QEP SC Meeting Minutes  
February 12, 2010

Present: Linda Anderson, Andy Baker, Diane Everett, Claudia Gatewood, Abbie Heisner, Jeannie Kiriwas (note taker), Carolyn Nicholson, Brigid Noonan, John Pearson, Christa Queen-Sutherland, Alex Sanchez, Greg Sapp (chair), Sasha Schmid, John Tichenor

Prior to the meeting, the chair disseminated research gathered by Rosalie Carpenter that included positive findings on having a common, summer reading for incoming students. We discussed this briefly, and not all of the committee members were supportive of it. This sort of thing has been done in the past at Stetson with mixed results. Others who had participated in summer reading programs also noted mixed results such that if we decide to go with a common, summer reading program, we would have to implement it in such a way that it would have a good chance of working.

There are a couple of benefits to having a common, summer reading. First, it would send the message to students who are coming in to Stetson that academics are important. While they are (reasonably) concerned about living quarters and conditions, we need to let students know that academics are important and that they should not take classes or academic work for granted. Since over half of the incoming class in a typical year has at least one academic deficiency by mid-term, we believe we need to get students thinking academically sooner. A second benefit to having a common, summer reading is to encourage a common experience among our students that ties them closer to the institution itself and makes the students feel like they are a part of it. It would also give students something in common to talk about outside of classes to be able to have a conversation with someone they do not know.

Some on the committee were skeptical as to the efficacy of a summer reading, especially one that would be common to all students. At Stetson in the past, it seemed as if the majority of students did not do the reading. If the students do not do the reading, the initiative is, largely, a waste of resources. We agreed, though, that for the initiative to work, faculty would have to integrate the reading into the FSEM coursework and let students know that they will be expected to do the reading for their coursework when classes begin. If faculty make it clear that the reading will be part of their academic work for the semester, students will be more likely to do the reading as assigned.

However, integrating the text into the FSEM course presents another problem—how to choose a text that will fit into 32-35 FSEM courses. Choosing a common text would be difficult and would have to be left to a small committee, but even so, expecting faculty to be able to integrate the text into the coursework might prove quite difficult and artificial.

We discussed the possibility of having each faculty member choose a text that students would be expected to read before arriving on campus and that would be integrated into the coursework. We would forego the commonality of the reading, but it would make it easier to integrate the text into the coursework.

Having a text of some length (longer than a haiku and shorter than War and Peace) would allow for FSEM faculty to assign some paper or other work that can be due sooner than usual allowing faculty to get feedback on the students’ work to the students earlier. (One initiative we have discussed favorably is having an “early intervention” or “early checkup” for first-year students rather than waiting for midterm reports. We would need to assign, evaluate, and return a fairly major assignment within the
first four weeks of class to help students make any necessary adjustments to their study habits early enough to prevent them damaging their semester beyond repair. If a student waits until after receiving midterm reports to make adjustments, it is often too late to salvage the semester grade-wise.)

We also thought having a summer reading assignment due at the beginning of class would allow for an engaging academic discussion the first day of class rather than having to wait for students to get something read and digested. We might even incorporate discussion of the summer reading into orientation to help students begin to focus on academics as they are thinking about whether or not they remembered toothpaste at the store.

Having a summer reading program tied to first-year seminars would also allow for the students and faculty to have communication over the summer via e-mail thus providing a bridge from high school to Stetson that begins before classes start.

We agreed that there has to be professional development for faculty to help them select the reading that is appropriate and interesting and engaging. In fact, for most of what we are discussing, there will have to be widespread faculty buy-in because faculty will be more involved in helping incoming students transition into Stetson.

The benefit of having academic contact between faculty and students over the summer is that faculty and students can begin developing a mentoring relationship without the pressure of grades so that when the pressure of coursework begins, there is already a relation developed and challenges can be negotiated together rather than waiting for problems that have to be fixed after the fact.

As noted above, not everyone was convinced a summer reading and/or writing assignment was the best option. The suggestion was made that, instead of having students write a paper at the beginning of the semester, have them bring in questions for discussion or break them up into focus groups to discuss various aspects of the texts at a more in-depth level.

One faculty member on the committee said that he can have a writing assignment in the first couple of weeks of class based on a shorter reading assigned at the beginning of the semester. So it might be possible to achieve the same goal of having early feedback without having students read something over the summer.

Whatever we do, to support a significant transitional initiative (e.g., summer reading, early intervention, summer mentoring), we will have to provide the infrastructure for us to implement, support, and follow through with program initiatives. It is possible that we will need a full-time director of our First-Year Seminar Program to help coordinate, lead, and support transitional initiatives.

Based on collective past experiences with first-year programs and summer reading programs, we agreed that the faculty and staff who participate in them will have to be hand-picked from among our best people and that no one should be thrown into it unwillingly. We should have senior faculty working with our incoming students, and new faculty should be excused until they learn the culture of Stetson and can devote the high demand of time it will take to mentor students.

One of the things we discussed was not allowing students to declare majors until they have been at Stetson a year (unless they are transfers with a significant amount of credit and need to declare right away; this would be handled on an ad hoc basis). This would set up an advising system where FSEM
instructors serve as Gen Ed advisors for all of their FSEM students. The great benefit of this is that students will know who their advisors are and will be able to develop a mentoring relationship with their advisors. Advisors will actually know their students and the kind of work they are doing quite early in the first semester and will actually be able to mentor students instead of helping them check off boxes on their list of requirements. We had a hard time in the committee separating “advising” from “mentoring” as we agreed that the two really should go together. We talked about having a “Declaration Ceremony” for the students who have successfully completed their first year and who have declared majors.

Regarding the College of Law, we discussed developing a mentoring program for the College of Law to replace what law firms have left behind. Linda Anderson provided us with a memo discussing the need for law schools to provide more mentoring for law school students since law firms have lessened their mentoring programs in recent years. Retention does not seem to be a problem for the College of Law as they lose very few students from the first year to the second year. One of the ways we might want to think about strengthening the experience of our law students is to develop a mentorship program that provides for more contact especially first-year law students.

Toward the end of our meeting, we discussed the need to investigate specific initiatives that we might include in our QEP. Some thought it would be a good idea to research initiatives along developmental lines as opposed to chronological lines. That is, rather than focus on students where they are at specific points in their college careers (including during the summer before they get to Stetson) that we should think about areas of focus they will need throughout their careers such as mentoring, advising, co-curricular learning, and small-group learning. A fifth category was proposed—Student Services Center/Strategies.

We did not all agree that this was the best strategy for developing initiatives, but we do agree that these categories provide potential areas of important needs for our students that, if strengthened can enhance student learning at Stetson. At the end of the session, the group self-selected areas of focus to create subgroups for investigation. The groups are as follows:

Mentoring – Brigid Noonan, Alex Sanchez, Claudia Gatewood
Advising – Carolyn Nicholson, John Pearson
Co-Curricular learning – Diane Everett, Andy Baker
Small group learning – Sasha Schmid, Rosalie Carpenter (added after the meeting)
Student Services Center/Strategies – Abbie Heisner, Jeannie Kiriwas
College of Law Transitions—Linda Anderson, Christa Queen-Sutherland

While there was still much energy to go around, the chair adjourned the meeting at 5:00. We will most likely engage in more discussion via e-mail.

Our next scheduled meeting will occur February 26, 2010.

Thanks to Jeannie Kiriwas who provided good notes for this report!