ASU’s Dissertation

The first step of any writing project is selecting a topic. Sounds easy, but all of us know that many factors must be considered during the topic selection process. In 2013, ASU will submit its Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) to the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools-Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC). In a sense, this is ASU’s dissertation proposal; and broadly put, SACSCOC expects our proposal to focus on student learning. After a five-year implementation period (conducting our dissertation study), ASU will submit an Impact Report, which will document the effect or impact that the QEP has had on student learning. This would be analogous to the final defense of our dissertation. Selecting the “just right” topic for ASU is an extremely important and somewhat complicated decision. My hope is that this document will help “un-complicate” the process and help us make the “just right” topic selection decision.

SACSCOC Expectations

While a “focus on student learning” is the broad expectation for the QEP, SACSCOC has also provided several specific expectations. Used appropriately, these expectations can certainly help us narrow our focus in selecting a QEP topic. Therefore, as the ASU community continues the process of selecting a topic, we would do well to consider that SACSCOC evaluators will expect the QEP to:

a. be directly related to institutional needs, that is; directly improve institutional/student performance (accomplishment of mission);
b. be directly related to institutional strategic planning efforts;
c. include detailed student learning outcomes tied directly to institutional needs;
d. demonstrate a clear relationship between the activities of the QEP and the improvement of student learning, all tied to established institutional needs;
e. include detailed budget/personnel data that clearly defines the institution’s financial/human resource commitment to the success of the QEP;
f. include a detailed timetable of year-to-year activities, expenditures, and assessments that clearly indicates the viability of the 5-year plan;
g. include documentation of broad-based input during development stage;
h. directly involve all relevant constituencies in the plan’s implementation;
i. include clearly stated goals that lead to specific measurable outcomes; and
j. assess those outcomes through direct measures.
How Do We Meet These Expectations?

While we are currently engaged in activities that address *Expectation g: broad-based input during the development stage*, many of these expectations lead us to ask questions – why questions; how questions; who and what questions; how much or how many questions; where and when questions. The first question is: *Where do we start looking for answers?* The follow list includes possible sources of information that might answer many of these questions and inform the process of narrowing our focus. Some of the obvious questions appear in parenthesis. Others certainly remain.

1. **Mission Statement** (*Why* does ASU exist?)

   *Angelo State University, a member of the Texas Tech University System, delivers undergraduate and graduate programs in the liberal arts, sciences, and professional disciplines. In a *learning-centered environment* distinguished by its integration of teaching, research, creative endeavor, service, and co-curricular experiences, ASU prepares students to be responsible citizens and to have productive careers.)*

I have emphasized two key concepts from our mission statement.

   a. **Learning-Centered Environment.** Our environment focuses on learning; not the student; not the teacher; but learning. This is an extremely important philosophical point that has a significant effect on our view of ASU. Try these statements on for size. ASU is an *institution of higher learning*. ASU is a *learning community*. Personally, I like the way they fit.

   b. **ASU prepares students to be responsible citizens and to have productive careers.** These are our broadest student learning goals. Every graduate and undergraduate student learning goal, and all student learning outcomes (SLO’s), must align with these broad goals. SLO’s associated with the QEP must do likewise.

2. **Learning Goals** (*What* are the goals for student learning that align with this mission?)

   a. Undergraduate Learning Goals
   

   b. Graduate Learning Goals (in development)

3. **Strategic Plans/Priorities** (*How* will we fulfill this mission and achieve these goals?)

   a. State of Texas Higher Education Plan-*Closing the Gaps*
   
   http://www.thecb.state.tx.us/reports/PDF/0379.PDF?CFID=13041417&CFTOKEN=34818613

   b. Texas Tech University System Strategic Priorities and Goals
   
   http://www.angelo.edu/services/strategy/documents/LEADING%20THE%20WAY%20February%202010.pdf

   c. Angelo State University Strategic Plan http://www.angelo.edu/services/strategy/vision2020.html

4. **Institutional Issues or Characteristics** (*What* issues or characteristics impact learning at ASU, now and in the future?)

   a. Underprepared students; retention; persistence to graduation

   b. Declining state support; stretched resources
c. HSI status; Military-friendly status, etc.
d. Other characteristics

5. **Student Body** (*Who* are our students?)
   a. Demographics
   b. Learning styles
   c. Academic competencies and interests

6. **Current and Future Employers** (*Who* is hiring our students?)
   a. Regional
   b. State-wide
   c. National
   d. International

7. **Student Learning Outcomes** (*What* learning is needed to be a successful ASU student? *What* learning is needed to be a successful ASU graduate, now and in the future?)
   a. Study skills, time management, knowledge of support services, etc.
   b. Core competencies and discipline-specific competencies
   c. Liberal learning and professional preparation
   d. Co-curricular outcomes

8. **Learning Environment** (*Where/when* does the learning take place?)
   a. Degree/Certificate programs
   b. Special Programs (FYE, International Studies, Honors, Undergraduate Research, Field-based, Community-based)
   c. Academic support; Library and other learning resources
   d. Co-curricular/Student development programs; Residential environment
   e. Classroom/Lab/Co-curricular environment
   f. Instructional technology; Distance/Online environment

9. **Assessment** (*How much* learning is expected? *How* will assessment be conducted?)
   a. Learning criteria/Rigor
   b. Direct/Indirect metrics
   c. Internal/External metrics
   d. Assessment processes/Documentation

    a. Learning-centered practices
    b. Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL)
    c. Faculty/Staff development
    d. QEP administrative/operational practices
11. **Institutional Capacity** *(How much will a viable, sustainable QEP cost?)*
   a. Direct costs
   b. Indirect costs

12. **Sustainability** *(How can we sustain the QEP?)*
   a. Reallocation of existing resources
   b. “Piggyback” with current/future TTUS or ASU initiatives
   c. Community partnerships
   d. Collaboration w/ other TTUS components
   e. Sponsored Projects

**Concluding Thoughts – Narrowing the Focus**

While these and other sources of information will certainly inform the topic selection process, it is my belief that two seminal, “focusing” questions will drive our topic selection decision.

1. *What topic will best address our institutional/student needs? (What do we need to do?)*
2. *What topic is most viable for ASU? (What can we do?)*

Therefore, a topic proposal that substantiates an institutional/student need and institutional viability is worthy of strong consideration. It is imperative that an initiative as significant as the QEP aligns with our mission, institutional learning goals, and strategic priorities. Such alignment links the QEP to institutional/student need. This also greatly enhances the viability of any topic under consideration given the relationship between strategic priorities and operational budgets.

**What is Next?**

In early November, the QEP Development Committee will concurrently release their *What’s Your Big Idea? Report* and issue a *Call for QEP Topic Proposals*, with incentives. The report will summarize the results of the recent QEP survey, an analysis of ASU student learning and engagement data, and a review of literature regarding 21st century learning expectations. The call for proposals will ask small teams of faculty, staff and students to submit proposals that focus on five criteria. The two most important criteria serve as bookends. They will be weighed more heavily in the evaluations process and are emphasized below:

1. **Institutional/Student Needs (What are our institutional/student needs?)**
2. **Student Learning Outcomes (What will students be expected to learn?)**
3. **Learning Environment/Activities (How will we foster this learning?)**
4. **Learning Assessment (How will we measure this learning?)**
5. **Viability (How will we sustain our plan?)**

Please participate and/or encourage your colleagues and students to participate in the proposal process.