEP... is narrowed to a single initiative: the development and delivery of an enhanced, carefully designed Student Success Seminar (p. 12).

The original SOAR pre-proposal called for the implementation of:

1. A new student orientation, "Conf-style session piloted previously as Falcon Fair, Deland"
2. New student seminar/college success class
3. Learning communities/cohorts
4. Co-curricular activities
5. Peer mentoring
6. Faculty mentoring
7. Student incentive program
8. Financial counseling
9. Academic advising
10. Career counseling, and
11. Service learning

To satisfy SACS' requirements, each of the above interventions would have its own specific SLOs, and there would be corresponding assessment measures for *each* SLO. The original holistic, multi-pronged plan is in keeping with sound research that suggests the Freshman Experience should be, "well-coordinated or integrated into a coherent, intentional, institution-wide strategy" (Gardner, 2009). However, Betsy Barefoot, from the *Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education*, cautions taking on a broad focus for the QEP (personal communication).

This is not to say that someone from DSC couldn't champion this broad initiative in the future. In fact, to do so independently of the QEP would allow for greater flexibility without having to deal with strictures from SACS. With an initial foray paved by this highly specific SLS course,

other components, as detailed in the original SOAR proposal, can be added incrementally as resources allow and individuals initiate.

What does the research say about the current plan iteration?

1. *Students will be exposed to fewer academic resources:*

“In many cases, ensuring that students “get the material” involved using methods that focused on breadth of coverage rather than the depth of learning assumed by our theory of action and that learning theory suggests is required to develop students’ ability to apply new knowledge and skills. From the students’ perspective, this approach appeared to be what Grubb (2006) calls an “information dump,” in which they were told about information and services quickly and briefly. When asked about student services discussed in the course, many students described receiving a list of available resources. There was limited discussion of these services beyond their existence and basic function. Students were not assisted in figuring out when or how to use the services. From a learning theory perspective, this type of rapid and didactic presentation of knowledge is counterproductive because it inhibits deep learning. Singley and Anderson (1989) and Bransford et al. (2000) argue that students need time to organize, make sense of, and develop an in-depth understanding of the content they are being asked to learn, which cannot happen when many topics are covered in quick succession. “Packing in” course content, though logical from the perspective of trying to quickly give students as much information as possible, may hinder students from applying this knowledge throughout their college careers” (Karp, 2012, p. 28).

“...the pedagogical benefits of narrowing the content outweigh the costs. A narrower curriculum leaves more time for each topic, thereby offering more opportunities for sustained contact with each topic area” (Karp, 2012, p. 41).

2. *The pilot SLS course will be comprised of students who placed at, or just above, the cut-score on the writing portion of the PERT placement test; additionally, these students will simultaneously be enrolled in ENC1101. (Those narrowly passing the PERT do not receive an intervention in the form of developmental writing, and institutional data demonstrate that pass rates in ENC1101 are lower for these students than for those not making the cut and placed into developmental writing.)*

“[Few students entering a program of study] reflect the difficulty community college students often have passing the initial college-level courses in particular fields. These courses are sometimes called “gatekeepers” because they prevent many students from entering a program of study. Examples include ... Math 101 and English 101 for students in most programs leading to an associate degree ... Community colleges should examine whether this is the case with their own students and, if so, take steps to help students pass the gatekeeper courses” (Jenkins & Woo, 2012, p. 11).

[SACS looks for institutional data to provide rationale behind the QEP. Our data demonstrate low success rates in gatekeeper courses; furthermore, the need to address this problem was cited by the Retention Review Committee in last year's report. In tandem, these strengthen the proposal.]

3. *Gatekeeper courses are cited as key momentum points; passing such foster motivation toward persistence and retention.*

“...during a student's enrollment, particular course completions or other educational accomplishments can provide 'momentum' that propels students toward the achievement of milestone events. These *momentum points* are measurable educational attainments that are empirically correlated with the completion of a milestone. Momentum points can be particular courses (such as the first college-level 'gatekeeper' math or English course), sets of courses (such as a developmental education series), or levels of educational attainment (such as one term's worth of credits) that, once reached, increase the likelihood of completion of degrees or other milestone events. Therefore, attaining a momentum point is associated with a higher probability of achieving a milestone” (Leinback & Jenkins, 2008, p. 2).

4. *Linking the SLS course (directly or indirectly) will allow for contextualization.*
(A). *The logical course to link would be a gatekeeper course:*

“As the basis of contextualization of basic skills instruction in community colleges, select discipline area courses that are needed for graduation by large numbers of students but that also have high failure rates” (Perin, 2011, p. 3).

- (B). *Providing a context for application (the SLS course) will encourage engagement, which is in keeping with good pedagogy.*

“Learning theory purports that when new information is made relevant for students—such as when it is connected to an academic course or a career goal—the likelihood of application is increased” (Karp, 2012, p. 30).

“Student engagement is generally considered to be among the better predictors of learning and personal development. The premise is deceptively simple, perhaps self-evident: The more students study or practice a subject, the more they tend to learn about it” (Carini, Kuh, & Klein, 2006, p. 2).

“...when academic support is provided to students, whether it’s academic support or social support, that support is more effective when it’s connected to the other demands that students face during their first year of curriculum. And the reason why that’s the case is that when you connect and contextualize, make relevant that support, it’s easier for students to apply that support they’ve received to do well in the other class(es) in which they enroll. But when the freshman seminar is disconnected from everything else, it is regrettably too often the case students discount the course as not being, quote, ‘an academic course.’ And they will often ignore it or not treat it as an academic enterprise. So increasingly, institutions are trying to connect that Freshman Success course to the other courses to which the students are enrolled, to help them succeed in those courses as well” (Tinto, 2012, n.p.).

5. *The academic resources highlighted in SOAR focus on the Learning Commons (library, writing center, and Academic Support Center). Tens of millions of dollars invested in these resources suggest their importance. They can be better utilized.*

“...the organization of student support services in many colleges assumes that students have enough knowledge, social skills, and motivation to ‘seek out and make use of those available services.’ This assumption may not always be valid” (Karp et al., 2008, p. 3).

“Even if they are prepared academically, students may neither be aware of, nor use, existing services (e.g., technology labs, libraries, counseling services) to their advantage” (Kuh & Gonyea, 2003, p. 314).

“Most of us in higher education would agree that high on the list of essentials for collegiate success are the abilities to find, manipulate, and use information — not just information that can be easily downloaded from the Web, but information that meets standards of accuracy and academic rigor. While colleges generally acknowledge that first-year students are unlikely to develop those abilities on their own, we don't do much to help them” (Barefoot, 2006, n.p.).

“It is noteworthy that national survey data indicate that one the most frequently cited goals of first-year seminars is to increase student use of campus resources and facilities (Barefoot & Fidler, 1996), and campus-specific research conducted at various types of institutions indicate that the seminar (SLS) is effective for achieving this goal” (Cuseo, n.d., p. 11).

How will the QEP in its current iteration benefit the overall college community and why should the college community buy in to the plan even though it might not affect them directly?

A more focused QEP meets a series of institutional and SACS requirements and constraints. However, within the context of these limitations a long lasting impact on our students and the

learning environment is expected. The QEP, as implied by its acronym, is simply a plan aimed at enhancing the quality of the education we provide. And, as is the case in any facet of life, enhancements or improvements involve changes that can be either revolutionary or evolutionary. This QEP clearly fits the latter description and it aspires to being a catalyst for transformations that will impact, first and foremost, the student population targeted, and then indirectly the college community.

The process of focusing the QEP involved the careful consideration and evaluation of the SOAR pre-proposal, its main elements, and the data which sustained the pre-proposal itself. The data used were based on a student withdrawal survey that the college conducts. It was clear that students have a variety of non-academic issues that affect their academic performance and their ability to remain in school. These included financial, family, health, and work-related issues, among others. As an academic institution, we have very little or no influence over a number of those elements. We do, however, influence the academic environment and provide students with effective academic support to enable student success—itsself a motivational factor—and such support is at the center of this QEP.

The proposed intervention, in the form of a study skills course, is meant to reduce the academic stressors by providing true guidance and support. It targets a student population that too often is overlooked—students considered too able for remediation yet weak enough to be at risk. The current iteration will be an applied, action based and hands-on face to face course reflective of what recent research and best practices suggest. In general, research indicates that study skills courses help students to stay in college and improve their chances of earning either an associate degree or transfer to four year institutions. Very targeted study skills courses, with a narrow and applied curriculum rather than comprehensive content, seem to have significant and sustained impact on students (Karp et al., 2012).

It is clear that application and contextualization are also necessary for success in these types of courses, and the intention is to have students ‘optimize’ their use of academic resources via scaffolding in the SLS class.

Effective student-support programs are those that initiate supportive action by reaching out to students and bringing or delivering support to them, rather than passively waiting and hoping that students take advantage of these services on their own. Ender, Winston, and Miller (1984) captured the gist of this principle almost 20 years ago when they forcefully stated that ‘it is totally unrealistic to expect students to take full advantage of the intellectual and personal development opportunities [on campus] without some assistance from the institution.’ (Cuseo, n/d)

Retention, success, and persistence—the evidence suggests—are all positively affected by SLS or other types of first year interventions. These factors affect not only the students but the college community itself. This proposal is one more intervention that can further enhance these objectives.

We all have a stake, as an educational institution and as part of a society at large, in the success of our students. It affects us both directly and indirectly and it is incumbent on all to embrace efforts at improving our students' education. The plan is an incremental and formative process that is likely to raise the college community's awareness of the academic resources with unrealized potential that are at our reach. As the plan reaches full implementation, we will likely see students who will be more responsive to their academic tasks as a direct result of an intervention. This iteration of the plan is a stepping stone in that direction. Ultimately, it is said that "Success breeds success" and perhaps that is a motivational force whose intangibles are difficult to measure, yet likely to be felt by all.