QEP SC Meeting Minutes
January 15, 2010

Attendance:
Linda Anderson, Andy Baker, Rosalie Carpenter (scribe), Claudia Gatewood, Abbie Heisner, Jeannie Kiriwas, Brigid Noonan, Greg Sapp (chair), Sasha Schmid, John Tichenor

Review of the Process
At the beginning of the meeting we reviewed the QEP process to keep in mind the big picture of what we have done, where we are, and where we are going. For an in-depth look at the QEP process see the QEP Handbook at http://www.sacscoc.org/pdf/081705/QEP%20Handbook.pdf.

What We Have Done So Far
John Tichenor, Director of Institutional Research and Stetson’s SACS liaison, informed us of what has been done so far regarding the QEP. We have clear evidence of problems with student success as indicated by retention and graduation rates that are lower than they can be. We have NSSE and BSSE results that show that students are not as engaged as they can be, and there is research that indicates that engaged students are more successful than those who are not (or more engaged students are more successful than those who are less engaged). These data will be included in our QEP and will be included in future minutes. For more information, please contact Dr. Tichenor at jticheno@stetson.edu.

For our QEP, we have conducted university-wide focus groups to decide what our big issues are. John had initial conversations with Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs Beth Paul, and they met with several groups across the University. Most of these meetings took place in September of 2009. The current QEP Steering Committee was formed in November of 2009 and held its introductory meeting in late November. The first working meeting was held December 4, 2009, and minutes from that meeting are posted on the web here: https://www.stetson.edu/other/planning/qep.php.

Our next step is to identify programs and processes that have the greatest impact on our students as they transition from high school to Stetson, from entering Stetson to completing their courses of study, and then on into their post-Stetson lives. Our meeting of January 15 discussed some of those places where we might focus our attention to help our students be more successful in those transitions.

Discussion of Issues Related to the Summer Before Entering Stetson
For some time we discussed the period of time for students as they prepare to enter Stetson, that period where they transition from being high school students to Stetson students. The point was raised that we need to do a better job with students helping them to bridge their lives between high school and their arrival at Stetson. The discussion turned to things we might work on in the summer to help them.

One of the things we might adjust is the Course Preference form students currently use to indicate their preferences. It seems many students think they are actually choosing classes and do not understand that they are only indicating preferences. This can (and, most likely, does) lead to student dissatisfaction when they get their schedules and see courses they did not “choose.”
We asked Andy Baker, Assistant Dean of Admissions, to help us understand what our incoming students are thinking about college as they prepare to enter. Andy said the students are more concerned about student life issues rather than academic concerns. We agreed that it is normal for students to be concerned about issues such as housing, meal plans, and things to do in DeLand, but we also agreed that we need to help them think seriously about the academic demands that will be placed on them. We need to help them bridge the gap between high school and college academically so they will not be as taken off guard by academic demands as they currently seem to be.

Having a common, summer reading for incoming students, complete with an assignment that is evaluated by faculty members, might be a good way to help students understand the difference in what is expected from them at Stetson versus their previous educational experiences. We might be able to effect this realization with a brief reading and writing assignment during orientation.

We currently have Off-to-School parties in their hometowns, but these are sparsely attended. With more support for infrastructure, these might be more successful. These gatherings might be beneficial for the students and their parents to begin to understand the demands of college before they arrive to move in.

Might having faculty contact incoming students over the summer help students adjust? We discussed the possibility of having students’ FSEM instructors contact the students to aid in the transition. One challenge to overcome here, though, is that most faculty use the summer for research or other activities and are often away from campus.

Support After Coursework Has Begun
We discussed the idea of having all instructors of first-year students collect, grade, and return a major assignment (e.g., exam, paper) by the end of the first four weeks of classes to serve as an early intervention for those students who are not doing college-level work. Presently, our first evaluation of students comes at mid-term, often far too late for students to make adjustments necessary to successfully finish the semester with a strong GPA.

The point was also raised that most students do not have small communities for support that make them feel like they are a part of Stetson. On the other hand, this is not necessarily true of all schools. In the School of Music, for example, students quickly bond with each other because they have shared experiences and the group is smaller. They also have extra funding (e.g., faculty course releases) that helps in having a high-contact level with recruits.

The point was also made that having a mentor on campus would help make incoming students feel like they are a part of this community and give them guidance on navigating their course for the first few months.

Advising: Gen Ed vs. Major
We noted that, in Arts and Sciences, all students will have their FSEM courses in the fall this coming school year (2010). We liked the idea of not allowing students to declare majors until they have completed one year at Stetson and having their FSEM instructors be their Gen Ed faculty advisors. Students who declare an interest in a particular major will be taken to that major’s departmental advisor by the Gen Ed advisor so that the student can be advised (informally) by a major advisor even before
declaring a major. As soon as the student is able to and declares a major, that student’s file will be transferred to the major advisor who will become that student’s faculty advisor. This would set up a two-step process in advising in which all students come in as “Discovery” majors or “Undeclared.” The primary advantage of having these students receive their formal, academic advising from their FSEM instructors is that the FSEM instructors will actually know their advisees and be able to better advise them. The advisors will know long before official reports are sent out whether or not the students are making good progress in their initial months at Stetson. Advising at Stetson is clearly an area we, as the QEP SC, want to look at for improving.

With regard to advising, we discussed the possibility of using StrengthsQuest, MBTI, or other personality profile to help students understand and utilize their strengths. This can help with academic advising and be used to establish a common language across campus.

For the College of Law, Linda Anderson says students come in and stay together with a cohort of about 80 students. There has been some discussion about requiring students to meet with a faculty advisor on a regular basis. There is research that shows that Law students need guidance to help them. (More on this below.)

First-Year Seminars
A suggestion was made that we use non-faculty members to connect to students in an experiential manner. At the University of South Carolina, first-year seminar courses are team-taught by a faculty member, a staff member, and a student mentor. This provides students with three mentors from different segments of the university population. FSEM courses would incorporate some living and study skills in addition to critical thinking and writing that will help incoming students be successful. We recognized that students are whole people and that matters “outside the classroom” clearly affect their behavior and performance “inside the classroom.” Adding an experiential component to the course, perhaps supervised by the staff instructor, would benefit the students’ academic achievement and sense of belonging to the community.

Research for Future Work
By the end of our meeting, we discovered three initial areas for which we need research to help us decide where to focus our central efforts. The chair assigned three QEP members to research projects to be completed by our February 12 meeting:

1. Linda Anderson (College of Law) will research the possible benefits of having faculty advisors/mentors attached to incoming law students.
2. Jeannie Kiriwas (Student Activities) will research the benefits of creating small communities for incoming students to see if being a part of a small community makes a difference in student success.
3. Rosalie Carpenter (First Year Studies) will research the effects of team-taught first-year seminars on student learning and success.

For Next Time
Our next meeting will be held in Gulfport at the College of Law on Saturday, January 23. At that meeting we will hear more from Linda Anderson on issues faced by students transitioning to law school from college or careers.

Special thanks go to Rosalie Carpenter for being the official note taker for the meeting.