

QEP Questions and Answers

The Evolution of the QEP in the SACS Accreditation Process:

Starting in the Fall of 2007, the Meredith College community has participated in a campus-wide process to identify a topic for our QEP—a *quality enhancement plan*—project that will impact student learning. In the summer of 2008, the SACS Leadership Team appointed a group of faculty and staff across campus to develop the topic voted on by the campus into a concrete QEP project that would be energizing and transformative. Co-chairs Mark O’Dekirk and Ann Gleason led the QEP Steering Committee in a concerted effort to gather feedback from all sectors of campus, which focused us on a narrower topic of critical thinking. Since January 2009, the committee has worked throughout the semester, the summer and the fall to develop strategies to improve and infuse critical thinking across the college. At several points throughout the Academic Year, the co-chairs of the QEP Committee shared updates with the college during faculty meetings and through its website. In Summer 2009, the committee started drafting the QEP Report to submit to SACS for accreditation purposes, which details our development process, related research, detailed action plans, and allocated resources to implement the QEP project—the PRISM Experience of Critical Thinking.

The QEP Report:

PRISM: Purposeful Reasoning, Inquiry and Scholarship at Meredith College:

You will find links to final DRAFTS of the QEP Report at the QEP SACS Website:

<http://www.meredith.edu/sacs/qep/>

Although one document, the QEP report is presented on the website by chapters for your targeted reading of sections that are of interest. In addition to the DRAFT of the official report, you will find a link to this document that addresses important questions you might have about the QEP and the SACS Process as well as a link to a more descriptive overview of the budget. Those who wish to see the full budget may read the appropriate section in the report.

QUESTIONS that you might have:

(1) Why are schools required to do a QEP type project for SACS?

- SACS is not an external body that has imposed an arbitrary requirement on the member institutions. Meredith is a member of SACS and the membership of SACS Commission on Colleges voted to include a QEP-type project as a part of the accreditation process.

Why? I imagine that SACS member institutions recognized:

- (a) That schools often do not change or initiate strategies that address perceived student learning needs and/or
- (b) That schools often implement new programs without demonstrating the ability to plan sufficiently, research best practices and learning theory, establish learning outcomes and appropriate strategies, secure adequate resources to support the faculty and staff in making changes in teaching and learning, assess effectiveness, and use evidence to make programmatic decisions.

(2) What does SACS look for in an acceptable QEP?

- SACS does not comment on the focus that a campus decides for its QEP project; the reviewers evaluate how well the campus has researched, developed and planned for addressing that focused need in student learning.
- The major components that SACS addresses in its reviews are
 - **BROAD-BASED PARTICIPATION**
 - **STUDENT-CENTERED FOCUS & OUTCOMES**
 - **APPROPRIATE ASSESSMENT STRATEGIES**
 - **SUSTAINABILITY by the institution**
- Every school will have to report on the progress of their QEP over the course of a 5-year period.

(3) It's been an incredibly difficult time this fall for Meredith College. Why should we focus on doing a QEP—specifically, the focus on critical thinking?

- We have lots of good answers for this question!
- It ***has been*** an incredibly long and difficult semester for all of us at Meredith College this fall—we have experienced a compressed time frame for program reviews of many programs, have absorbed painful decisions about loss of programs and personnel, had difficult conversations about allocation of program resources across our campus, incurred an unexpected budget shortfall that will impact our programs both this year and next year, and have labored to meet the needs of the largest entering class of freshmen in Meredith College's history.
- In the face of these arduous conditions that have weighed on all of our shoulders, this is a ***critical, perhaps pivotal, time in the history and future of Meredith College.*** While making hard decisions to cut back and reduce, *we still have to move forward to offer our students a vibrant education that meets their needs as 21st century learners.* The temptation to “batten down the hatches” and not implement new directions in our academic and co-curricular programs is not going to lead us forward into a new and better future. It is imperative that we rally around meeting our students' needs in focused and energizing ways, while being vigilant that we do so responsibly—both fiscally and academically.
- At this time, we ***need positive directions around which we can rally***—our spirits, our morale, our energies, and our efforts. If we do this well, our students will benefit, our retention can improve, and we can demonstrate to prospective students that Meredith still is a source of transformative education in these trying times.
- Our students need the focus, foundation, practice, and skills in critical thinking and active reflection. We have wonderful academic programs already in place on campus that we need to encourage and support. Yet, even this semester, we have discussed openly that we still see trends in our student population that we are not meeting inside nor outside the classroom. Those trends speak to the need for critical thinking—
 - Enabling our students to handle collegiate level thought and study
 - Establishing common language and framework for thinking and reasoning clearly

- Empowering students to engage in higher levels of complexity and reflection
- And (yes)...Equipping women to excel (as our mission statement has declared) in a global society in the 21st century
- PRISM offers our campus a focus that can be a unifying element and can be the vehicle for our campus to update and improve our teaching and learning environment—which will benefit all of us.
- In all honesty, with the current assessment and budget situations on campus, we need to demonstrate to ourselves and to SACS that we can get it right! That is the point and purpose of the SACS QEP component.

(4) With the current budget situation, how can our campus conceive of and propose a budget for a new program?

- The QEP Committee/PRISM Team spent months researching strategies to meet our campus-wide need to improve critical thinking. In light of those strategic decisions, we initially proposed a *budget that was comparable to similar-sized institutions' QEP projects.*
- The committee did it right—the committee did not propose an extravagant budget, but an *appropriate one* to provide a transformative and comprehensive initiative that had the potential to change the culture on Meredith College's campus.
- In light of the growing revelations of the college's current budget situation, the committee has worked hard to modify and reduce that *budget to a program that still has integrity but is in line with the difficult budget reductions we are all having to make.*
- SACS' major criteria for evaluating QEP projects is SUSTAINABILITY—does the institution have the resources and the commitment to carry out curricular change? Has the institution thought about the resources needed to impact students learning and planned carefully for its implementation?
- We feel that we have a bare-bones budget that SACS will still find acceptable in meeting the goals of the project, maintaining its integrity, and still be consistent with the resource structure of programs on our campus.
- We need to demonstrate to SACS that we can do curricular change well—we need to demonstrate that not only can we plan, create and implement, but also that we can resource, support, assess and sustain such programs.

(5) How did the PRISM Team go about reducing a fully resourced budget and maintain a reasonable, implementable project?

- The committee took a three-pronged approach to modifying the project budget in light of the campus-wide situation:
 - (a) We looked carefully at the project as proposed and scaled back slightly—in light of current resources and concerns on our campus in general, we *scaled back the scope of the project.* Rather than an end-goal of all students in a freshmen seminar in 5 years, we can aim for 15 sections of 20 students reaching $\frac{3}{4}$ of the freshmen class and make a decision about future expansion from that point.
 - (b) We worked horizontally or longitudinally on reducing the budget by *slowing down the pace of the implementation.* By scaling

back slightly, we then re-evaluated how much progress we need to make by each year and spaced out that implementation over the five years.

- (c) We searched vertically through the budget to remove bells and whistles. While we never considered any components extravagant, we recognized that we could have a creative, energizing, and effective program without some of the features that we hoped to include. In these budget times, we had to eliminate elements like all of our campus units are doing. If finances restore themselves or funding opportunities arise, we will look to restoring some of those components.
- (d) In addition to the three-pronged approach of scaling back the scope, slowing down the pace, and reducing non-essentials, we operated with the principle that we wanted to protect student learning and faculty-staff development. Change in teaching and learning requires faculty-staff development and support. We are not willing to sacrifice support of our faculty and staff, nor do we want to sacrifice the central strategies that address what and how students learn.

(6) What are the major components of the PRISM Experience?

- They are articulated in detail in Section 7 of the Report.
- **The PRISM Freshman Seminar**—a topic-driven, discipline-based seminar that focuses on depth rather than breadth; introduces students to a framework and common language of critical thinking; encourages making experiential connections to learning; and introduces students to types and ways of thinking within the various disciplines; goal of at least 15 sections with max enrollment of 20 students each
- **The PRISM Infusion (Curricular)**—Infusion in the courses and programs of the individual disciplines at the mid- and upper-levels; CT-designated courses in the discipline that deepen explicitly some aspect of critical thinking in that discipline; ways to assess students' progress in critical thinking; goal of 15% of courses with CT designation over 5 years
- **The PRISM Infusion (Co-Curricular)**—Infusion in the strategies and activities of our college programs; empowering our students to connect their learning and apply critical thinking in all college activities; giving students opportunities to assess their own growth in critical thinking
- **PRISM Professional Development**—Support for all faculty who create and teach seminars; competitive support for faculty to enhance current courses to achieve CT designation; Delta (Δ) Professional Learning Communities to share and support each other in teaching and learning in new ways; professional development seminars and stipend support to learn about critical thinking and strategies to implement CT on campus; limited travel funds for faculty to seek more extensive or more targeted professional development opportunities appropriate to their discipline

Concluding Statement:

In conclusion—yes, it has been an incredibly difficult semester for all of us on campus—faculty, staff and students. We have tremendous challenges in front of us as a college community—fiscally, logistically and intellectually. Meredith College has a long tradition of rallying around each other as a community, reaching deep with our “can-do” spirit, and moving forward with insight and vision. We have to do that again, and ***our QEP can be a source and focus of that energy.***

We invite you to read the sections of the report, get to know the strategies of the PRISM Experience, and examine our budget for implementing those strategies in this pivotal point in our college history.

We will hold a public forum on Monday, November 16 at 10 AM to respond to your questions about the strategies, the budget, and/or the implementation plans. While the components of the PRISM program are in place, we still have flexibility in our implementation of those plans. We need to act as a campus to implement those plans together and that community-wide effort will help the campus make appropriate decisions.

The PRISM TEAM would like to THANK the entire Meredith College Community for your continued participation—both in interest and ideas—in the QEP development process. We have learned a lot as a campus in this process and the team believes that *PRISM offers the potential to transform our campus culture through an emphasis on critical thinking*—we could not offer the campus anything less than this. Our SACS Re-accreditation process will be complete only with an effective QEP project that touches our campus broadly, and offers you many avenues of participation.

PRISM Implementation Team
(formerly known as the QEP Steering Committee):

Ann Gleason, *Dean of Students, Co-Chair*
 Mark O’Dekirk, *Psychology, Co-Chair*
 Tim Hendrix, *Mathematics & Computer Science, PRISM Director*
 Steven Benko, *Religion & Philosophy*
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 Deborah Tippett, *Human Environmental Sciences*
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Student Members:

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