

QEP

Investing in Faculty Development to Improve Student Learning

by Philip Poole



Eric Fournier

Samford University's new Quality Enhancement Project (QEP) is being launched during the 2016–17 academic year and will have impact for the entire university community.

The new QEP provides a detailed framework for faculty development to improve student learning. The project emerged from a yearlong selection process that saw 17 initial proposals narrowed down to five. Then the teams that proposed the two highest-scoring proposals met to merge some of the strongest aspects of each, according to Eric Fournier, director of Samford's Center for Teaching, Learning and Scholarship, and QEP

implementation coordinator.

As defined by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC), a QEP "describes a carefully designed course of action that addresses a well-defined and focused topic or issue related to enhancing student learning" and "should be embedded within the institution's ongoing integrated institution-wide planning." Moreover, a QEP must be "forward looking" and must

inspire a "process that can move the institution into the future characterized by creative, engaging and meaningful learning experiences for students."

The QEP is an important step in the SACSCOC 10-year reaccreditation process, Fournier said. Samford is in the midst of that process, which will culminate during the 2016–17 academic year. Samford's first QEP in 2006 resulted in the University Fellows undergraduate honors program.

“Transformative Teaching for Significant Learning” focuses on the connection between increased investment in faculty development and improved student learning. The project is an attempt to answer the question, “Does focused and intentional faculty development programming result in improved student learning in rigorous academic courses?”

Fournier said Samford’s hypothesis is that “such an investment in faculty development not only improves student learning and performance, but does so while increasing a student’s appetite for deep thinking, and enhancing faculty satisfaction with the teaching and learning experience.”

The emerging Samford QEP will have a meaningful impact on the student learning experience, inspire broad participation across the university, develop the university’s strength as a teaching-focused institution, provide ways to assess learning outcomes and build upon the university’s strategic plan. Two items in Samford’s strategic plan align closely with this initiative: “create a remarkable environment for teaching and learning,” and “nourish and recruit a faculty committed to exceptional standards for learning.”

“We will be training faculty to teach critical thinking by designing or redesigning courses to be effective, and metacognition, helping students investigate their own thought process/learning process,” Fournier explained. “We want faculty to be able to trigger in students those things that foster deep and lasting learning.”

Fournier also noted that there are benefits for alumni with the new QEP.

“By improving learning for today’s students, we enhance the university’s academic reputation and further undergird the value of degrees already earned,” he said, “regardless of when someone attended.”

Investing in the quality of the educational product at Samford is important, he added. “The way we will do that is by

investing in faculty growth as effective teachers. We’ve already got a high-quality faculty committed to teaching, but we will be giving them the tools that will make them even better teachers.”

The Center for Teaching, Learning and Scholarship will have a primary role in leading the QEP with support from other academic and administrative units, including the Student Success Center, Communication Resource Center, Frances Marlin Mann Center for Ethics and Leadership, and the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment. Others also will contribute to the effort.

A group of faculty participated in a pilot program this summer as Samford’s QEP began to formulate. The program, “Critical Thinking and the Core,” involved 10 faculty members who teach freshman core classes (Communication Arts and Cultural Perspectives). The group explored issues related to teaching and assessing critical thinking, designing courses for significant learning, and developing a student’s metacognitive skills. The group developed new learning objectives for core classes being offered in the fall semester.

The summer workshop and pilot project are facilitated by the Center for Teaching, Learning and Scholarship. Assisting with the workshop and pilot project is Leonard Geddes, developer and leader of the Learn Well

Project, which is focused on improving the student learning process through workshops and consultations.

While the initial phase focuses on the freshmen experience and core curriculum, Fournier quickly pointed out that opportunities will be available to faculty across the university and all degree programs to apply these principles in their courses.

“This is about being innovative and building on a strength,” Fournier added. “We’re building on a Samford strength. We’re already highly ranked for our teaching, but we want to be even better.”

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University Fellows director Bryan Johnson discusses an assignment with Fellow Emily Youree. The honors program was a result of Samford’s 2006 QEP process.