



*Southern Association of Colleges and Schools  
Commission on Colleges  
1866 Southern Lane  
Decatur, Georgia 30033-4097*

## **THE QUALITY ENHANCEMENT PLAN**

### **Policy Statement**

The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC), requires its accredited institutions to undergo a comprehensive decennial review to ensure that each institution continues to meet member-driven standards of quality. These accreditation standards – formally adopted by member institutions – are found in *The Principles of Accreditation: Foundations for Educational Quality*. The comprehensive review includes the institutional submission of two documents: (1) a Compliance Certification and (2) A Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP). The following definitions and requirements apply as institutions submit their QEP for the On-Site Reaffirmation Committee’s review.

### **Definitions**

The *Compliance Certification* is a document completed by the institution that demonstrates its judgment of the extent of its compliance with each of the Commission’s Core Requirements and other standards. The Off-Site Reaffirmation Committee conducts the initial review of this document and presents preliminary findings to the institution and the On-Site Reaffirmation Committee.

The *Quality Enhancement Plan* is an integral component of the reaffirmation of accreditation process and is derived from an institution’s ongoing comprehensive planning and evaluation processes. It reflects and affirms a commitment to enhance overall institutional quality and effectiveness by focusing on an issue that the institution considers important to improving student learning outcomes and/or student success. The document submitted by the institution demonstrates that its *QEP* (a) has a topic identified through its ongoing, comprehensive planning and evaluation processes; (b) has broad-based support of institutional constituencies; (c) focuses on improving specific student learning outcomes and/or student success; (d) commits resources to initiate, implement and complete the QEP; and (e) includes a plan to assess achievement. The On-Site Reaffirmation Committee reviews the document and conducts interviews to determine whether the institution has demonstrated compliance with Standard 7.2.

### **Requirements**

#### **Review of the Quality Enhancement Plan**

The institution may choose to submit selected information about its QEP for review by the Off-Site Reaffirmation Committee. This information allows the Off-Site Reaffirmation Committee to provide an opinion as to whether the intended QEP appears to offer a reasonable attempt to comply with sections (a) and (c) of Standard 7.2 regarding the relationship of the QEP topic to the

institutional planning process and the focus of the QEP on improving student learning outcomes and/or student success. The Off-Site Reaffirmation Committee may also choose to provide additional narrative feedback to the institution.

The entire QEP will be submitted to the On-Site Reaffirmation Committee concurrently with the institution's *Focused Report*. At that time, the QEP document will be reviewed to determine the institution's compliance with all of the parts of Standard 7.2 (*QEP*). The On-Site Reaffirmation Committee will also offer consultative advice to the institution, highlighting strengths of the plan/project and identifying possible challenges to the successful implementation and completion of the QEP. If the On-Site Reaffirmation Committee determines that the institution did not demonstrate compliance with all parts of the standard, the Committee will propagate one or more formal recommendations. The institution will provide a formal response to the SACSCOC Board of Trustees at the time of the Board's review. The Committee's consultative comments, on the other hand, are intended to add value for the institution; the institution may choose the best way to make use of such comments.

### **Subsequent Quality Enhancement Plans**

An institution may use facets of its previous QEP for its next reaffirmation review under certain conditions. The new QEP should be derived from an assessment of its previous QEP, have distinct goals and institutional outcomes, and should continue to focus on student learning outcomes and/or student success.

### **Consultants during the planning process and development of the QEP**

SACSCOC does not require that an institution engage either an internal or external consultant in the process of developing its QEP. Such a decision is wholly the institution's and lies outside of the purview of SACSCOC. Whether or not the institution reports engaging such consultative services will have no bearing on the type or rigor of the review of the QEP conducted by SACSCOC peer review committees.

### **QEP Lead Evaluator: Nomination and Selection**

Since the On-Site Reaffirmation Committee will review the QEP with a view toward determining compliance with Standard 7.2 and with the purpose of providing the institution with valuable consultative advice, the Committee will include a peer reviewer whose primary responsibility lies in review of the QEP: the QEP Lead Evaluator. An institution participating in a review leading to reaffirmation of accreditation has the option of nominating two candidates – from which SACSCOC staff will choose one – for service in the Lead Evaluator's role on its On-Site Reaffirmation Committee. The Commission welcomes nominations from outside the Southern Association's region. This evaluator brings expertise in the general content area on which the QEP is focused and does not have to be employed by a college or university. Should the institution choose not to submit nominations to the SACSCOC VP assigned to the institution, a QEP Lead Evaluator will be chosen by SACSCOC staff based on the information submitted at the time of the Off-Site Reaffirmation Committee's review.

In order to protect the integrity of the process and of the institution, the institution nominating the QEP lead evaluator should be particularly sensitive to avoid even the potential appearance of

impropriety that could result from personal or professional relationships between the nominee and institutional personnel, either past or present. Persons nominated should have special expertise in relation to the QEP and have no conflict of interest in connection with the evaluation. The conflict of interest policy of the Commission on Colleges applies to nominating the lead evaluator for the QEP (Please see the SACSCOC policy “Ethical Obligations of Evaluators”).

A current SACSCOC Board of Trustee member may not serve on an On-Site Reaffirmation Committee scheduled to visit an institution that employs another current Board member.

The institution may not call upon On-Site Reaffirmation Committee members, including the lead evaluator for the QEP, for advice or consultation in relation to any follow-up responses or reports submitted by the institution until final positive action has been taken on reaffirmation of accreditation. A committee member who violates this policy is removed from the evaluator registry. The Commission expects an institution to respect the process by not engaging any team member as a consultant for this period of time.

Evaluators serving on On-Site Reaffirmation Committees receive the same nominal expense reimbursements from the Commission on Colleges (\$100 plus expenses). Evaluators may not receive additional compensation from the institution or from other sources in connection with the evaluation.

### **Assessment of Institutional Quality Enhancement – Fifth-Year Interim Report**

Each member institution submits a Fifth-Year Interim Report to demonstrate compliance with selected standards of the *Principles of Accreditation*. A review of institutional initiatives related to enhancing student learning outcomes and/or student success is an integral part of that Fifth-Year Interim Report. Institutions are expected to provide a report on the impact of the Quality Enhancement Plan from their most recent reaffirmation for review by the Fifth-Year Interim Committee.

#### **Document History**

*Approved: SACSCOC Board of Trustees, June 2018  
(Replaced former SACSCOC Policy “QEP Lead Evaluator”)  
Revised: SACSCOC Board of Trustees, December 2019, June 2022*

## Procedures

### Information provided to the Off-Site Reaffirmation Committee

Institutions may choose to provide information regarding their QEP at the same time they submit their Compliance Certification. Submission of such QEP information is strictly optional on the part of the institution, and the institution's choice will have no bearing on the rigor or breadth of the On-Site Reaffirmation Committee's review of the QEP.

An institution which chooses to submit its QEP to the Off-Site Reaffirmation Committee's non-binding review should provide the following information:

- A short narrative (1-2 pages) summarizing the QEP topic and its relationship to the institutional planning process.
- A short narrative (1-2 pages) describing the focus of the QEP on enhancing student learning outcomes and/or student success.

These narratives should be included with the Compliance Certification document under Standard 7.2. The Off-Site Reaffirmation Committee will provide its reasoned opinion and any additional narrative in its comments on Standard 7.2. Those comments are strictly for the institution's use, however; they will be deleted from the draft report forwarded to the On-Site Reaffirmation Committee which forms the basis for the Report of the Reaffirmation Committee.

### Nominating and Selecting a QEP Lead Evaluator

Institutions should submit the names and pertinent information for at least two persons to their Commission staff representative. Track A (undergraduate) institutions should submit that information by April 1 before their On-Site visit. Track B (graduate) institutions should submit that information by October 1 before their On-Site visit. The institution should confirm that its first nominee is able and willing to serve on the On-Site Reaffirmation Committee in this role before submitting the nomination. When an institution submits nominations for the evaluator, it provides the following information to the Commission staff for each nominee at least three months before the on-site reaffirmation visit:

- (1) Name and contact information
- (2) Title
- (3) Institution or organization
- (4) Experience and special expertise
- (5) Rationale for selection and explanation of how the nominee's expertise pertains to the QEP and its evaluation

The Commission staff member invites the individual and includes a copy of the Commission's conflict of interest statement. In a positive response to the staff member's invitation, the evaluator indicates that the statement was reviewed and that no conflict of interest exists for the institutional assignment. Should the first nominee be unacceptable or decline the invitation, Commission staff will notify the institution that the second person on the list will be invited to allow the institution to make an initial contact with that person in advance of the invitation.

## The Role of the QEP Lead Evaluator

Members of the On-Site Reaffirmation Committee – including the QEP Lead Evaluator – receive companion materials from the Commission staff or Committee Chair setting out specific writing assignments related to remaining compliance concerns, US DOE standards needing further review, and the QEP. This preliminary material also includes a draft visit itinerary that provides a beginning structure for the visit itself. These writing assignments will usually reflect the language of the relevant Standard (7.2), with reviewers being assigned primary or secondary responsibilities for analysis and writing in six basic areas. Reviewers will read the document, conduct on-campus interviews with appropriate institutional constituencies, and engage in discussions with other committee members in order to answer the following questions:

- Did the institution identify a topic through its ongoing, comprehensive planning and evaluation processes?
- Does the topic have broad-based support of institutional constituencies?
- Does the topic focus on improving specific student learning outcomes and/or student success?
- Has the institution committed resources to initiate, implement and complete the QEP?
- Does the QEP include a plan to assess achievement?

The review of the QEP is the responsibility of all members of the On-Site Reaffirmation Committee. Any recommendations the Committee might propagate will result from consensus decisions of the Committee as a whole. The QEP Lead Evaluator's role on the Committee is one of leadership and coordination under the supervision of the Chair. While each Committee's review of an institutional QEP will be tailored to the institution and the dynamics of the visit, the following thoughts serve as "good practices" to guide the Committee and its QEP Lead Evaluator in that review.

1. Before the visit
  - a. Articulate some important questions about the QEP document and email these to other Committee members in advance of the Committee's conference call.
  - b. Be prepared to lead the Committee in a preliminary discussion of the QEP during the Committee's conference call conducted in advance of the site visit.
  - c. If appropriate, ask Committee members for their initial thoughts – or a first draft of their writing assignments – to prepare a draft report that can be modified during the visit itself.
2. During the visit
  - a. Be prepared to meet with institutional representatives for ongoing discussions about the QEP. On the first day, in particular, the QEP Lead Evaluator may be the only Committee member whose schedule does not involve following up on remaining compliance or US DOE issues.
  - b. Continue to provide helpful guidance to other members of the Committee that will engage the Committee in discussions leading to consensus in its analysis of the QEP. At the same time, be wary of imposing individual impressions or decisions on the rest of the Committee.
  - c. Look for ways to provide consultative advice that will increase the institution's ability to implement its QEP successfully.
  - d. Lead the Committee's discussions, where appropriate, to reach consensus on any

recommendations that may need to address areas where the institution appears to have failed to comply with Standard 7.2.

3. Finishing the report/visit
  - a. Manage the process of preparing that section of the Reaffirmation Committee's Report related to the QEP. The QEP Lead Evaluator should clearly understand the Chair's timeline for completing the final draft of the report.
  - b. Compose the introductory section of the QEP report, as well as any other primary writing assignments.
  - c. Compile and edit drafts of the QEP report.
  - d. Be prepared to lead in the discussion of the QEP during the exit conference.