

TO: CBU QEP Focus Group Participants
FROM: Scott D. Geis, QEP Chair
SUBJECT: QEP Focus Group Materials
DATE: November 20, 2009

Good afternoon, friends:

I hope you're all well, and that your week has been rich, rewarding, and productive thus far! Please accept my heartfelt thanks for your willingness to assist with this very important part of the overall process of selecting CBU's Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) topic. I realize that this is a terribly busy time of year – and that things will no doubt only get busier! – and so am especially grateful for your generosity of time and spirit. As promised, I am writing to introduce you to the purpose of the QEP topic selection focus groups as well as certain matters related to protocol. Please allow me, first, to provide you with a brief background on the QEP.

As I have mentioned in previous correspondences, CBU is up for reaffirmation of accreditation by SACS – the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools – with March 28-30, 2011 as the dates for our on-site visit. There are two basic components of the reaffirmation process: the Compliance Certification and the Quality Enhancement Plan. And whereas the Compliance Certification focuses primarily on the past and the present, the QEP is “forward-looking” and will be an “ongoing activity,” the implementation of which begins with our 2011 SACS visit and continues for at least five years. The QEP is thus not to be viewed as an “episodic event.” Therefore, in order for us to succeed in this endeavor – and succeed we will! – our Plan must be aligned and in accordance with Core Requirement 2.12 of the *Handbook for Reaffirmation of Accreditation*, which reads as follows:

The institution has developed an acceptable Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) that (1) includes a broad-based institutional process identifying key issues emerging from institutional assessment, (2) focuses on learning outcomes and/or the environment supporting student learning and accomplishing the mission of the institution, (3) demonstrates institutional capability for the initiation, implementation, and completion of the QEP, (4) includes broad-based involvement of institutional constituencies in the development and proposed implementation of the QEP, and (5) identifies goals and a plan to assess their achievement.

With this in mind, the fundamental question SACS will be asking is: **“Has [Christian Brothers University] provided a comprehensive and clear analysis of the critical importance of the QEP for improving the learning environment?”**

Fortunately, as a university community called not only to teach but also to serve, we have the unique opportunity to re-think and re-envision – *together* – who we are and what it is, exactly, that we have

been called to do and to be on behalf of our students. That opportunity is the QEP. According to SACS, then, “Developing a QEP as a part of the reaffirmation process is an opportunity and an impetus for the institution to enhance overall institutional quality and effectiveness by **focusing on an issue or issues the institution considers important to improving student learning.**” In sum, the selection, development, and implementation of the QEP topic will demonstrate – *first and foremost to our students*, and only secondarily to SACS – our firm and unwavering commitment to **improving student learning** at Christian Brothers University.

What, exactly, do we mean when we talk about “student learning”? SACS is glad we asked: “Student learning may include changes in students’ knowledge, skills, behaviors, and/or values that may be attributable to the collegiate experience.” The critical point is this: Regardless of the chosen topic, “**the goals and evaluation strategies must be clearly and directly linked to improving the quality of student learning.**”

As I have mentioned in previous correspondences, the list of possible QEP topics has now been pared down to three: **Academic Advising**, **First Year Experience**, and **Service Learning**. Whichever topic we ultimately settle on, we must demonstrate a clear and meaningful connection to CBU’s *Mission* as well as our *Strategic Plan* (which can be accessed through CBU’s website). The Christian Brothers University Mission statement reads as follows:

Christian Brothers University is a private, Catholic, comprehensive university committed to preparing students of all faiths and backgrounds to excel in their professional and public lives by providing challenging educational opportunities in the arts, business, engineering, the sciences, and teacher education. (Christian Brothers University Catalog, 2009-2010)

In an effort to assist you in your conversation within your focus group, I am providing you with the following definitions or synopses of each of the three topics, at least as they have been conceived or envisioned by those who have participated in the QEP topic selection process to this point:

- **Academic Advising** – As a Lasallian university, CBU values the kind of individual attention that can inspire students to succeed in the classroom, and to make a difference in their communities and in the world. Such a topic would obviously – or, at least, ideally – affect retention, but the inclusion of a mentoring component would also tie in to mission. Central to this topic is the perceived need for systematization and/or automation of the advising system, and also tying academic advising to admissions and the overall admissions process.
- **First Year Experience** – At the heart of this topic is the importance of creating and nurturing a positive environment within which to foster student success (i.e., academic skills, dispositions, attitudes). There is an emphasis here on information literacy, and also protocols and programs for the identification of and intervention for “at risk” students. This would be distinct from the Freshman Orientation Program, but could conceivably dovetail with what is already in place in the current Program.

- **Service Learning** – This topic is obviously tied to CBU’s Lasallian identity, and envisions a service learning component – or service learning opportunities – in the curriculum to provide various opportunities for community involvement and outreach. Appropriate and relevant internships were also highlighted here, as there is a perceived need to provide and promote practical, real world learning experiences.

As you might have noticed, there is obvious overlap among these three topics, but we need to select *one*. Your task is not to *develop* any of the topics – that will come when we have actually selected our topic, and there will be many opportunities for the CBU community to be involved at points along the way – but, rather, to make the strongest argument possible for one of the three topics over the others.

Your group will have 90 minutes to discuss the three topics, devoting no more than 30 minutes to each topic. And, in an effort to provide some direction as you begin your conversation, I encourage you to give some thought to the following questions, as they will serve as the “talking points”:

- How do you believe this topic will enhance student learning? Please be specific!
- How would we go about measuring whether this topic has actually improved student learning?
- What would we like to see come of this particular focus on improving student learning?
- Are we close to a consensus on which of the topics might best enhance student learning at CBU?

I would encourage you to give some thought to these questions – and the first three in particular – in relation to each of the topics, and perhaps jot down some preliminary responses in preparation for the meeting, since doing so will no doubt aid in our being as efficient as possible within the allotted time. In addition to the twelve participants – three students, three faculty members, three staff members, and three alumni – there will be an observer, and I will serve as facilitator, primarily just to keep us on task.

If you have any questions between now and the meeting date, please don’t hesitate to contact me, as I’ll be more than happy to help in any way I possibly can. You may reach me either at my office extension – 901.321.3349 – or at home – 901.592.5361. I am really looking forward to our time together, and cannot thank each and every one of you enough for your desire and willingness to participate in this critical part of the overall reaffirmation of assessment process. Thank you!

Peace,

Scott