QEP Minutes of January 23, 2010

Present: Linda Anderson (scribe), Claudia Gatewood, Abbie Heisner, Jeannie Kiriwas, Brigid Noonan, Greg Sapp (chair), Alex Sanchez, John Tichenor

On January 23, the QEP SC travelled to the College of Law in Gulfport to strengthen the connection between the campuses. We tagged along with the Bonner Scholars who were visiting the College of Law to learn how the law can be used as a tool to bring about social justice in communities. We had two sessions, one in the morning and one in the afternoon before heading back to DeLand and Orlando (or home in Gulfport for Linda Anderson).

Announcements
The institutional working groups are finishing up their work and will hold two reporting sessions: Friday (1/29) from noon – 1:30 and 3:30 – 5. These will be available in DeLand and Gulfport. Our meeting for January 29 is cancelled so we can attend one of these sessions.

Dr. John Pearson of the English department, will be joining the QEP SC.

Transitions to the College of Law
Since we were on the College of Law campus, we asked Linda Anderson, Associate Professor of Law, to share with us her insights into the areas of law school where our students need the most help. Linda noted that there is a disconnect from college to law school. By this she means that students’ college experiences do not always prepare them for being successful in the College of Law. Linda speaks as a professor and as a parent of a law student. When students inquire about what life is like in law school, they ask about social life, where to live, or how far away the beach is. Students are immediately bombardded with the fact that grades are very important and are not ready to meet the challenge. The problem is that most students don’t know how well they are doing in law school until the end of the semester because grades are not usually given before finals (though some faculty members give midterm assignments). Students may be called upon to speak to a particular case in class, but they are then left off the hook for the rest of the semester. This makes it difficult for many students to make adjustments in their academic behavior until they receive their grades at the beginning of the following semester. Linda estimates that a small percentage of students usually seek help from their professors during the semester, and it is usually the top students who do. This means that the vast majority of students have no idea how they are doing throughout the semester. They are often unaware of the need to be very independent learners. They face large classes with little required interaction and limited or no feedback until the final exam. Consequently, they often do not know whether they are learning, whether they are learning deeply enough, or what they should do to be more effective learners. The best students find a way to stay engaged, often visit their professors outside of class, and learn how to make the material meaningful, which allows them to learn it more effectively.

We considered an initiative where we implement required visits to professors to see if this would affect GPAs or class rank, but because students are graded on a mandatory curve, we would not see a change in overall grades based on any academic initiatives we might put in place. We can’t compare overall GPAs for a measure of student success. We can look at LSSSE (Law School Survey of Student
Engagement) to note student satisfaction. We may also be able to compare student self-reporting on visits to professors with class rank. Here, we would compare the class rank or GPA of students who say they visit with professors on a regular basis versus those who do not. If those who visit with their professors on a regular basis to get more regular feedback have higher GPAs and class rank, this would indicate that having feedback earlier in and more regularly throughout the semester would be beneficial to students.

There is a need in helping law students understand the leap in the educational process, how to be more proactive in assessing their own learning.

It is possible to design a study to research the effect of early feedback on student success. We need to check LSSSE and other data to see if there is a correlation between student engagement and class rank. Then we can support initiatives that will get early feedback to students. We can begin with those law professors who give early feedback to their students and compare those students to students who do not receive early feedback.

After lunch, we did an exercise to illustrate the difference between how students typically read and understand texts and what we expect from our students. We read the short story, “The Story of an Hour,” by Kate Chopin, and discussed how this demonstrates different ways that students look at material depending on their educational level. Rather than simply reporting about the events in the story, at the college and graduate school levels we expect our students to answer questions that are not clearly answered by the text, identify their position, defend it, and support it. For some students, at all levels, this is not yet happening.

The committee explored ideas about why we were not seeing the expected level of intellectual development, or ability to develop this over the first few semesters. We discussed the fact that many students go to college or graduate school because it is expected, not because they want to explore new ways of thinking. Additionally, many first generation college students, and maybe first generation graduate students, go to school to make more money, not to explore new ideas or ways of thinking. Additionally, there may be a connection between taking courses to demonstrate success so they can continue to keep the GPA that allows them to keep their funding, rather than taking courses that might help them explore new ideas or patterns of thought. These are issues we face when we think about helping our students to be as successful as they can be.

We recognized that the QEP does not need to focus only on what students can do differently, or what additional resources we can provide for students, but it can also address faculty development ideas and initiatives as well. We recognized that asking faculty to make changes can be challenging, but not impossible. As the SACS guidelines for the QEP indicate, there must be widespread faculty involvement in the QEP initiative(s) undertaken by the university.

We identified another challenge we face: many students enter our various departments with a strong desire to make a difference in the world, but in many cases, especially at the graduate level, they lose sight of this, get frustrated, and don’t always get the guidance that would allow them to make progress toward their goals. The group discussed a variety of potential reasons for this. It is possible that faculty assume students are getting what they need in current curricula and do not see a need for change or to offer students further help. We need to determine if students are, in fact, getting what we think they need from what we are currently offering. For example, if we think students are getting the skills necessary to succeed in their college or graduate/professional school careers in their first-year
programs, we need to measure their skill levels to see if this is, in fact, the case. If it is the case, there is no need for change. If students are not where we expect them to be at the end of the first semester or year, we need to implement changes that will help them get to where we want them to be.

At our next meeting, in addition to reports about research efforts, we will focus on advising, especially from the student point of view. We will meet on February 12 at 3:00 pm.

The meeting was adjourned and was followed by a tour of the College of Law campus.

Special thanks go to Linda Anderson for being the official note taker for our meeting.