

### ***3 — Identification of the Topic***

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The development of the QEP began during academic year 2007-2008 with campus-wide discussions involving faculty, staff and students in a variety of venues. In fall 2007, the SACS Leadership team invited guests from Faculty Council to their meetings and met with Associate Vice Presidents and Deans of Academic Programs to discuss possible QEP topics and plans for engaging the community in discussions about QEP topics. A QEP discussion strategy was created for spring 2008. From February to April 2008, discussions were held to identify areas of interest at lunch tables in the dining hall, in faculty meetings, in student forums and in campus-wide forums. Participants were provided a list of possible QEP topics as well as examples from other institutions that had gone through reaffirmation in 2006-2007. From these discussions, the SACS Leadership Team identified four topics to present to the community for a vote via online survey in April 2008.

The first survey was administered April 7-9, 2008 to all students, faculty and staff. Respondents were asked to rank the following four choices for a QEP topic:

1. Deepening the intellectual involvement of freshmen
2. Expanding the international understanding and experience of students
3. Creating an infrastructure for academic success; and
4. Increasing engaged citizen leadership.

Out of the 190 responses, the two top first-ranked choices were those relating to an infrastructure for academic success (34%) and international understanding (29%). These top two choices were discussed at a faculty meeting on April 11, 2008 and plans were made to do a second survey of faculty, staff and students that focused on these two topics.

The second survey was administered April 18-23, 2008. Students, faculty and staff were asked to state which of two topics they preferred for the QEP: 1) "Strengthen the support system for academic success"; or 2) "Expand the international and cultural understanding and experience of students." Of the 501 respondents, 69.5% chose strengthen the support system for academic success. Respondents also provided comments and suggestions for the topic selected.

The SACS Leadership Team discussed the possibilities suggested by the top topic and decided to focus the topic on enhancing academic challenge and support in order to present it to a QEP committee. In May 2008, the SACS Leadership Team met to select and appoint the Co-Chairs and members of the QEP Committee. Important factors in selecting members were to reinforce the goals of creating a QEP that was tied to the College's Vision 2010 strategic plan and to enhance student learning experiences across campus. Co-Chairs and members who were selected represented many areas across the campus and divisions. The SACS Leadership Team intentionally selected team members who were proven collaborators and able to work with faculty and staff educators and students from across campus. Dean of Students Ann Gleason and Associate Professor of Psychology Mark O'Dekirk were invited to serve as QEP Committee Co-Chairs and 8 other faculty and staff members from a number of academic and college programs departments were invited to serve as committee members. In fall 2008, three Meredith College students were invited to serve on the QEP Committee.

**(Add list of members of the QEP committee)**

After members of the QEP committee were identified, the SACS Leadership Team met with the newly formed QEP Committee on June 25, 2008 to discuss their charge. The SACS Leadership Team presented the QEP committee with the charge of developing a QEP program that will “improve students’ readiness for college work with a focus on research, writing and critical thinking.”

The QEP Committee spent fall 2008 reviewing institutional data indicating strengths and weaknesses in Meredith students’ learning and gathering input from the Meredith community about improving student learning in order to narrow the topic.

### **Institutional Data Used to Inform Topic**

Institutional data that were reviewed in fall 2008 included findings from the Measure of Academic Proficiency and Progress (MAPP), the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), and the Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership (MSL).

- Measure of Academic Proficiency and Progress (MAPP). The incoming freshmen at Meredith College have consistently performed low in the critical thinking section of the MAPP with 85% scoring as Not Proficient in. An examination of the MAPP scores of incoming freshmen from 2002, 2003, 2004, 2007 & 2008 revealed that first year Meredith students exhibited the lowest skill scores in the area of critical thinking. According to the Educational Testing Service (ETS), students who are proficient in critical thinking as measured by the MAPP can evaluate causal explanations and hypotheses for consistency with known facts, hypotheses or methods; determine the relevance of information for supporting an argument or conclusion including artistic information; and recognize flaws and inconsistencies in an argument.
- National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). When students were asked how often they have engaged in certain academic and intellectual activities in the past year on the NSSE, their responses to items specific to integrating diverse ideas and concepts, thinking critically and analytically, engaging in self-analysis and regulation of learning, and solving complex real-world problems indicated that they had not exhibited much change from freshman to seniors (especially in examining their own views and solving real-world problems) and that the institution had shown little growth over the last ten years. The scores of freshmen and seniors and the differences between the two groups are comparable to other institutions, but are still a concern given the importance of these activities to the growth of the student and to the mission of the College. For example, typically, over 30 % of seniors report that they engaged in only some or very little complex real-world problem solving or examination of the strengths and weaknesses of their views. The importance of these activities can be seen through the results of **Error! Hyperlink reference not valid.** between these items and the engagement scales: Academic Challenge, Active and Collaborative Learning, Student-Faculty Interaction, Enriching Educational Experiences, and Supportive Campus Environment. An analysis of the 2008 data revealed that all of these items showed positive, significant and moderately strong correlations (.3 to .6) with at least some of the engagement scales (note: none of the items was part of the engagement scales). In addition, NSSE results revealed that both Meredith first-year and senior students’ ratings of the

College's contribution to their ability to think critically and analytically as well as their ability to solve complex real-world problems were comparable or lower than students' ratings at other women's colleges (except for 2008).

- Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership (MSL). The MSL asks a number of questions that are relevant to the QEP. Specifically, students are asked how much they have grown in college in their ability to put together ideas, their ability to learn on their own and their ability to critically analyze ideas. 2006 results broken down by class standing, reveal that typically less than 15% of first and second year students report that they have grown very much and only 50% or less of seniors report that they have grown very much in these areas.

The QEP Committee discussed these results and noted that students are often coming to Meredith needing work in areas related to critical thinking skills including integration, self-analysis and problem solving, and that they are not consistently and dramatically growing in these areas. While these data do not suggest student scores are alarmingly low in comparison to other institutions, these skills are crucial intellectual skills when educating and equipping women to excel.

### **Forums and Focus Groups**

In addition to institutional data, the QEP Committee sought feedback and insights from Meredith faculty and students. These qualitative findings from forums and focus groups were often consistent with the institutional findings. QEP Committee members attended 26 departmental and student organization meetings to gather information about students' strengths, areas of student learning that could be improved, and ways to enhance student learning by capitalizing on strengths and skills development. Common themes that emerged from these conversations were that there was a need for students to develop their critical thinking skills; their reading, writing and oral communication skills; and their independence, engagement and self-confidence, especially in the early years of a student's college experience.

In addition to committee members attending meetings across campus, specific program directors were invited to the QEP meetings to provide additional input. During one of these meetings, the Director of General Education noted that in his recent review of academic program outcomes that 70% of departments list critical thinking as a major outcome. During this same time period, QEP committee members were also reading numerous articles that were informing their conversations (see reference list).

At a December 2008 retreat, the QEP Committee reviewed institutional data and information gathered from campus conversations and narrowed the QEP topic to focus on critical thinking skills, agreeing on the QEP title, *Educating and Equipping Women to Excel: Improving Critical Thinking*. This narrowed topic and QEP title were introduced to the SACS Leadership Team and then to the Meredith community in January 2009 and the QEP Committee sought campus input throughout spring semester 2009 on QEP student learning outcomes and possible strategies.

Below is a timeline graphic that shows the benchmarks both in our campus' identification of a QEP topic (detailed above in Section III) and the process used to develop the QEP (detailed in Section IV).



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