When you walk into the Student Success Center and see students and tutors engaged in study, it is easy to think that this effort has always been part of the Gordon State campus. But, it hasn’t. Certainly students have benefited from tutoring and support since the earliest days of the College, but not in such a focused and strategic way as we see today. Many of you who were part of the last 2006 SACSCOC reaffirmation process know that today’s success center grew from our last reaffirmation’s Quality Enhancement Plan and its focus on academic literacy.

Here we are ten years later with many accomplishments behind us—accomplishments that every faculty and staff member joined together to make happen. But just as exciting as what has been is what lies ahead: another opportunity to better what we do at Gordon State College. The process of reaffirmation provides us the opportunity to step back and examine ourselves—what we do well, what we need to improve, and how we can best plan to positively impact our students.

This newsletter outlines the steps that have been taken to date as well as plans for the future in developing and implementing our new Quality Enhancement Plan.

Many across campus have been involved in this process for more than a year, working to complete our Compliance Certification Report, a document that details what we do at Gordon State College. Others have given their time and expertise working on our Quality Enhancement Plan. I thank each of you who has had a part and those of you about to be engaged.

There is still more to be done. I hope that this newsletter is informative, but also instrumental in your joining us to make “First Things First” an integral part of the GSC culture.

Core Requirements begin with the number two and are the “big picture” of the requirements that an accredited school meets. Comprehensive Standards begin with the number three and focus on the specifics of the requirements.
Because it focuses solely on improving student learning, the QEP is the creative, energizing aspect of Gordon’s SACSCOC reaccreditation process, one that engages the full college community; as such, it is also the most exhilarating part of reaccreditation. And much has already taken place in preparing for this exciting step. At the opening meeting of the fall 2014 semester, Professor Teresa Betkowski (SACS Liaison) announced to the faculty and staff that Gordon would be selecting a topic for our QEP in early spring term 2015. Accordingly, in early January, Dr. Alan Burstein conducted two very lively brainstorming sessions. Several proposals were put forth at this time, with the Gordon State community voting and selecting the proposal entitled “First Things First: Increasing Mastery in Quantitative and Communication Skills,” submitted by Dr. Stephen Raynie, Mr. Peter Higgins, Dr. Nolan McMurray, and Dr. Ed Whitelock. In the proposal, Dr. Raynie pointed to the disconnect between Gordon State’s vision statement “where students flourish” and the sad reality that too many GSC students struggle with the skills of the first-year Math and English courses—courses that are fundamental to success in every other area of study. The proposal calls for a QEP that will strengthen the academic foundations of the students at Gordon State College; it will do so by putting “first things first.”

According to SACSCOC, Gordon State’s QEP must also be substantively different from our previous QEP on Academic Literacy in the First Year, though it may extend, modify, redirect, or strengthen other improvements that the institution has already initiated. In other words, our QEP will be uniquely Gordon State’s plan and will build on our unique institution, our unique history, our unique student population, and our unique needs.

Because it focuses solely on improving student learning, the QEP is the creative, energizing aspect of Gordon’s SACSCOC reaccreditation process, one that engages the full college community; as such, it is also the most exhilarating part of reaccreditation. And much has already taken place in preparing for this exciting step. At the opening meeting of the fall 2014 semester, Professor Teresa Betkowski (SACS Liaison) announced to the faculty and staff that Gordon would be selecting a topic for our QEP in early spring term 2015. Accordingly, in early January, Dr. Alan Burstein conducted two very lively brainstorming sessions. Several proposals were put forth at this time, with the Gordon State community voting and selecting the proposal entitled “First Things First: Increasing Mastery in Quantitative and Communication Skills,” submitted by Dr. Stephen Raynie, Mr. Peter Higgins, Dr. Nolan McMurray, and Dr. Ed Whitelock. In the proposal, Dr. Raynie pointed to the disconnect between Gordon State’s vision statement “where students flourish” and the sad reality that too many GSC students struggle with the skills of the first-year Math and English courses—courses that are fundamental to success in every other area of study. The proposal calls for a QEP that will strengthen the academic foundations of the students at Gordon State College; it will do so by putting “first things first.”
In August of 2015, Gordon State’s Reaffirmation Leadership Team initiated the selection of a QEP committee that represents key constituent groups on campus, and these members have been busy honing the focus of the QEP and discussing possible avenues by which to strengthen the academic foundations for Gordon State’s students. Following SACSCOC’s recommended steps, the committee began work on Step Two, defining student learning outcomes. In working on these definitions, the committee sent out a survey that asked the faculty to give specifics about the weaknesses that they had witnessed with regard to quantitative and communication skills. Ninety two faculty members responded, giving detailed explanations to the questions about weaknesses that they had noted. The faculty survey confirmed what assessments of all kinds had been showing for quite some time, so the QEP Committee moved into work on Steps Three and Four, researching our topic and identifying the actions to be implemented.

One action that the QEP will call for is the implementation of Gateways to Completion (G2C), an evidence-based John N. Gardner Institute (JNGI) program that assists institutions in collecting and analyzing data in an effort to improve student learning and success in “gateway courses.” These gateway courses are those that are foundational in nature, that tend to be high-risk courses with high DFWI grades, and that have high enrollment (numbers of students required to take the course). As an Area A initiative, GSC’s QEP was already aimed at our own gateway courses, so the G2C program was a perfect fit for our overall goals. In order to truly focus on “first things first,” the QEP research committees narrowed their focuses to and will leverage the G2C program for strengthening Gordon’s Math 1111 and English 1101 courses.

The JNGI process will benefit Gordon in several ways: analytics (facilitated via the Gateway Course Success Analytics Inventory), a predictive analytics model, and an Analytics Process Collaborative; professional development opportunities that will focus on teaching and learning pedagogies; and a self-study which will assist faculty in applying evidence to course planning.

While the QEP committee continues the research and planning phase of “First Things First,” the launch of these newsletters marks the implementation of our marketing strategy. As the spring term continues, committee members headed by Dr. Peter Boltz will strategize about ways to inform the entire Gordon community about “First Things First.” The committee welcomes ideas from anyone in the GSC family.

Although there is much work ahead—work that will call on the entire Gordon State community—we are in a great place with regard to our QEP, an action plan that will show that when we put “first things first,” our students do indeed flourish.
Gordon State College’s QEP evolves out of our mission, vision, goals, values, and strategic plans.

GSC’s Mission Statement is “To provide an exceptional education through innovative teaching and engaged learning for the benefit of the world in which we live.”

Our Vision Statement is “Gordon State College . . . where students flourish.”

GSC’s overall goals are as follows:

• To ensure affordable, supportive access to high quality post-secondary education
• To develop creativity, critical thinking, problem solving, innovation, a global perspective and a commitment to lifelong learning that includes a respect for everyone involved in the process
• To maintain a commitment to engaged faculty-student interaction through intimate classroom experiences, innovative and effective teaching strategies, excellent advising and mentorship programs, and effective student support services
• To serve the broader community and region by developing academic programs and producing leaders equipped to contribute positively to middle Georgia, the United States, and the world
• To remember and celebrate the heritage of the College and its graduates
• To provide a beautiful and vibrant center of learning and scholarship as the touchstone of a diverse, connected community

Gordon State College’s Core Values are as follows:

Gordon State College LEARNS:

• Life-long scholarship - To develop habits of the mind: creativity, critical thinking, problem solving, innovation, a global perspective and a commitment to lifelong learning that includes a respect for everyone involved in the process
• Engagement - To maintain a commitment to engaged faculty-student interaction through intimate classroom experiences, innovative and effective teaching strategies, excellent advising and mentorship programs, and effective student support services
• Accessibility - To ensure affordable, supportive access to high quality post-secondary education
• Respect - To respect and celebrate the diversity, heritage, and history of the college and its graduates
• Nurture - To nurture a beautiful and vibrant center of learning and scholarship as the touchstone of a diverse, connected community
• Service - To serve the broader community and region by developing academic programs and producing leaders equipped to contribute to middle Georgia, the United States and the world

The college’s USG Learning Goals for our Area A courses (and thus relate to our QEP topic) are as follows:

Learning Goal A1:
Students communicate effectively using appropriate writing conventions

Learning Goal A2:
Students have the ability to represent and manipulate mathematical information in verbal, numeric, graphical, and symbolic forms and use these representations and manipulations to solve a variety of problems.

Of our Strategic Planning Priorities, two are especially linked to our QEP. The first is Access with Excellence, which states, “Gordon State College will serve the educational needs of the region and the state by maintaining its mission as an access institution, while expanding to offer wider access to baccalaureate programs and assuring excellence in its offerings and service to its constituents. By maintaining access while expanding programs, Gordon State College will open the doors to a college education to a wider audience, resulting in a more educated Georgia.” The second is Retention, Progression, and Graduation, which states, “Gordon State College will increase retention (the number of students that are retained from one year to the next), graduates (the number of students who graduate from two-year and four-year programs), and the number of students who progress from Gordon State College to the next appropriate step (such as transfer to another college). By accomplishing these goals, the College will contribute to a more educated population, prepared to face the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century.”