Enhancing Academic Literacy in the First Year

*A Quality Enhancement Plan for Gordon College*
Executive Summary

Each year, a higher percentage of academically and socially under-prepared students enroll in college, and each year a growing percentage of these students fail to accomplish their goal of completing a college education. As a two-year, open enrollment institution, Gordon College serves a significant portion of such at-risk students. Our primary goal as an institution of higher education and a gateway into four-year degree programs within the Georgia University System of Higher Education should be to maximize the potential for our students to successfully complete their Associate’s Degree and move onward in their educational experience.

We have focused upon “academic literacy” as the umbrella term for the myriad academic and social characteristics that maximize a student’s potential for successful completion of a college course of study. We define academic literacy as the necessary skills, practices, and attitudes for successfully engaging oneself within the academic community and ensuring continued academic progress. For Gordon College, we specify that definition to address the development of key behaviors and attitudes which will enhance student potential for successful academic progress within the institution: these elements include developing better knowledge of Gordon College’s policies, procedures, and resources; developing an awareness of the interconnectedness of academic knowledge and fields; developing an appreciation for diversity; developing confidence and maturity within the classroom; and developing an appreciation for and connection to Gordon College’s history and its community.

To initiate and enhance the development of the above academic literacy skills, we have created four Action Plans which will engage the whole of the campus community in the service of enhancing the academic literacy skills of our students and maximizing their potential for academic success. First, we will charge a Task Force for Academic Literacy in the First Year (ALFY) which will oversee the initiation and development of the other three Action Plan programs. Second, we will begin to distribute the College Student Expectations Questionnaire (CSXQ) as part of our New Student Orientation program in order to better understand the expectations of our incoming students and adjust our programs (particularly the second and third Action Plan elements) to reflect them. Third, we will initiate a Learning Community (LC) program in order to better address elements of academic literacy such as community formation, cross-curricular understanding, and student-faculty interaction. Finally, we will initiate a First-Year Experience Course (FYE) to further address elements of academic literacy such as study skills, identity formation, classroom conduct, and awareness of institutional resources.

These four programs will be gradually phased in and developed over the course of the next three years, with a goal of seeing full implementation and integration into the campus community of Gordon College by the end of five years. An implementation schedule for the four elements of the Action Plan follows:
Fall 2006:
- Establishment of the Task Force for Academic Literacy in the First Year (ALFY)
- Initial offering of two Learning Community course pairs (English 1101 & Math 1001 and English 1101 & History 2122)
- Identification of faculty volunteers to represent Gordon College at the annual Conference on the First-Year Experience hosted by the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience & Students in Transition

Spring 2007:
- Offering at least three more Learning Community course pairs for a total of five minimum
- Participation of two Gordon College faculty volunteers in the annual Conference on the First-Year Experience hosted by the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience & Students in Transition
- Identify national authority on First-Year College Experience and extend invitation to host two days of seminars at Gordon College for faculty, staff, administration, and students
- ALFY initiates approval process with Board of Regents for First-Year Experience Course

Summer 2007:
- Initiating use of the College Student Expectations Questionnaire (CSXQ) as part of New Student Orientation program

Fall 2007:
- Offering three Learning Community course clusters of three courses in addition to the five paired courses already established
- ALFY works to finalize Board of Regents approval for 3-credit First-Year Experience Course to fulfill Area B general core requirement

Spring 2008:
- Participation of two Gordon College faculty volunteers in the annual Conference on the First-Year Experience hosted by the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience & Students in Transition
- Hosted seminars for Gordon College community by national speaker (to be named)
- Prepare for Spring 2009 seminars with national authority of First-Year Experience
- Offering total of ten Learning Community clusters, five of two linked courses, five of three linked courses
- ALFY develops and approves model syllabus for First-Year Experience Course
Fall 2008:
• Initial offering of First-Year Experience Course, four sections linked to four different learning community clusters
• ALFY begins comprehensive assessment of two-year old Learning Community offerings
• Now offering ten Learning Community clusters each semester

Spring 2009:
• Participation of two Gordon College faculty volunteers in the annual Conference on the First-Year Experience hosted by the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience & Students in Transition
• Hosted seminars for Gordon College community by national speaker (to be named)

Spring 2010:
• Participation of two Gordon College faculty volunteers in the annual Conference on the First-Year Experience hosted by the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience & Students in Transition
• Hosted seminars for Gordon College community by national speaker (to be named)

Fall 2010:
• ALFY begins comprehensive assessment of two-year old First-Year Experience Course

Spring 2001:
• Participation of two Gordon College faculty volunteers in the annual Conference on the First-Year Experience hosted by the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience & Students in Transition
• Hosted seminars for Gordon College community by national speaker (to be named)

Fall 2011:
• ALFY undertakes comprehensive review of whole of the QEP-initiated programs for academic literacy in order to assess effectiveness and make recommendations for the future
Table of Contents

Part One: Introduction to Gordon College
  Gordon College History.................................................................6
  Gordon College Mission...............................................................7

Part Two: Development of the Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP)
  QEP Committee Members..........................................................8
  QEP Topic Selection Process........................................................9

Part Three: Academic Literacy
  Academic Literacy: A General Definition.................................19
  Academic Literacy: A Definition for Gordon College...............22

Part Four: Development of the QEP Action Plan
  Development of the QEP Action Plan............................................23

Part Five: The Gordon College Quality Enhancement Plan
  Summary..........................................................................................30
  Action Plan One: ALFY.................................................................31
  Action Plan Two: CSXQ.................................................................33
  Action Plan Three: LC.................................................................38
  Action Plan Four: FYE.................................................................47

Part Six: Implementation Costs of the Gordon College Quality Enhancement Plan
  Cost Analysis and Budget Requisition........................................56

Part Seven: Assessment of the Gordon College Quality Enhancement Plan
  Overview of Assessment Tools....................................................59

  Bibliography..................................................................................62

  Appendix A – Report on Class Attendance Policies..................67
  Appendix B – Copies of New Student Orientation Surveys...........72
  Appendix C – Copies of Learning Community Surveys.................78
  Appendix D – Copies of First-Year Experience Course Surveys.....87
Part One:
Introduction to Gordon College

Gordon College History

A two-year residential college that traces its roots to pre-Civil War times, Gordon College is located in the quiet middle Georgia town of Barnesville (population approx. 5,200), halfway between Atlanta and Macon.

It was in 1832 that Josiah Holmes built a frame school house in the center of Barnesville to teach the classics to the local children. In 1852, the General Assembly incorporated the school as the Barnesville Male and Female High School. That date is considered the founding of what we today call Gordon College.

In 1872, the school became the Gordon Institute, named in honor of General John B. Gordon, who served Georgia as a three-term United States Senator and a two-term Georgia Governor. The Military Department was established in 1890. For the next 82 years, Gordon distinguished itself as a premiere military institution while also serving as the public school for the city of Barnesville.

In 1933, Gordon High School and Junior College moved to its present location. Gordon flourished on its new campus until the late 1960's. During this same period, Governor Carl Sanders' Commission to Improve Education established the need for a junior college in the area. Through the efforts of many community leaders, Gordon Junior College entered the University System of Georgia on July 1, 1972.

There were 571 students enrolled in the Fall of 1972. Over the next quarter century the size and character of the College changed tremendously. In immediate response to the needs of the community, the College began a nursing program in 1973, which has since graduated over a thousand students. In the fall of 2006, slightly more than 3,500 students were enrolled. Approximately 800 of those students resided on campus. The Gordon College Foundation endowment now exceeds $5,000,000.

Today, while Gordon provides modern facilities, including state-of-the-art computer labs and internet connections in all dorm rooms, the College still hasn't lost its friendly, small-town sense of community. Its student population is very diverse and many different countries are represented on the Barnesville campus giving Gordon an urban feel in a rural setting.

The College offers 70 associate of arts, associate of science, and associate of science in nursing degrees. A cooperative bachelor of science in nursing is offered with the Medical College of Georgia. Extracurricular activities include music and theatre productions, student art shows, movies, clubs and intramural sports. Gordon competes in men's intercollegiate baseball, women's fast-pitch softball, men's and women's soccer, and men's and women's tennis.
Gordon College Mission

Gordon College joined the University System of Georgia in 1972 as an associate level institution with a distinctive legacy of excellence in scholarship and service. From its founding in 1852, Gordon has grown and changed, not only in response to, but also in anticipation of, the educational needs of its community. Gordon’s scope of influence now extends beyond the surrounding rural areas to include the rapidly growing suburban areas south of Atlanta, east of Columbus, and north of Macon. This area of Georgia is a community in flux, rural yet suburban, rich in diversity, reflecting the extremes in economic and population growth. Gordon College exists to provide educational and cultural opportunities within and beyond this area. The mission of Gordon College, therefore, is to:

1. Prepare students for transfer into and success in baccalaureate and professional degree programs (College Transfer programs);
2. Prepare students for entry into and success in specific occupations and careers (Associate of Science in Nursing program);
3. Strengthen the academic skills of students otherwise unprepared for entry-level college work (Developmental Studies programs);
4. Serve the community by providing opportunities for life-long learning and professional development (Community Service Programs).

Gordon College is dedicated to providing a superior climate of learning through excellence in instruction, attention to students' needs and cooperation with other agencies to enhance Gordon's own resources. The College further commits itself to assembling a faculty with excellent credentials who are dedicated to teaching and active in the pursuit of scholarship.
Part Two:  
Development of the Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP)

*QEP Committee Members*

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<th>Member and Rank</th>
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<td>Edward J. Whitelock (Chair)</td>
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<td>Richard Baskin</td>
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QEP Topic Selection Process

September 2004 - Board of Regents’ Annual Retention and Graduation Rates Improvement Plan:

In September 2004, the University System of Georgia’s Board of Regents accepted the Graduation Rate Task Force Report compiled by a system-wide committee chaired by Provost Ron Henry of Georgia State University. Among numerous implementations of new policy and recommendations for new practices, several elements of this report reflected issues of focus for the QEP Committee as we began our preparations for selecting and committing the institution to a QEP topic.

The first recommendation with a direct relation to the QEP was the implementation of a regular schedule for the use of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) for four-year schools and the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) for two-year schools, such as Gordon. As noted below, Gordon first utilized the CCSSE in March 2005, with its results offering direct impact on the conception of our QEP topic selection.

Further, the report offered a concise overview of “Conditions that support learning” which directly impacted the committee’s conception of our focus for positive systematic change at Gordon College. The report’s phrasing, based on the work of Vincent Tinto, merits direct quote:

Research points to five conditions that support student learning. The first is high expectation. The second is an environment of academic and social support. The third condition for student learning is feedback, i.e., students are more likely to succeed in settings that assess their skills, monitor their progress, and provide frequent feedback, especially immediate and continuous feedback. The fourth condition for student learning is involvement, with the first year of college being especially critical. The final condition is relevance, i.e., deep learning arises when students engage in knowledge in ways they perceive as meaningful.

Reviewing these conditions, the committee recognized the importance of the five principles and agreed that the opportunity to find ways to maximize some or all among them should shape the ways in which we reviewed our administrative practices, prepared questions for the college community, and reviewed survey data.

Another element of the report that deeply informed committee members as they reviewed possible directions for the QEP was its emphasis that “There is little direct causal link between a particular strategy and improved retention rates. Multiple strategies need to be ongoing on a regular basis.” While the committee agreed that retention itself was not a sufficiently student-centered focus for the QEP, the information and recommendations of the board’s retention report as they related to programs proved quite informative in their ability to be extrapolated beyond the singular issue of the report’s focus. The emphasis on multiple strategies informed the committee’s
preparation of the QEP topic by amplifying the need to offer a multi-pronged approach to program enhancement that would form the basis of the document and plan of action.

In the retrospect provided by the time of this writing, the Graduation Rate Task Force Report offered two specific program recommendations that would become central to the QEP Action Plan: the establishment of both a Learning Community Program and a First-Year Experience course. When our QEP topic was decided, the knowledge of system-wide support for these programs encouraged the committee to recommend their establishment at Gordon College as a component tied not to retention but to the QEP topic of academic literacy enhancement itself.
March 2005 - Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE):

In March 2005, the Gordon College Office of Institutional Research distributed the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) to 540 of Gordon College’s roughly 3,500 students. Of the students surveyed, one-fifth of the student respondents claimed part-time status, four-fifths full-time. The survey was analyzed at the University of Texas and results were returned to Gordon College in late spring 2005.

The QEP Committee, upon review of the CCSSE 2005 report, noted some intriguing numbers regarding our students’ attitudes towards themselves and Gordon College. These impressions, as recorded in student responses to the survey, offered the first inklings of potential direction for the committee.

According to CCSSE, 90% of Gordon College students identify “transfer to a four year college or university” as a primary or secondary goal. Yet, we noticed that, in other answers to the survey question, this high percentage of students are not necessarily exhibiting behaviors predicated to achieve this goal or taking full advantage of Gordon College’s resources in the pursuance of this goal. Student attitudes and practices regarding academic advising, for instance, demonstrate an inconsistency between student ideology and practice.

Sixty-six percent of Gordon College students identified academic advisement as “very important,” and 70% claimed some degree of satisfaction with academic advisement at Gordon College. However, when examining the numbers of students who actively take advantage of academic advisement, a disconnect between attitude and practice is revealed. Only 18% of our students claim to take advantage of academic advisement “often,” and 35% admit to not taking advantage of this valuable resource at all or barely. Further, only 26% of students claimed to have discussed career plans, a significant element of academic advisement, “often” with an advisor or instructor.

Gordon College, a two-year open-enrollment institution, has a relatedly high percentage of under-prepared students, 40% of whom, for instance, require some sort of Learning Support curriculum upon enrollment. Further, 93% of our students admit to having never taken a study skills course and 79% to having never attended a college orientation or course. Yet 90% of our students intend to pursue a four-year degree. There is an indication in these numbers that a significant percentage of our students are content with or resolved to maintain their under-prepared status, to pass through the education system without question or reflection in much the same way they may have passed through secondary school. An academic passivity is revealed in such student attitudes, and this will create a problem for a significant number of these students relating to their potential for success both at Gordon and beyond.

This passivity is further revealed in the disturbingly low sense of connectedness to the Gordon College community revealed in the survey results. A sense of belonging is necessary for motivation; Gordon College offers a significant number of student
activities, cultural and special events, sports, and intramural programs for a school of its size. Yet, the surveys demonstrated that students are not taking advantage of these resources to their full effect either. Only 19% of students admitted to taking part in any Gordon College student organizations (and only 6% often), yet 23% of our students identified those organizations as “very important” to the college experience. Further, 51% of students claim to have never attended a campus sponsored cultural event (musical performance, art show, etc.) and 67% claim to have never taken part in any student activities (dances, movies, guest speakers, etc.). These numbers are in spite of the fact that Gordon College has made such participation easier for students with busy schedules: beginning in Fall 2003, Gordon instituted a class session “dead hour” for Monday and Wednesday afternoons from 2:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m. No classes are scheduled during these times so that student organizations may hold meetings, and recitals, performances, and lectures are also scheduled at these times to maximize the opportunity for students to attend. Time constraints are particularly hard on commuter students who make up the majority of our student body, so this practice was begun with them in mind. Reviewing the results of student responses to campus activity, organization, and cultural event questions, it became apparent that, while the “dead hour” program has generated some positive results, more needs to be done to expand this important element of the college experience for our students.

At first impression, then, a problem was revealed in student motivation, preparation, engagement, and expectation. The question for the committee became how to better link students to the resources of Gordon College, how to motivate them to take a more active role in their education, how to engage them. Our discussions were not centered on “What’s wrong with students today,” though certainly the data could be read that way by cynics. Rather, we became interested in the contradictory mix of sincerity our students demonstrated (an honest expectation to better themselves through a college education), their awareness of college resources available to them (and the importance of those resources), and their passivity (an unwillingness to utilize these resources to their fullest extent and their lack of attachment to the Gordon College community and sense of ownership of their own education). Our first question then became “How can we best enable our students to help us help them?”
April 2005 - Survey of Presently Attending Students (SOPAS):

In April 2005, the Gordon College Office of Institutional Research distributed the Survey of Presently Attending Students (SOPAS) to a randomly selected group of 515 Gordon College students. While the questions within the SOPAS are not as exacting as those in the CCSSE, the SOPAS results provided a useful comparative impression for the QEP Committee as they reviewed the more specific CCSSE results.

Among the findings of the SOPAS report, more than one-third of Gordon College students indicated that they found the academic challenge of college classes “difficult,” yet over half indicated they engaged in minimal preparation for those classes. This disparity is apparent in the CCSSE findings as well. Similarly, on the subject of academic advising, students were in broad agreement regarding its importance, with 72% agreeing that their academic advisers are easily available and helpful and 71% expressing satisfaction with the quality of academic advising. But, as became apparent upon review of the CCSSE results, student satisfaction with these resources does not indicate widespread or effective use of these resources by those same students. They seem happy to have these services available when they need them, but they don’t seem as capable of diagnosing their own needs when they could best be addressed.

Another area of interest to the QEP Committee was student involvement in campus activities. The SOPAS demonstrated that a majority of Gordon College students are not involved in campus and community activities. While 34% of resident students claimed membership within a student organization, that number dropped to 16.7% among students who live off-campus but within the town of Barnesville, and dropped even more dramatically among commuters from outside the town limits, to a level of only 1.4% claiming membership. These numbers mirror those of the CCSSE report: despite the number and variety of campus student groups and activities, less than 25% of Gordon College students took part in any form of campus-supported cultural and social life. They’re satisfied to know they’re there when they want to take advantage of them, but they lack motivation to make the most of these offerings.

As with the findings in the CCSSE report, the committee members’ impressions of the SOPAS pointed towards a need to enable students to become better connected to the whole process of their education at Gordon College, better connecting themselves to the college community and better utilizing the resources that the college offers. A question of student literacy skills (in terms not simply of reading and writing, but in their overall successful communication and interaction within the college) began to form. Could literacy skills enhancement offer a solution to student engagement and the successful utilization of the college’s resources?
August 2005 - Faculty and Staff Presentation and Literacy Survey:

At the initial Gordon College meeting of faculty and staff to begin the 2005-2006 academic year, Edward J. Whitelock, Chair of the QEP Committee, gave a presentation on the Quality Enhancement Plan process and initial impressions of the QEP Committee members based upon close study of the spring 2005 CCSSE and SOPAS survey results. One strong impression gained from the surveys and from the formation of our initial question, “How can we best enable our students to help us help them,” was an awareness of the variety of literacy skills students brought to Gordon College from their widely assorted backgrounds.

Informed by Howard Gardener’s theory of multiple intelligences (linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and environmental), the members of the QEP committee became interested in the variety of literacy skills that our students brought to the college community upon their initial arrival. Could a focus upon developing multiple literacy skills offer the pathway to enhancing student success at Gordon College? For certainly, the issue of literacy in higher education has become one that has garnered close attention, its once commonly assumed definition made more complex in relation to the academic institution itself.

In “Literacy, Discourse, and Linguistics: Introduction” James Paul Gee (1989) defines literacy as “the mastery of or fluent control over a secondary discourse” (p. 9). Gee identifies secondary discourses as those means of communication which are required to participate in any or all of a “variety of non-home-based social institutions – institutions in the public sphere, beyond the family and immediate kin and peer group” (p. 8). Where the family, kin, and peer group comprise the primary discourse group, or the first group in which we learn to understand and socialize with others, the secondary discourse group includes schools, churches, community groups, businesses, government, and other public entities. When we teach literacy skills in speaking, reading, writing, argument, and research at the postsecondary level, we are preparing students to participate in these various secondary discourse groups. The issue of literacy for each field of study or area of student engagement in a two-year college such as Gordon lies not so much in knowledge of information but rather in the ability to communicate and utilize that knowledge effectively within each specific area of the academic community.

Working from this definition, the committee distributed a survey to faculty and staff asking them to identify the different “secondary” literacy skills necessary for students to interact successfully within their various academic fields of study and student support services. Secondly, faculty and staff respondents were asked to consider the following three key questions. First, how do we define successful literacy for our students, specific to our individual field of study or student support service? Second, how do we improve the literacy skills of our students, specific to our individual field of study or student support service? Third, how do we measure student success in these skills as they apply to our specific field of study or student support service?
Faculty and staff members were given a week to consider these questions and to return the surveys to Dr. Whitelock for review and presentation to the QEP Committee. Respondents to the survey offered seven areas of literacy identifiable and necessary to student success at Gordon College: Reading Literacy, Written Literacy, Oral Literacy, Technological Literacy, Cultural Literacy, Scientific Literacy, and Academic Literacy.

The last category, academic literacy, caught the committee members’ immediate attention. Whereas five of the previous six literacy areas identified are primarily skills based and easily quantifiable, academic literacy seemed to point towards a more holistic attitude and awareness as much as it did to a particular skill, similar, then, to cultural literacy. These two areas, less obvious but more influential within each individual person, became points of interest in relation to our larger question of providing students with a self-empowered means of achieving individual success and achieving the goal that 90% of them identified: transfer to and graduation from a four-year program.
In September 2005, the QEP Committee distributed questionnaires to all faculty and staff members of Gordon College. Informed by our growing awareness of academic literacy as a possible subject for the QEP topic, the Committee asked two simple questions of respondents, intending to examine how responses would reflect an underlying need for a deeper understanding of academic literacy. The two questions were:

1) What is the most significant obstacle to student success at Gordon College?
2) What is the most significant action the college can take to remove this obstacle and ensure student success at Gordon College?

Among faculty members, a total of 70 respondents identified seven different areas of concern. Thirty respondents identified insufficient academic preparation as our most significant obstacle. Another 21 identified insufficient academic/study skills. And 12 others identified poor student attitudes. Other identified problems included non-school distractions, insufficient campus resources, and (one respondent) poor faculty attitudes. All told, 90% of the respondents identified weaknesses that students brought with them to Gordon College. It could be tempting to conclude from these numbers that Gordon College’s faculty are more willing to put the blame elsewhere and to recall the popular, recently-circulated email poem that offers a descending pattern blame (and the passing of responsibility) going from college professors all the way down to Kindergarten teachers. However, the discursive responses from faculty members demonstrated less a sense of frustration than one of sincere concern for finding a means of ending what one respondent termed, “this cycle of under-preparation.” While avoiding our own cycle of passing the blame, the faculty of Gordon College is well aware of the challenges we face as an open-enrollment institution in a state that consistently scores in the bottom three of annual SAT scores, maintains a low high school graduation percentage, and continues to display a wide disparity in the quality of education between its growing suburbs and its lesser funded urban and rural regions.

Insufficient academic preparation was, as could be expected, the primary source of concern amidst respondents, but a related pattern emerged among responses that demonstrated an added level of complexity within the issue: a lack of awareness of the different social, ideological, and behavioral expectations of college. One respondent, for instance, said “I call it the ‘Not Ready for Prime Time’ syndrome or a multi-faceted lack of preparation for college. . . . There are basic social rules, as well as understanding the peculiar rules and organizations of colleges that many of them have no clue about.” Another respondent offered a similar statement of concern: “I would have to say that many of our students’ expectations are significantly out of line with what college really is. They have different expectations of the work both in terms of the type and the level, of the atmosphere, of what constitutes success, of what will be the basis of how they will be evaluated, of what it takes to be successful, of Gordon’s academic level compared to other USG institutions, etc. These unrealistic expectations lead to student behaviors that are detrimental to student success, the classroom environment and college atmosphere.”
Another put it most succinctly: “The majority of students entering Gordon College are unprepared for college in almost every aspect of their lives. They are unprepared academically, socially, and emotionally.” Adding under-developed social skills to an already well-documented collection of under-developed academic skills is a formula for failure. If a significant number of our students are entering Gordon College with this formula well engrained within them, we have indeed identified a significant crisis point for addressing within our programs and student services. If these collected issues could be addressed under a general banner of academic literacy, we would have our focus.

The survey of staff members revealed a similar focus for concern. Where 90% of faculty respondents identified issues related to academic literacy as primary points of concern, 71% of staff agreed, noting as well a lack of academic preparation as the primary concern (19 of 34 respondents), seconded by insufficient academic advising (5 respondents). In many cases, our academic support services staff members gain the first impression of our incoming students through their work with students and families in the admissions, financial aid verification, and other necessary pre-enrollment processes. In many ways, Gordon College’s staff is able to observe and identify areas of under-preparation or mistaken assumptions, a “lack of knowledge for higher education practices,” as one respondent called it, which comprise obstacles to student success before those students enter the classroom. It’s not just classroom skills that a significant percentage of our students lack; our colleagues in the college staff are able to identify in students a lack of institutional and procedural knowledge, both at Gordon and amidst the larger structure of academia, and a lack of awareness of campus resources that could benefit them. As one respondent noted, one significant weakness is contained within “knowing that they need help and where to find the type of help that each student needs.” Relatedly, a member of the Financial Aid office offered a specific instance of the problem of under-preparedness for the college experience as a whole and how it can affect every aspect of the student’s life and undermine potential for success: “The students applying for financial aid are very immature and are lacking the knowledge of how college actually works. They need to be better prepared for college knowing that college is not free. Also, they do not need to wait until one week before college begins to check on their financial aid and expect it to be in place by the 1st day of class if we are awaiting the FAFSA or other documents to complete their file.” Unrealistic expectations, lack of understanding of deadlines and procedures, unawareness of campus resources, all of these attitudes create serious obstacles for later student success before the challenges of the classroom are even introduced.

Reviewing the above survey results, the idea of strengthening the academic literacy of our students as a key ingredient of enhancing their potential for success began to seem a more viable and important focus for the QEP. The Committee, working at this point with a preliminary understanding of the concept of academic literacy, committed to developing a comprehensive, Gordon College-specific definition of the term that could guide our QEP Action Plan. On the subject of an action plan, the faculty/staff surveys also offered useful insight and direction into potential plans which would work to enhance academic literacy at Gordon College.
Among faculty members, there was a wide range of suggestions, with three garnering the most mention: developing a study skills course (11 respondents), developing an Introduction to College course (10 respondents), and initiating course/classroom modifications (10 respondents). Other suggestions included raising admission standards (9), modifying student behavior via comprehensive policy change (7), adding physical resources (5), and developing a Learning Center (3). Staff members also offered a wide range of suggestions, including offering an expanded college orientation (10 respondents), expanding student support services (5), improving faculty advisement (2), and increasing community interaction (2). These suggestions would inform the Committee particularly as we developed our definition of academic literacy with a specific focus upon the needs of Gordon College and as we explored viable programs for enabling the realization of that definition within the actions and attitudes of our students.

The architects of the QEP Committee resolved to develop a deeper understanding of academic literacy and, as noted, prepare a specific definition of the term as it applies to Gordon College. Then, the committee would present that definition to the Gordon College community for its approval and insight into methods of systematically addressing its enhancement within the college.
“Academic literacy” is an amorphous term that continues to be debated, its definition under constant re-evaluation. Because the challenge in defining academic literacy rests in socially charged notions informing our general notions of basic literacy, any explanation of academic literacy necessarily begins with a definition of literacy itself.

The explanation of literacy and discourse communities from above merits repetition here. In “Literacy, Discourse, and Linguistics: Introduction” Gee (1989) defines literacy as “the mastery of or fluent control over a secondary discourse” (p. 9). Gee identifies secondary discourses as those means of communication which are required to participate in any or all of a “variety of non-home-based social institutions – institutions in the public sphere, beyond the family and immediate kin and peer group” (p. 8). Where the family, kin, and peer group comprise the primary discourse group, or the first group in which we learn to understand and socialize with others, the secondary discourse group includes schools, churches, community groups, businesses, government, and other public entities. When we teach literacy skills in speaking, reading, writing, argument, and research at the postsecondary level, we are preparing students to participate in these various secondary discourse groups. Preparing to teach these skills, we must be perpetually aware that our students are entering into a secondary discourse community, the academic community, which functions according to a particular set of rules, expectations, and assumptions.

Relatedly, Freire (1973) has argued for an understanding of literacy as “purposeful, contextual, and transformative.” Literacy, according to Freire, is not just a collection of skills; rather, it is a creative activity in which learners, observing and interacting within their cultural surroundings, analyze and interpret those behaviors and practices that maximize their opportunities for successful interaction and self-actualization. Literacy is more than a set of skills, then; rather, it is a means of understanding one’s place and purpose within a larger society and of negotiating a successful pathway through that social context. Literacy is not just what we think, but how we think. Different social situations require different literacy practices. The academic community is, for most, the most important and culturally institutionalized site for literacy practice that our students currently encounter.

Definitions of academic literacy begin with the focus on the academic skills necessary to be successful in a post-secondary educational context: study skills, written and oral communication, critical thinking and reading. For example, Cobb, Combs, and Kemmerer (1985) focus their early treatment of the subject on a skills based program for “learning how to learn.” Similarly, Lea and Street (1998) focus their treatment of the subject exclusively upon study skills and discipline-based socialization as they offer a list of optimal behaviors for students. Relatedly, issues of academic literacy have often been
connected primarily to at-risk students, those entering college with insufficient academic skills and in need of remediation, such as in Maloney’s (2003) “Connecting the Texts of Their Lives to Academic Literacy: Creating Success for At-Risk First-Year College Students.” Academic skills, then, are a central element in the definition of academic literacy and a necessary point of focus for improving academic literacy in post-secondary students; however, a complete definition of the term requires a broader understanding of the nature of literacy practices within the specific social context of the academic institution itself.

E. D. Hirsch’s (1980, 1982, 1988) work with and popularization of the term “cultural literacy” offered an opportunity to broaden the scope of understanding of literacy in its many uses and social contexts. While countering the exclusivity and perceived limitations within Hirsch’s proposed canon formation of cultural literacy, many pedagogical theorists utilized his beginnings to expand the concept of academic literacy into a more nuanced, holistic understanding. Bartholomae (1985) has offered one of the most valuable understandings of academic literacy in his examinations of basic writers. New college freshmen, Bartholomae reminds us, have “to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community.” Our students, he says, “have to appropriate (or be appropriated by) a specialized discourse . . . they have to invent the university by assembling and mimicking its language” (p. 530). Bartholomae gives us the sense of the student as a traveler newly arrived in a strange country with an alien language and unfamiliar behavioral habits; in order to function successfully, that student must learn the language and acceptable behavioral practices of the community. But like anyone alone in a foreign land, isolation and disconnection sets in. Learn the language, learn the proper patterns of behavior, and succeed; fail to adjust, fail to succeed. This quandary is clarified in the work of Bizzell (1982) when she identifies students’ unfamiliarity with the academic discourse community, combined, perhaps, with such limited experience outside their native discourse communities that they are unaware that there is such a thing as a discourse community with conventions to be mastered. What is underdeveloped is their knowledge both of the ways experience is constituted and interpreted in the academic discourse community and of the fact that all discourse communities constitute and interpret experience. (p. 230)

While students must sufficiently develop academic skills as they make the transition to post-secondary study, they must also develop the communications and behavioral skills that will enable them to interact successfully within the academic institution, among their peers, their professors, and among the academic support staff. A complete definition of academic literacy considers the development both of successful academic skills and an effective academic identity within the individual.

Reviewing the wealth of theoretical perspectives and variant definitions on academic literacy, some common characteristics do emerge in terms of best and worst practices. Elements of healthy academic literacy include effective study habits, an ability to communicate without intimidation with professors and peers both in and out of
class, an understanding of classroom etiquette, a comfortable sense of belonging to a community of learners, an appreciation of cultural and ideological diversity, an appreciation for the interconnectedness of the fields of knowledge, and an awareness of the different expectations encountered in college that are distinct from those in high school. Characteristics of students who enter college with a low level of academic literacy include ineffective study habits, unfamiliarity with the complex structure of academic discourse, intimidation by authority, disruptive classroom behavior, feelings of displacement or isolation, uncritical dismissal of opposing or unfamiliar ideas, a careerist or consumerist attitude towards coursework, and an assumption that college is simply an extension of high school. A low level of academic literacy can significantly undermine a student’s potential for success.

Further, it merits repeating that, despite their close relationship, academic literacy is not synonymous with academic preparation. Academic literacy addresses less the content of an education than the ability of any student to become educated. This is important to remember in order to best serve all students within an institution, for while it is true that academically under-prepared students often exhibit a low level of academic literacy, it is equally true that students who have been well prepared in the essential academic skills of college can, nonetheless, exhibit deficiencies in academic literacy that may undermine their own potential for success.

We believe that a constructive, workable definition of academic literacy must find a middle ground between a normative, constructivist skills-based approach and more theoretically informed questionings of implicit power structures and identity formation. Reviewing the discussions on the topic, we define “academic literacy” in its general sense as the necessary skills, practices, and attitudes for successfully engaging oneself within the academic community and ensuring continued academic progress.
Academic Literacy: A Definition for Gordon College:

As noted above, we define “academic literacy” in its general sense as the necessary skills, practices, and attitudes for successfully engaging oneself within the academic community and ensuring continued academic progress. At Gordon College, we identify the successful demonstration of those skills, practices, and attitudes as including:

- A working knowledge of the policies and procedures of the college
- An ability to locate and utilize Gordon College resources to their fullest extent
- An appreciation of the college’s history and continued mission
- A willingness to interact with a diverse faculty, staff, and student body
- An understanding of the interconnectedness of knowledge and learning
- An active awareness of the different expectations of college
- A mature and respectful classroom presence
- An overall sense of connectedness to the Gordon College community

An understanding and strengthening of academic literacy at Gordon College should enable our students to better navigate through their college experience, providing them with knowledge of the culture of academia, understanding of its behavioral and technical requirements, skills for success, and a sense of belonging within a community of educated individuals capable of making the best decisions for themselves and the larger culture of America.
Part Four:  
Development of the QEP Action Plan

Development of the Action Plan

November 2005 – Faculty and Staff Focus and Action Survey:

Having prepared a Gordon College-specific definition of academic literacy and having reviewed faculty and staff surveys addressing potential topics and related actions, the members of the QEP Committee distributed a “QEP Focus Statement and Action Summary” to all faculty and staff members. The document included two parts: first, a statement of the QEP focus on academic literacy with our definition of the term; second, a list of potential actions to be taken to enhance academic literacy skills in Gordon College students, compiled from suggestions made on our previous surveys of faculty and staff. The document follows:

* * *

QEP Committee  
Focus Statement

We have identified Enhancing Academic Literacy for Student Success as the focal point of our QEP. We define “academic literacy” as the necessary skills, practices, and attitudes for successfully engaging oneself within the academic community and ensuring continued academic progress. A high or low level of academic literacy among a student body correlates to a high or low retention rate for an institution.

Elements of healthy academic literacy include effective study habits, an ability to communicate without intimidation with professors and peers both in and out of class, an understanding of classroom etiquette, a comfortable sense of belonging to a community of learners, an appreciation of cultural and ideological diversity, and an awareness of the different expectations encountered in college that are distinct from those in high school.

Characteristics of students who enter college with a low level of academic literacy include ineffective study habits, unfamiliarity with the complex structure of academic discourse, intimidation by authority, disruptive classroom behavior, feelings of displacement or isolation, uncritical dismissal of opposing or unfamiliar ideas, and an assumption that college is simply an extension of high school. A low level of academic literacy can significantly undermine a student’s potential for success.

Academic literacy should not be confused with academic preparation.
Academic literacy addresses less the content of an education than the ability of any student to become educated. While academically under-prepared students often exhibit as well a low level of academic literacy, even students who have been well prepared in the essential intellectual skills of college (reading, writing, mathematics, critical or scientific inquiry) can exhibit problematically low levels of academic literacy that can endanger their success.

Surveys of faculty, staff, and students all indicate that improving academic literacy is an issue central to the academic mission of the college and should be a primary focus of our five-year plan as represented by the QEP report. Seventy-three percent (51 of 70) of faculty respondents identified issues related to academic literacy as primary challenges to student success at Gordon College. Seventy-five percent (24 of 32) of staff respondents identified issues related to academic literacy as primary challenges to student success at Gordon College. Student surveys identified academic literacy issues via both direct reference and unintentional demonstration of those very weaknesses (emphasis on parking or dining hall issues in relation to an academic question, complaints of faculty with accents, answers left blank).

QEP Committee
Summary of Potential Actions on Focus
Enhancing Academic Literacy for Student Success

The next step facing the QEP Committee is to identify and plan a sequence of actions which will address our focus on academic literacy. Our ongoing discussions include investigations into the following possible solutions (both systemic and localized) for overcoming academic literacy weaknesses in Gordon College students. Our final Quality Enhancement Plan will most likely include several of the following plans of action.

A Freshman Experience Course - Approximately 70% of American colleges and universities have initiated some form of a required or optional “Introduction to College” course in order to improve both student outcomes and retention.

Learning Communities - By linking groups of learners as they progress through their curricular programs, numerous studies have shown that all levels of academic skills and behaviors increase through interaction. Our growing resident student population could benefit from such a program, particularly as our new dorms have seminar rooms built into each floor, and students could be grouped into learning communities within the residence halls themselves.

Expanded Orientation - This project has been ongoing at Gordon College and has seen initial success in its first year in place. Worth investigating: many schools have initiated a two-day resident orientation during summers, allowing for a more comprehensive introduction to the institution, its policies and
procedures.

**Comprehensive Attendance Policy** - Studies have shown that in courses where attendance is required and recorded, students are less likely to minimize the importance of presence and participation in the classroom.

**Bridge to Feeder High Schools** - Identify those high schools from which a high percentage of Gordon students originate and initiate a transition program for those students, providing them with a wealth of necessary information before their first arrival on campus.

**Online Support and Resource Center** - Establish a clearinghouse of information (glossary of academic terminology, quick reference guides for college procedures, etc.) for easy access to necessary information for students. Part of our larger effort to engage students in the benefits of utilizing Gordon College’s online services, email, etc.

**Reading Club** - Assigning a common book to all freshmen (non-fiction, a college success guide, novel, memoir, etc.) and establishing a schedule of book discussion forums and an assessment method of ensuring that all students are actively involved in the program.

**Service Oriented Training** - Better educating staff and faculty of the breadth of Gordon College’s resources and policies in order to create a more comprehensive network of information for students and parents.

* * *

All Gordon College faculty and staff were asked to review the above document and to answer two questions related to it:

1) Please comment on your opinions regarding our chosen focus for the QEP. Do you believe this focus will effectively enhance our students’ potential for continued academic success? Are there any challenges that you feel the QEP Committee may be overlooking in regards to student success at Gordon College?

2) Which of the possible solutions listed on the Action Summary seem the most viable to you and for what reason? Do you have any strong opposition to any of the actions listed, and if so, why?

Eighty-two faculty and staff members responded to the survey and expressed an overwhelming approval of the QEP topic while offering valuable insight into the list of potential actions to be taken in order to enhance the academic literacy skills of our students. Nearly all respondents, as well, expressed a willingness to take an active role in some aspect of the overall focus upon enhancing academic literacy.

Of the respondents, 79 (96%) expressed satisfaction with the QEP topic and agreed that it addressed a central need for the college. One faculty member declared
“Such a plan is long overdue. We need to follow through with this plan to make Gordon a better place academically.” Another responded “I think this is the number one priority for Gordon College right now. The frustrations that faculty have expressed about the academic literacy of students will have been given a clear and positive administrative response.” Still another noted that “the focus is dead-on. Our classes provide the ‘software,’ but no software will run without adequate ‘hardware.’” A first-year faculty member noted that “many of the students that I have helped register have really needed much more guidance than I could give without referring to another resource. I know part of this is my being new to the institution; however, I believe that many of the first time students need extensive training on how to be a college student and what to do to start their journey into the academic world.” The idea of academic literacy is appealing as it addresses ‘how to learn’ not ‘what to learn.’” Members of the staff were equally positive in their assessment of the QEP topic. One staff member noted “Many entering college students do not have healthy academic literacy—even though many are very capable and bright individuals. I think the focus is right on target.” Another staff member called academic literacy “the central issue relating to our students’ success.” And another declared that the plan “will translate into student growth and in their perception of ours as a caring faculty.”

One element that generated considerable attention was the relation of academic literacy to first-generation students, who constitute a significant percentage of Gordon College’s student body. As one respondent noted, these students, “do not have a point of reference for the college experience” that peers who grew up with a parent or parents who have completed college degrees have. One staff member offered a reflective understanding of the plight of our first-generation students based on her own experience as one that merits quotation in full:

Please emphasize that this is not a matter of intelligence, but rather of socialization. If a student, or their parent, has been exposed to the academic world they are probably more likely to understand and feel comfortable with faculty and the processes involved in their college education. If, like me, you are the first person from your family to go to college, it is entirely new and you are more likely to treat college as an extension of high school, especially at first. I’m not a “stupid” or “dumb” person, but culture shock can cripple the best of us if we don’t have some sort of support system established.

It is just the kind of “culture shock” observed in our students and described by this respondent that inspired the QEP Committee to choose academic literacy as the focus of the QEP Report.

Some questions arose from our survey of faculty and staff which were important to the development of the QEP Action Plan. The four most prominent questions involved methods for identification of academic literacy weaknesses in incoming students, encouraging student engagement within the potential programs suggested for consideration within the action plan, whether these programs would be voluntary or required of all students, and how to best adapt the programs to a primarily commuter-based student body. The members of the QEP Committee addressed these questions in
choosing the individual elements of the QEP Action Plan, and those considerations and solutions are detailed in the pertinent sections below.

There was a wide array of responses to the list of potential actions among faculty and staff, but four in particular stood out as having wide support and/or interest: 53 respondents expressed interest in a First-Year Experience Course as a means of enhancing student academic literacy; 31 respondents expressed interest in an Expanded Orientation Program as a means of enhancing student academic literacy; 21 respondents expressed interest in a Learning Communities Program as a means of enhancing student academic literacy; and 20 respondents expressed support for a Comprehensive Attendance Policy as a means for enhancing student academic literacy. Each of the other options listed in the survey received fewer than ten votes of interest.

Three of the proposed considerations for action received negative reviews or votes: 12 respondents expressed strong resistance to the idea of a Comprehensive Attendance Policy; 7 respondents expressed serious reservations regarding the viability of the Reading Club proposal; and 3 respondents expressed serious reservations that would incline them to oppose the First-Year Experience Course. Opponents of the Comprehensive Attendance Policy overwhelmingly cited issues of “academic freedom” in the classroom as the source of their opposition. Opponents of the Reading Club cited viability of finding a single text that would adequately represent all academic divisions and concern for the method of upholding and assessing the requirement. Opponents of the First-Year Experience Course were mostly in opposition regarding the expectation (which was not expressed in the proposal description) that the course would be required of all students and thereby represent a “waste of time” for those who didn’t need it.
Spring 2006 – QEP Focus Group Review for Action Plan

Reviewing the feedback of our colleagues from among the faculty and staff of Gordon College, the members of the QEP Committee decided to investigate four areas of consideration for inclusion within the formal Action Plan of the QEP Report. Those four areas were:

1) First-Year Experience Course 
2) Expanded Orientation
3) Learning Communities
4) Comprehensive Attendance Policy

The Chair of the Committee, Dr. Whitelock, assigned four focus groups, each of which would investigate the viability and potential for effectiveness of one of the proposals. The focus group assignments were as follows:

1) Focus Group on a First-Year Experience Course: Dr. Richard Baskin, Dr. Alcena Rogan, Mr. Daniel Wilkinson
2) Focus Group on an Expanded Orientation: Ms. Ally Carter-Hatterman, Dr. Pat Lemmons, Mrs. Jan Pharro
3) Focus Group on Learning Communities: Dr. John Barnard, Dr. Kelly McMichael, Dr. Edward Whitelock
4) Focus Group on a Comprehensive Attendance Policy: Dr. Dennis Chamberlain, Dr. Linda Hyde

The focus group members would investigate the background and literature on the programs in question, and then report back to the whole committee by the midpoint of Spring 2006 for discussion of the final proposal for the QEP Action Plan.

In April 2006, the findings and opinions gathered by the focus groups were reviewed by the QEP Committee as a whole. Final recommendations for the QEP Action Plan resulted from these discussions:

1) Focus Group on the First-Year Experience Course: The research compiled by this focus group became the basis for the fourth component of the QEP Action Plan and have been incorporated into that section of this document.

2) Focus Group on the Expanded Orientation: This group reviewed the history of institutional practices of the New Student Orientation at Gordon College, which had been undergoing significant revision over the preceding two years. The question of expanding the program to a two-day, overnight event was investigated but deemed impractical in light of campus resources and, according to members of the Office of Enrollment Services who had previously investigated the possibility, a lack of student/parent interest in such an offering. The focus group members recommended that the Office of Admissions and the Admissions, Advisement, Registration, Retention, and Financial Aid Committee (AARRFA) continue to work in conjunction to enhance the effectiveness of the present New Student Orientation through systematic review of the services offered. An overview of the revision and expansion of the Gordon College New Student Orientation program over the past two years prepared by the members of this focus group is included in Part Two of the Action Plan, which incorporates their
primary recommendation for the QEP Action Plan: The focus group members made the recommendation that the New Student Orientation program be used as a means of gathering assessment data from students that would relate to the QEP topic of academic literacy, since this is the first occasion of students’ direct interaction with the college. The focus group members identified the College Student Expectations Questionnaire (CSXQ) as an excellent tool which would allow for comparative analysis of student attitudes when combined with the CCSSE and SOPAS surveys and would also provide valuable insight into the effectiveness of the other proposed elements of the QEP Action Plan as they are undertaken over the course of the next five years. This recommendation formed the basis for the second element of the QEP Action Plan.

3) Focus Group on Learning Communities: The research compiled by this focus group became the basis for the third component of the QEP Action Plan and has been incorporated into that section of this document.

4) Focus Group on a Comprehensive Attendance Policy: Upon review and discussion of this option, the QEP Committee members chose to not include this proposal as an element of the QEP Action Plan due to the divisive nature of the subject when polling faculty members and to the focus groups’ inability to locate significant evidence in field publications of such a proposal’s benefits specific to enhancing academic literacy skills. There was general agreement among the committee members that better attendance practices on the part of our students could be an expected outcome of the other elements of the Action Plan and that our ability to create “a culture of attendance” amidst our students could form one assessment measure when reviewing the programs initiated through the college’s commitment to the QEP Action Plan in the upcoming five years. This focus group’s report summary is included as Appendix A of this document.

Following an extensive period of campus-wide survey and discussion, committee work and research, topic selection and investigation of potential actions, the QEP Committee felt ready to move forward with its four step plan for taking action to enhance academic literacy in first-year students at Gordon College.
Part Five:  
The Gordon College Quality Enhancement Plan

Summary

In an effort to better help our students construct and gain the academic literacy necessary to ensure their continued success at Gordon College and beyond, we have decided to make a systematic and comprehensive commitment to enhancing the first-year experience of our students by taking four significant steps, described in detail below and comprising the QEP Action Plan, to improve the academic literacy of our students during their first year of enrollment at Gordon College.

First, Gordon College will charge a Task Force for Academic Literacy in the First Year (ALFY), which will oversee the implementation and continuation of the three main components of the Gordon College QEP Action Plan over the course of the next five years.

Second, Gordon College will enhance its understanding of our incoming students by making assessment a part of our New Student Orientation program in order to better inform the implementation and continuation of the first-year programs that comprise the third and fourth elements of the Action Plan. Participants in the New Student Orientation will be asked to complete the College Student Expectations Questionnaire (CSXQ) administered by the College Student Experiences Questionnaire Research Program of Indiana University Bloomington.

Third, Gordon College will establish a Learning Community Program, linking a common cohort of students in a sequence of multi-disciplinary core curriculum courses. The program will begin with two cohorts in Fall 2006 and build over the course of time to comprise ten cohorts offered by Spring 2008, totaling 20 learning community cohorts offered each academic year thereafter as a minimum goal.

Fourth, Gordon College will establish a First-Year Experience Course to be offered in conjunction with the Learning Community Program, with four sections to be offered by Fall 2008, totaling 8 First-Year Experience Courses offered each academic year thereafter as a minimum goal.

The focus of each element of the QEP Action Plan will be to enhance academic literacy within the first two semesters of enrollment in order to enhance student potential for continued academic success on the road to the completion of an Associate’s Degree or to transfer to and successful completion of a four-year Bachelor’s Degree program.
Action Plan One: Establishing a Task Force for Academic Literacy in the First Year (ALFY)

In Fall 2006, Gordon College will charge a Task Force for Academic Literacy in the First Year (ALFY) to oversee the development and assessment of the programs detailed in QEP Action Plans two through four (Incorporating Assessment into Gordon College’s New Student Orientation, Establishing a Learning Communities Program for Gordon College, and Establishing a First-Year Experience Course for Gordon College). The Committee will be made up of eight members, comprising the Vice President for Student Affairs (Dr. Dennis Chamberlain), The Director of Institutional Research (Dr. Kelly McMichael), the Director of Student Counseling Services (Ms. Kristina Miller), the College Comptroller (Jan Pharro), and four faculty members, one from each of the four academic divisions of the college (Humanities, Nursing & Health Sciences, Math & Natural Sciences, and Social Sciences). Faculty members will be nominated by their divisions and named to the Task Force at the second faculty meeting of Fall Semester (at the end of the first week of reporting, before the start of classes) to serve for the academic year. Consideration will be given to appropriate course load reduction to faculty members for their service. Faculty members who serve on the task force will also demonstrate a commitment to the Learning Communities and First-Year Experience course by participation in one of the programs.

The Task Force will be responsible for working with the Gordon College Assessment Committee, studying and analyzing assessment data collected as part of the New Student Orientation (NSO) program at Gordon College. This assessment data will include student answers to the College Student Expectations Questionnaire (detailed in Action Plan Two), answers to additional qualitative surveys directly related to the programs offered in the NSO that will be included in the program, and data collected later in the semester through the CCSSE and SOPAS surveys. Reviewing this data with the Assessment Committee, the Task Force will make recommendations for program or other changes and improvements to the NSO and related campus resources and practices, particularly as they relate to the final two Action Plans of the QEP.

The Task Force will be responsible for disseminating information related to the Learning Communities program to all faculty and staff to build a common understanding of the resources and benefits available through the program. The Task Force will oversee primary assessment obligations related to the Learning Communities Program, including review of survey materials collected both among students within the Learning Communities cohort and an equal sampling of students outside of that cohort. Task Force members will be responsible for recruiting interested faculty into the program and assisting faculty, staff, and Division Chairs in the planning and organization of the Learning Community clusters.
Most importantly, the Task force will be responsible for overseeing the design and implementation of the First-Year Experience course. The first necessity will be to receive approval for the planned 3-credit course as a General Education elective from the University System of Georgia Regents. While this formal process is pursued, the Task Force will oversee training of the first faculty volunteers (who will file a written report to the Task Force for each training event they attend) and planning of the structure of the course. The Task Force will work to ensure that the first four sections of the proposed First-Year Experience Course are available to Gordon College students beginning in Fall 2008.

Ultimately, it will be the Task Force’s primary responsibility to work with administration, staff, and faculty to ensure the successful incorporation of the QEP Action Plan recommendations into the policies and practices of Gordon College over the course of the next five years, at which time a comprehensive review of programs will be undertaken and a decision will be made whether to continue the administration of these programs under the guidance of the Task Force or to establish a new, independent administrative department to oversee their continuance.
Action Plan Two:
Incorporating Assessment into Gordon College’s
New Student Orientation Program
via the College Student Expectations Questionnaire (CSXQ)

Program History:

Even before work began on the Gordon College QEP with its focus upon academic literacy, members of Gordon College’s Admissions, Advisement, Registration, Retention & Financial Aid Committee (AARRFA) were aware of the importance of better preparing students for their transition into college life and the Gordon College Community. The first program that came under examination and revision for better effectiveness was Gordon College’s New Student Orientation.

For years, the program’s focus was more on getting new students registered for their classes than on getting them oriented to the new experiences and expectations ahead of them. During the academic years between 1999 and 2004 as Gordon College experienced the most significant enrollment spike in its history, the shortcomings of the program became glaringly apparent. During these years, new students and their parents would be invited to attend a ninety minute welcoming presentation in the Fine Arts Auditorium. There, the President or Dean of Academic Affairs would give a formal welcome followed by a sequence of brief presentations from each of the academic divisions, an overview of Financial Aid, and a general introduction to the core curriculum and registration process. Basically, a rapid succession of important information would be presented to students and parents with little opportunity for audience input or interaction: a lot of information in a little time. Obviously, this was not the best means of informing students and their families of the many necessary issues of college admission and of the resources and services available to them at Gordon College.

The problem was compounded by the next stage of the New Student Orientation program: registration. After the program, students and their parents were then sent to one of the four academic divisions to meet with an advisor in their area of interest. Advisors would be in their offices, waiting for the next student (and family members) to register them for Fall Semester classes on a first-come/first-served basis. Students and their families would wait in line in the hallways of the academic buildings while waiting their turn for registration. On a typical afternoon, the average wait for advisement was approximately ninety minutes. This was time spent simply waiting, with no interaction from college faculty or staff beyond the call of “Next!” down the hallway. Following this wait, many students and their families would find themselves in an equally long line at either the Business or Financial Aid Office. Students and their families could spend up to eight hours on campus on one of these days, with the bulk of that time spent waiting in line and only a small portion spent in beneficial interaction with Gordon College faculty or staff. In all, review of the program revealed it as grossly inadequate to both the college’s and our students’ needs.
The AARRFA Committee understood that the long-standing practices within the program were problematic on a number of significant levels.

First, the traditional practices generated a negative first impression with our students and their families. Being subject to a hastily delivered overload of important information created the impression that our students and family members were not individually important to the college, an impression intensified by their experience of waiting in long lines to gain basic services that ended with them making a substantial financial commitment to the institution. Such a negative first impression naturally carried over to all their future interactions with the college. If one of the goals of a college orientation program is to establish a feeling of welcome and commitment to the student’s future, we were failing at this first and possibly most important goal.

Secondly, the program’s ineffective dissemination of information resulted in significant complications for students, faculty, and staff and enhanced the potential for errors in every level of the student’s enrollment, from registration through graduation. Uninformed students and family members are more prone to miss important deadlines, forget necessary formwork, register for the wrong classes, etc. Overloaded faculty advisors or staff members often assumed that students and parents already understood necessary information and skipped over important details amidst the chaos of serving a long line of waiting advisees and their families. The AARRFA Committee noted substantial time and effort was being spent correcting errors that could have been avoided if the college as a whole did a better job of informing its students of important policies and procedures, advising them of their options, and guiding them through their decisions. Too often, this important obligation was being left to the discretion of individual advisors; despite the commitment of Gordon College’s faculty members to their advisees, the case by case nature of depending upon individual advisement to inform all students of all necessary information proved too random and open to inconsistency. Committed students who sought out advisors or asked informed questions would get quality advisement, but the opportunity for many to remain under-informed was significant. We can’t rely upon our students to know what they need to know or know that they need to know it; we must better reach them with the important information that we know they need.

Thirdly, the system of having students and families wait in long lines while advisors registered one after another allowed for a higher potential for error on the faculty’s part as elements of time pressure and exhaustion took their toll, necessitating extra work on the part of faculty and Registrar’s Office staff in tracking down students enrolled in inappropriate courses and making the necessary changes. Oftentimes, students had already bought books for the classes they were incorrectly enrolled in, creating additional inconvenience.

In the 2004-2005 academic year, the Committee charged itself with the task of constructing a comprehensive renovation of the program that would accomplish two things: provide better information to students and their families in a more interactive
setting and make better and more efficient use of our students’ and family members’ time while assisting them through the registration process.

In service to the first goal, the morning session of the orientation was significantly revised. First, rather than have all students and their family members meet in the Fine Arts Auditorium in order the hear a sequence of presentations, they were separated into student- and family-member-groups of approximately 35 individuals who would travel around the campus and attend small-group informative sessions of twenty minutes each. The smaller sessions allowed for more opportunities for interaction between Gordon faculty and staff and our visitors. The small sessions with brief breaks in between also allow for better information retention. For parents, Gordon College offered an individual orientation session, tours of the campus, and a question and answer session on student services and campus safety. For students, Gordon College offered small-group sessions on financial aid and student records, academic integrity, the transition from high school, student affairs and public safety, learning strategies, and a general question and answer session. The morning sessions ended with a break for lunch at the cafeteria (provided by Gordon College).

Separating parents and students into different orientation groups was viewed as beneficial on a number of levels. First, it encourages students to understand the importance of developing independence in their choices as college students and frees them to make informed decisions for themselves without parental interference. Second, it allows for more efficient, varied and specific dissemination of information, engaging parents in sessions related to their interests and students in sessions related to needs. This helps to avoid information overlap and increases the efficiency of information exchange.

In service to the second goal, the registration process was simplified and made more efficient. After lunch, students attend an information session on the offerings and services available through Gordon College’s BannerWeb computer software. During this session, they are given their BannerWeb ID’s and instructions for determining their password, then walked through the process of logging on and navigating through the online services offered therein. After this session, they are sent to the division of their declared major. Here, the core curriculum is further clarified, particularly as it relates to their field of concentration in Area F. The registration process is comprehensively reviewed and students are prepared to register for their first semester of courses under the supervision of three to five faculty advisors. Rather than waiting in line for a meeting with an individual advisor, three to five advisors (depending on the size of the orientation cohort) are waiting for the students in each of our four main computer labs (each with a minimum of thirty computers). Students enter the lab and log into the Gordon College BannerWeb registration program. They can make their course choices based upon what they’ve learned in the information sessions and can ask questions of individual advisors who “float” around the room to offer assistance. Once a student has chosen a schedule, he/she can print it out and it (with their printed academic summary) will be reviewed by an advisor to ensure against errors (wrong classes, wrong location, ineligible classes, etc.). Only when the student’s schedule has been checked by an advisor are they dismissed individually. This system better serves the wide variety of students we receive
at the orientation sessions: some are registering for part-time courses and know exactly what they want; others need close, guided advising for a full-time schedule. Under the new system, no one is left waiting for a significant period of time, and everyone is able to receive the level of attention and guidance they need in a more dynamic, interactive setting. Students are able to work at their own pace in a helpful environment that minimizes student or advisor error and maximizes time investment and efficiency.

This initiative was begun in Summer 2005 and, judging from the feedback of students, their families, faculty, and staff, has been a success. The amount of time that students and their families spend on campus on New Student Orientation days has not necessarily changed in the year since the revised program’s inception: the program still runs from 9:00 a.m. to approximately 4:00 p.m. What has changed is the amount of interaction available to participants in the program and the effectiveness of information exchange.
Incorporating Assessment into the New Student Orientation Program:

Beginning in Summer 2007, students participating in Gordon College’s New Student Orientation will complete the College Student Expectations Questionnaire (CSXQ) administered by the College Student Experiences Questionnaire Research Program of Indiana University Bloomington. Information from this survey will inform the development of Gordon College’s Learning Communities and First-Year Experience Course programs while also enhancing our ability to address student need across the breadth of Gordon College’s programs and services. The CSXQ was developed in the 1990s from its parent survey, the College Student Experiences Questionnaire, which has been in use since 1979. The CSXQ, as Kuh (2005) explains, “asks student what they expect to do during the first year of college in selected areas, such as study time, course-learning activities, interaction with faculty members and peers, cocurricular activities, and other educationally purposeful activities” (p. 88). The survey provides measures on an important collection of student expectational attitudes related to academic literacy, including class preparation, advising and academic support, and contact with faculty, cocurricular activities, and diversity experiences.

By providing insight into the expectations that students have before they begin their coursework at Gordon College, the CSXQ will provide valuable comparative analysis to the two surveys Gordon College students will complete later in the academic year, the SOPAS and the CSSE. Comparing student expectations to their actual reported behaviors, Gordon College will be able to identify potential problem areas while also gaining a perspective on the effectiveness of the Learning Communities and First-Year Experience Course programs. As Schilling and Schilling (2005) note, “If we work to collect, understand, and respond to expectations of entering students about college, we can play a more productive role in helping students make a successful transition from high school to college” (p. 119).

In addition, Dr. Kelly McMichael of the Office of Institutional Research has developed individual surveys for students and their parents reviewing the services and sessions offered during the New Student Orientation. These surveys will be filled out by students and parents at the end of the day and will be collected and reviewed by members of the Admissions, Advisement, Registration, Retention & Financial Aid Committee (AARRFA) in order to improve those services over time. Copies of these surveys are included as Appendix B of this document.
Action Plan Three: Establishing a Learning Communities (LC) Program For Gordon College

This initiative will begin with a test cohort in Fall 2006 and will expand with each following semester. Learning Communities gather a common group of students in a sequence of linked courses in order to facilitate cooperative learning and an appreciation of the interconnections among the assorted academic divisions comprising the core curriculum. Proponents of Learning Communities (which have been initiated in over 500 institutions) note their significant contribution to overall student satisfaction and retention. Learning Communities can help students to become better socialized to what it means to be college students; they can help overcome habitually passive learning practices and initiate active learning patterns; they can help students to better appreciate the interconnectedness of the Liberal Arts core curriculum; and they can help to promote multicultural understanding and the development of campus community.

Review of Literature

Origins:

According to Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, and Gabelnick (2004), the term “learning communities” references “a variety of curricular approaches that intentionally link or cluster two or more courses, often around an interdisciplinary theme or problem, and enroll a common cohort of students. They represent an intentional restructuring of students’ time, credit, and learning experiences to build community, enhance learning, and foster connections among students, faculty, and disciplines” (p. 20). Learning communities have become a significant element in the reformation of the college curriculum in the past thirty years (over 500 colleges and universities had initiated learning community programs by the year 2000), particularly as administrators and faculty members have become more aware of the benefits of tapping into the social construction of knowledge.

Learning communities have their theoretical origins in the work of John Dewey, who stressed that effective teaching builds upon the individuality of each student and emphasized the importance of experiential and cooperative modes of learning. Dewey differentiated between what he labeled traditional education, inserting knowledge from outside the student, and progressive education, developing the student’s knowledge from within. His ideas heavily influenced Friere’s later concepts of “banking” and “liberatory” pedagogies, which effectively offered the same distinction. For Dewey, learning was a social process that should be a student-centered, active and open-ended process of inquiry rather than the passive transmission of information from teacher to student (Smith, et al., 2004; Minkler, 2002; Fishman & McCarthy, 1998; Tinto, 1993). Contemporaneous to Dewey’s theoretical work, Alexander Meiklejohn created the first learning community
program at the University of Wisconsin in 1927. Dubbed “The Experimental College,” Meiklejohn’s pedagogical model only lasted until 1932, but its emphasis on presenting a coherently-linked overall educational experience laid the groundwork for later learning community programs (Smith, et al., 2004). In all, both Dewey and Meiklejohn identified a series of common underlying assumptions necessary for successful pedagogy that shaped what would become the learning communities movement: an appreciation for knowledge that learners brought to the institution; an awareness of the diversity and individuality of learners; a valuation of active learning and problem-solving over passive information acceptance; an appreciation of the intimate connection between learning and identity development; and the need for a variety of pedagogical models used in tandem.

**Components:**

The structure of learning communities is as varied as the number of programs currently being undertaken, but a common collection of characteristics and components is revealed upon examining the research. These include:

- **Linked/Clustered Courses:** a learning community course cluster can be as few as two classes or as many as a full-time schedule of four or five. Two or three linked classes appear to be the most common option among programs.

- **Common Student Cohort:** a necessary component of learning communities is that the same group of students be enrolled within the same sequence of clustered courses.

- **Block Scheduling:** in most cases, course clusters are scheduled in blocks of time, allowing class sequences to build upon earlier lessons. Courses follow each other in sequence and may be scheduled with a brief break in between to encourage student interaction outside of the classroom.

- **Common Course Theme:** many learning communities arrange their courses around a multi-disciplinary theme, allowing groups of common majors to better appreciate the inter-relationships of curricular knowledge. For instance, undergraduate students wishing to enter a Pre-Med program might find a learning community linking English Composition, History, and Physics with a common underlying theme of the History of Medicine. Such thematic clusters are more prevalent among large research universities; two-year colleges such as Gordon, with their emphasis on the core curriculum, are less likely to utilize this feature.

- **Team/Collaborative Teaching:** related to thematic clusters, team teaching further enhances multi-disciplinary awareness and is most common at larger four-year institutions. Even at smaller and two-year colleges, though, faculty interaction and collaboration is a necessary component of the planning and implementation of the course clusters.

- **Active Pedagogy and Collaborative Learning Opportunities:** learning communities do not remove the lecture/discussion model from the classroom, but they do emphasize a more varied collection of pedagogical
tools and strategies for the classroom: student-centered learning, discovery-centered learning, group projects, community projects, service learning, interactive technology use, and portfolio development are among common additions offered in the learning community classroom that strives to shift students from passive to active learning models.

A Learning Community program for Gordon College, with our focus on providing a quality education in core-curriculum courses to enable successful student transfer into a four-year program, will include linked courses, a common enrollment cohort, block scheduling, faculty collaboration, and a variety of pedagogical modes all aimed at enhancing the overall academic literacy skills of our students.

**Benefits:**

The benefits of learning community programs have been examined in depth over a period of at least thirty years and include a number of elements that reflect important outcomes as stressed in several influential, nationally-funded studies. In recent years, a number of major studies have highlighted issues in education related directly to pedagogical concerns that can be successfully addressed in learning communities and have focused upon learning communities in particular in gathering findings. In 1998, The Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates in Research Universities released their report *Reinventing Undergraduate Education: A Blueprint for America’s Research Universities*. While focused upon research universities, the report held useful information for all institutions, including those like Gordon College that serve as a transition point for students entering four-year programs. In particular, the report emphasized the importance and value of integrated first-year programs, collaborative learning, and inquiry-based teaching, all central to the development of successful learning communities; additionally, the report highlighted the value of freshman seminars, the third element of Gordon College’s Quality Enhancement Plan. Relatedly, the Association of American Colleges and Universities’ 2002 report, *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College*, advocated the kinds of learner-centered approaches which emphasize active and inquiry-based approaches represented by learning communities. The report calls on the academic community to provide opportunities for students to use their “intellectual skills within rich disciplinary and multidisciplinary contexts,” and identifies integrated and linked learning communities, diverse forms of experiential learning, and collaborative research projects as an effective means of preparing students for more the more complex intellectual challenges they will face in the twenty-first century.

More directly related to Gordon College’s needs, in 2000 the American Association of Community Colleges released their report *The Knowledge Net: Connecting Communities, Learners, and Colleges*. This report cites “massive social changes” within both the larger culture and the academic community and urges institutions undergo significant “learning-centered changes relevant to the twenty-first century.” First, the report emphasizes the need for community colleges to “aggressively
implement strategies to create campus climates that promote inclusiveness as an institutional and community value” and provide strategies for lifelong learning. The report also emphasizes the need for community colleges to “emphasize the community” implicit within their name and mission by “providing learners with an array of experiences to help them gain civic awareness and skills that will enhance their participation in a democracy.” Further, the report’s emphasis on accessibility and learning outcomes is of particular resonance to Gordon College and our commitment to learning communities as part of our larger Quality Enhancement Plan. Of accessibility, the report emphasizes the need for colleges to adopt strategies to better alert students and community members of new learning opportunities and the resources available to them while working to “repackage their courses, policies, and schedules to meet the needs of lifelong learners.” In support of creating a community of “lifelong learners,” the report directs that “colleges should embrace learning rather than teaching as the focus of their educational enterprise and should focus on how different learning styles affect outcomes” while ensuring that disadvantaged learners are given equal emphasis in college and course planning. The establishment of learning communities is one viable and valuable way for Gordon College to address these concerns and become the kind of regional community leader that the report seeks to create through the proactive reassessment of our overall mission and methods. Further, our focus on academic literacy reflects the kind of learning-centered approach the report advocates.

The benefits of learning communities in general have been widely reported and include outcomes with significant relations to the American Association of Community Colleges report. Of particular import to Gordon College, many of the benefits attributed to successful Learning Communities programs have a direct impact on the development of effective academic literacy practices and attitudes within student participants. These include:

- **Creating community among learners:** As Hesse and Mason (2005) note, “Learning communities are built on the premise that learning is a social endeavor and that quality learning is enhanced by quality relationships” (p. 31). This is an especially important benefit for students at two-year, primarily commuter colleges, such as Gordon College. Grubb (1999) notes that students participating in learning communities at commuter-based institutions experience a significantly higher rate of successful, beneficial interaction with their classmates than do non-participants: “Students report that they come to know their fellow students better and are able to work with them more both in and out of class—in contrast to conventional practice in community colleges, where students typically find a new group in virtually every class they take.”

- **Community-based learning enhances student information retention:** As Dewey and Meiklejohn long ago maintained, the quality of student learning shows a corollary increase when undertaken within a committed community of peers working towards a common goal. As Chickering and Gamson (1987) note, “Learning is enhanced when it is more like a team effort than a solo race. Good learning, like good work, is collaborative and
social, not competitive and isolated. Working with others often increases
involvement in learning. Sharing one’s own ideas and responding to
others’ reactions sharpens thinking and deepens understanding” (p. 7).

• Enhancing awareness of inter-disciplinary understanding: For Cross
  (1998), learning communities “offer hope of making college a more
  holistic, integrated learning experience for students” (p. 4). Either through
  an identified theme or via the association of a common cohort of students
  working through a sequence of linked courses, learning communities
  enhance student understanding of the inter-connectedness of knowledge
  and works to dissolve traditional academic divisional boundaries.

• Promote student-faculty interaction: Minkler (2002) notes that learning
  communities “deliberately structure the curriculum so that students are
  more actively engaged in a sustained academic relationship with other
  students and faculty over a longer period of time than in traditional course
  settings” (p. 47). Shapiro and Levine (1999) note that learning
  communities provide students with “prolonged exposure to their peers and
teachers” that they would not get in the conventional class schedule and
note that faculty, in particular, “report a greater sense of community
among their peers and a closer connection to the college as a hole as a
result of teaching in a learning community environment.” And Cross
(1998) notes that “when faculty show an interest in students, get to know
them through informal as well as formal channels, engage in conversations
with them, show interest in their intellectual development, then students
respond with enthusiasm and engagement” (p. 6). Finally, Light (2001)
has declared that the single-most important and beneficial action a first-
year student can take is to develop a meaningful personal and professional
relationship with a faculty member. For Light, the developing a mentor
relationship with a faculty member will enhance the student’s potential for
success across the board.

• Block scheduling makes better use of student time: With a consistently
  more diverse student enrollment, a higher percentage of students’ time is
taken up by out-of-class responsibilities, from work to family
responsibilities. At Gordon College, approximately 40% of students noted
out-of-class responsibilities as being a challenge to their in-class success
on SOPAS and CSSE surveys. As Hesse and Mason note, block
scheduling provides students with “the perception that their time is well
spent taking one learning community rather than taking two or three
separate courses. By having various assignments relate to the same theme,
students have a sense that they are using their time more efficiently and
that the curriculum is more integrated and less disjointed” (p. 33).
Further, for commuter students, learning communities can provide, as
Laufgraben (2005) notes, “a setting for community-based delivery of
support services such as tutoring, mentoring, or career counseling” (p.
372). Making the most of classroom resources is of especial import to
commuter students who may not have the ability to interact with campus
resources otherwise; as Tinto (1997) notes, for commuters, the classroom is “the crossroads where the social and the academic meet” (p. 622).

- **Enhance diversity awareness and appreciation:** Rendon (2000) identifies learning communities as “a way of promoting a multicultural and democratic community where learning shifts from passive to active, retention rates are higher, and students learn in collaboration with peers and faculty” (in Minkler 2002, p. 51). Overseeing a learning community program amidst Florida International University’s diverse student population, Akens (2002) notes “students became less dualistic in their views of others, and eventually more open to others’ perspectives and differences” (p. 49).

- **Increased student retention and persistence:** In the first comprehensive study of the benefits of learning communities, Tinto et al. (1994) demonstrated that participants in learning communities demonstrated a 15% higher retention and persistence rate than their peers who had not participated in such programs and attributed the improvement to the “high level of social, emotional, and academic peer support that emerged from classroom activities” (p. 27). Gordon, Young, and Kalianov (2001) found similar outcomes in their study while noting, as well, marked improvements in the grade point averages of students participating in learning communities (p. 42).

- **Socialize students to college expectations:** Laufgraben (2005) notes that learning communities for new college freshmen provide “an ideal setting in which to introduce students to the expectations of the college classroom, while student interaction with peers reinforces the attitudes, values, and behaviors necessary to succeed as a member of the peer group” (p. 374). This is an issue of particular import to Gordon College’s faculty, as evinced from campus surveys and discussions in the Faculty Senate and should encourage faculty interest and participation in the learning community initiative.
A Learning Community Program for Gordon College:

Implementation:

Gordon College will begin to build its Learning Communities program in Fall 2006 with two sets of linked courses: English Composition I (Dr. Edward J. Whitelock) linked with Math 1000 (Dr. Silas Edet), and English Composition II (Dr. Alcena Rogan) linked with History 2112 (Dr. Gary Cox). Each semester, we will add more linked courses, moving from offering just pairs to the option of taking clusters of three courses. During the first two academic years of the program (2006-2007 and 2007-2008), offerings will increase each semester, building to a goal of offering 10 active learning communities, comprising 25 course sections, and serving an estimated 240 students per semester by the Spring semester of 2008. We will continue to expand offerings as student demand warrants, but plan to offer a regular cohort of 20 individual learning communities per academic year as our minimum program goal.

Leading up to the development and inclusion of a First-Year Experience Course, Gordon will gradually develop an increasing number of learning community clusters, leading to our goal of offering ten (10) learning communities by Spring semester 2008. By Fall 2008, Gordon will continue to offer ten learning community clusters per semester, twenty per academic year. Implementation will develop according to the following schedule:

Fall 2006: 2 learning communities of 2 linked courses  
4 total courses serving 48 students

Spring 2007: 5 learning communities of 2 linked courses  
10 total courses serving 120 students

Academic Year Totals: 7 learning communities, comprising 14 courses, serving 168 students

Fall 2007: 5 learning communities of 2 linked courses  
3 learning communities of 3 linked courses  
19 total courses serving 192 students

Spring 2008: 5 learning communities of 2 linked courses  
5 learning communities of 3 linked courses  
25 total courses serving 240 students

Academic Year Totals: 18 learning communities, comprising 44 courses, serving 432 students
In Fall 2008, Gordon will again offer ten learning community clusters while beginning the process of folding into that program the additional offering of a First-Year Experience Course. The schedule for this developing process is featured in the corresponding section of Action Plan Three: First-Year Experience Course below.

**Scheduling:**

Courses will be arranged according to block scheduling to meet twice or three times weekly, according to Gordon College’s MWF (ex.: a 3 credit course meets for 50 minutes, three times per week) and TR (ex.: a 3 credit course meets for 75 minutes, twice a week) course scheduling options.

**Enrollment:**

Enrollment in each learning community cluster will be limited to the number of students able to take the course with the lowest-enrollment assignment (as decided by the Vice President for Academic Affairs) amidst the selection of courses. For instance, in a pairing of English Composition II (maximum enrollment 24 students) and American History II (maximum enrollment 30 students), enrollment in the paired learning community cohort would be 24 students. This will enhance student-professor interaction by maintaining the smallest class size amidst the total cohort. Further, smaller class size can act as an incentive for faculty participation in the program and enable more interactive pedagogical methods.

**The “Dead Hour”:**

On MWF scheduled classes, the learning community clusters will have the opportunity to be arranged to take advantage of Gordon College’s “dead hour” which has been implemented on Monday and Wednesday afternoons; no classes are scheduled during the “dead hour” to allow students an opportunity to participate in campus clubs, which often schedule their meetings during this time, or to attend cultural events and lectures that are regularly scheduled during that time as well. Even when not taking part in one of these activities, the “dead hour” will allow students an opportunity to socialize amongst themselves, form study groups, or meet informally with professors.

**Course offerings:**

All core-curriculum courses offered by Gordon College could be included within a learning community cluster. The Task Force for Academic Literacy in the First Year will work with Chairs of the four divisions to schedule pairs and clusters that will best enable students to fill in their necessary requirements without suffering overlap within the core curriculum schedule for graduation. During the first two years of the program’s
development, emphasis will be placed on linking courses across curricular divisions. As the program develops over time, there may be opportunities to pair courses within a particular academic division, but primary focus during the first several semesters of development will be upon cross-curricular clusters. Another possibility, as the Learning Communities Program develops, would be to arrange Learning Support courses into learning community cohorts. This, too, is an element that we will explore once the foundation for the cross-curricular learning community clusters has been established.
Action Plan Four:
Establishing a *First-Year Experience Seminar (FYE)*
For Gordon College

This initiative is targeted to begin in Fall 2008. The course is designed to acquaint first-year students with the Gordon College campus, its resources and procedures, and with the practices and expectations of the larger academic community in order to better prepare students for college success and passage into their professional lives. With our focus upon academic literacy, the Gordon College First-Year Experience (FYE) Course is not designed as, simply, an academic skills course. While formal skills will be addressed, equal attention will focus upon additional, and often overlooked, elements of maximizing the potential for academic and professional success. The course will help students generate an understanding of the lexical, behavioral, and philosophical underpinnings of the larger academic community; it will help them develop confident interpersonal communication skills with students, staff, and faculty; it will help them to expand their appreciation of variant ideas, creeds, and cultures; and help foster a sense of connectedness to the Gordon College community through facilitating active participation in campus activities and cultural events.

Review of Literature:

Origins:

While noting that broad, sustained commitment to first-year seminars and courses is a fairly recent innovation in higher education, Hunter and Linder (2005) declare that such programs offer “an excellent opportunity for colleges and universities to challenge their first-year students to excel academically and socially, as well as support them in that quest” (p.275). First-year seminars have seen a dramatic acceptance within a wide array of educational institutions. A comprehensive study of first year experience programs, *The 2003 National Survey on First-Year Seminars*, shows that 81.6% of all U.S. institutions of higher learning now offer some type of first year experience course (Tobolowsky, Mamrick, & Cox, 2005). Comparing this figure with *The 2000 National Survey of First-Year Seminar Programs*, which notes that 73.9% of all U.S. institutions of higher learning offer a first year experience course, we can see that there is a strong and growing trend towards making the first year experience course a ubiquitous feature of undergraduate study.

According to Herder and Linder (2005), the realization that students often arrive on campus with needs specific to their status as first-year students is not new and has informed the development of programs over the course of the past one hundred years. Both Johns Hopkins University (in 1877) and Harvard University (in 1889) initiated faculty advisor and peer mentor programs specifically to address the needs of first-year students. By 1911, Reed College became the first to offer a first-year orientation course.
for credit, while numerous other elite colleges offered similar non-credit programs. A 1948 survey of first-year programs showed that 43% of the responding institutions required student participation in some form of a freshman orientation course. Most of the early information on such programs came from private colleges and from among the largest research universities; but by 1980, smaller public and private colleges and schools within state systems of higher education began to review the feasibility of incorporating freshmen orientation into their general education programs. FYE courses continue, according to Barefoot (2005), to be primarily offered at four-year colleges (80%) with a smaller percentage of offerings at two-year schools (62%). For Barefoot, this is an odd characteristic, considering that two-year colleges such as Gordon “enroll the highest percentage of at-risk students,” and she recommends that community colleges give top priority to establishing such programs within the next decade (p. 56). In 1986, the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition was founded at the University of South Carolina and remains the leader in pedagogical theory and support for the seminar program.

Components:

As with learning community programs, which have undergone similar growth in the past thirty years, First-Year Experience Seminar programs offer a wide array of components and characteristics. Elements common to most include:

- **Academic Credit** – According to Barefoot & Fiddler (1996), assigning credit to a first-year seminar course demonstrates institutional commitment to and valuation of the program, encouraging students to take the course seriously. Most such courses are offered for college credit ranging from one to three credits earned; whether these course credits are accepted as degree earning electives is an issue of wide variance.

- **Involve both faculty and student affairs professionals** – While primarily taught by faculty members, student affairs staff should be an active part of the seminar in order to familiarize students with campus policies and resources and to encourage their informed maximization of the opportunities the college community offers them.

- **Academic Skills Instruction** – A majority of first-year seminars focus primarily upon necessary academic skills of critical reading, note-taking, study skills, etc. All seminars offer some form of study skills focus, but a trend is developing to move away from a strict skills-centered approach.

- **Transitional Awareness** – Open understanding of the status of new students as “in transition” has informed the development of more campus community centered approaches to the seminar, including elements of inter-personal skills, drug/alcohol awareness, campus community events and offerings, etc., in order to better acquaint students with their new surroundings.

- **Academic Resources Awareness** – Most first-year seminars take advantage of the opportunity to familiarize students with the breadth of resources
available to them on campus, from library holdings, student services, academic support services, and local community resources.

- **Student Social Awareness** – Most first-year seminars also emphasize the social issues new students will be facing, from introducing the breadth of student services, activities, and cultural events available to them to offering programs on alcohol and drug awareness, multicultural acceptance, and acceptable inter-gender behavior.

**Benefits:**

One of the most important functions of the first year experience course is that it strongly and positively impacts student retention. In *The Journal of College Student Retention*, Schnell and Doetkott (2003) compare student retention rates among students taking a first year course with a matched group, finding that, at two-year institutions, 75% of the first year experience (FYE) group were retained, in comparison with 63% of the matched group. It is worth noting that the study shows that FYE programs are most efficacious in student retention at the two-year school level. Student retention is also found to be a significant outcome of the FYE course in Hoff, Cook, and Price’s *The First Five Years of Freshman Seminars at Dalton College: Student Success and Retention* (1996), which reports that “During the fall following first enrollment, 69.5% of DCS 101 students returned, compared with 55.8% of non-DCS 101 students,” and that in the “winter and / or spring of the following year, 68.7% of the DCS 101 students returned, compared with 50.0% of the non-DCS 101 students” (p. 38-39). Again, we see that FYE courses are correlated with increased student retention at the two-year school level.

Indeed, although it has been proven to be useful at four-year schools, the FYE course has special relevance for two-year institutions because of the particular nature of the student experience at the two-year school. In his comprehensive review of the literature on persistence theories, Metz notes that “Because two-year college students spend little time on campus and do not become as involved in the college community as do four-year residential college students, the integration of academic and student services functions, especially academic advising and orientation programs, is a significant factor affecting persistence” (2004-2005, p. 198). An FYE course offering at Gordon College would integrate academic and student services by making information such as that provided by orientation and student advisement sessions more readily, comprehensively, and consistently accessible to our student population. It would also provide our students with a community – of peers, staff, and faculty – that they would not otherwise have, and which, according to Metz as well as other scholars, is an important factor impacting student retention as well as students’ overall perception of the quality of their college experience.

In her study *Connections and Reflections: Creating a Positive Learning Environment for First-Year Students*, Donahue’s (2004) analysis of FYE students’ evaluations of the course “revealed that students need peers who provide personal and intellectual support, faculty who are personable and approachable, [and] courses that
encourage connections and community” (p. 77). A Gordon College FYE course would provide students with a community of peers – which, as we have seen, is an important factor impacting student success and enhancing academic literacy skills. Furthermore, a FYE course would provide students with additional access to faculty, whose primary function as FYE course teachers would be to provide and act as resources for first year students: simply put, an FYE course would deliver a “personable and approachable” faculty presence to students who are at risk for not taking advantage of faculty as intellectual and institutional resources, as demonstrated in the CSSE and SOPAS surveys mentioned in Part Two of this document.

Another important general rationale for a FYE course at Gordon is that FYE courses have been shown to positively impact graduation rates. This study is particularly significant because it demonstrates that the FYE course has long-term effects on student success. In their study *The First-Year Seminar as a Means of Improving College Graduation Rates*, Schnell, Louis, and Doetkott (2003) demonstrate that FYE courses have a major impact on graduation rates as well as other measures of student success and satisfaction with their learning experiences. Schnell et al. (2003) note that, “Of the 852 students in the [FYE] group, 142 (16.67%) graduated in four years. The four year graduation rate for the match group was 11.79% (100 out of 848)” (p. 61). The authors go on to comment on the importance of improving graduation rates: “Given the goal of higher education, the amount of money spent on student recruitment, and public perceptions, it is to the university’s advantage to retain students to graduation. In addition, parents and students are concerned about the student’s potential for success, and supporting that success is imperative on the part of both public and private institutions” (p. 68-69). First, of course, it is to the personal and professional advantage of our students to be able to matriculate successfully. Furthermore, since so many of our students at Gordon plan to go on to study at four-year institutions, overwhelmingly University System of Georgia institutions, their success in terms of persistence and graduation is an important issue not only for Gordon but also for the USG as a whole: with an effective FYE course, Gordon will be able to graduate more, and better-prepared, students into four-year USG schools.

Since so many of Gordon’s students plan to continue their studies at a four-year institution, another rationale for a FYE course is that it might be used effectively to ensure good transfer plans and practices. Although a little more than one-half (582 out of 761 graduates 2003-2004, *Gordon College 2005 Fact Book*) of Gordon’s graduating students currently transfer to four-year programs within the USG system, those numbers should certainly be improved, due to the increasingly limited marketability of a two-year degree. Planning on what to do after matriculation from a two-year institution is an important and difficult process that is currently left largely to the student to negotiate: an FYE course with a component on transfer plans and practices would get students thinking early and positively about continuing their studies. It would also benefit the USG by increasing enrollment at their four-year institutions.

Relatedly, a FYE course would also help to serve the population of Gordon students transferring into Gordon from other institutions. According to the Board of
Regents of the University System of Georgia’s *Fiscal Year 2004 Summary Transfer Feedback Report* (2005), of the 761 of Gordon College’s 2003-2004 graduates, 582 of them transferred to USG schools. In the same year, out of a total enrollment of 3449 students, 369 of them transferred into Gordon from another institution of higher learning. A FYE course would benefit both of these groups. In the *2000 National Survey of First-Year Seminar Programs* Skipper (2002) reports that “It is not surprising that four-year institutions are nearly twice as likely as two-year institutions to offer a special section of the seminar for transfer students, because of their function as receiving institutions. While students move in and out of two-year institutions, concerns about retention of transfer students may be more pronounced at four-year institutions” (85). The author of this study then goes on to suggest that a special section of a FYE seminar that focused on transfer students’ needs would be useful for lowering the high attrition rates of transfer students: given what we know about the FYE course’s efficacy in promoting persistence and retention, this makes a great deal of sense. Since part of Gordon’s mission as a two-year school is to prepare students for further study at a four-year institution, and since we have a fair number of students transferring in, it would serve Gordon’s student population well to address the special needs of those transferring both into and out of Gordon College.

Here we return to what seems to us to be the most relevant and promising data on FYE courses, Hoff et al.’s *The First Five Years of Freshman Seminars at Dalton College: Student Success and Retention* (1996). Dalton is, like Gordon, a two-year college within the USG system. Analysis of Dalton’s data on the first five years of their FYE course shows that students “attempted more hours, showed a higher retention rate, completed more hours, and showed a higher rate of completion of 90 quarter hours than did non-DCS students”(p. 33). Most of these findings replicate the results of other studies cited in this report, but they also show that more hours are attempted and completed by FYE course graduates. Because of the similarities between Dalton and Gordon Colleges, we feel confident that we could replicate these impressive outcomes with our own FYE course.

In addition to the above issues and of primary concern for the QEP Committee, first-year seminar programs, like learning community programs, offer a number of benefits of distinct relation to the successful development of academic literacy, especially when the first-year experience course is linked to a learning community. As Laufgraben (2005) notes, “Learning communities located within first-year experience programs . . . provide an ideal setting in which to introduce students to the expectations of the college classroom, while student interaction with peers reinforces the attitudes, values, and behaviors necessary to succeed as a member of the peer group” (p. 376). Gordon College will initiate and incorporate its First-Year Experience Seminar into the Learning Communities Program that we will establish during the two years leading up to the FYE’s introduction in the expectation that the linked programs will amplify the benefits already detailed related to the LC program plus the additional benefits we can expect to gain through the FYE seminars. These additional benefits, which relate directly to our focus on improving academic literacy, include:
• *Enhancing Study Skills:* Traditionally, this has been the primary goal behind the establishment of FYE courses at American colleges and universities. Gordon College will not limit its approach to this area, though will focus resources on it as a component within our wider definition of the measurable skills contained within individuals exhibiting effective academic literacy skills. It’s worth noting that Ramon and Napoli (1998) identified higher persistence rates in community college students who have taken a FYE course and earned a grade of C or higher (reported in Crissman-Ishler and Upcraft, 2005, p. 42).

• *Enhance Multicultural Understanding:* As Jones (2005) notes, “Educating all students for a pluralistic society involves the rethinking and restructuring of all the curriculum to meet the needs of a pluralistic society, which must also consider its links to a shared and connected global community” (p. 151). A multicultural awareness element built into the FYE will initiate a broader understanding of campus diversity and can be linked to other on-campus programs.

• *Maximizing student use and awareness of campus resources:* By building a practical get-to-know-Gordon’s-resources component into the program, we will better ensure that our students know where and how to find the answers to their questions and the means to accomplish their goals.

• *Successful transition and adjustment to college expectations:* Too many college students are entering their first year with the “thirteenth grade syndrome,” where their college expectations are shaped by their oftentimes passive experiences of high school education. The FYE course will help to clarify the very different expectations that college has for them and provide them with the intellectual and behavioral models necessary for college success, allowing us to, as Seigel (2005) contends, “challenge and support them during the crucial early days of their first year of college” (p. 176).

• *Development of pride and identity within Gordon College:* It is often difficult for a two-year, commuter college to generate a sense of pride and identification with the college among its students. By incorporating Gordon College and community history into the FYE course, we hope to generate a sense of connectedness that will be amplified by students’ participation within learning communities while taking this course.

*Implementation:*

Beginning with Fall 2008, half of the learning community clusters will be linked to a First-Year experience course taught by one of the five faculty/staff volunteers who will have undergone two years of training in preparation for the inauguration of the program. As these five individuals teach two classes each, Gordon College will seek another five volunteers from among faculty and staff to begin the same training sequence the first five have followed. After one year of training, and each working with an FYE mentor from among the five individuals already teaching in the program, they will each
begin teaching First-Year experience courses linked to learning communities. Gordon College will thereafter maintain a stable of fifteen faculty/staff volunteers trained or in-training for participation within the FYE/Learning Community program. Further, with a ready supply of trained teaching staff, we will be prepared to offer additional FYE courses as stand-alones if student interest dictates it.

Fall 2008: 3 learning communities of 2 linked courses
2 learning communities of 3 linked courses (with First-Year Experience course)
3 learning communities of 3 linked courses
2 learning communities of 4 linked courses (with First-Year Experience course)
29 courses serving 240 students

Spring 2009: 3 learning communities of 2 linked courses
2 learning communities of 3 linked courses (with First-Year Experience course)
3 learning communities of 3 linked courses
2 learning communities of 4 linked courses (with First-Year Experience course)
29 courses serving 240 students

*Academic Year Totals: 20 learning communities, comprising 58 courses, serving 480 students*

Fall 2009: 3 learning communities of 2 linked courses
2 learning communities of 3 linked courses (with First-Year Experience course)
3 learning communities of 3 linked courses
2 learning communities of 4 linked courses (with First-Year Experience course)
29 courses serving 240 students

Spring 2010: 3 learning communities of 2 linked courses
2 learning communities of 3 linked courses (with First-Year Experience course)
3 learning communities of 3 linked courses
2 learning communities of 4 linked courses (with First-Year Experience course)
29 courses serving 240 students

*Academic Year Totals: 20 learning communities, comprising 58 courses, serving 480 students*
At the end of four years, the Gordon College learning community initiative will be serving 480 first-year students per academic year, with 192 of those students benefiting from a linked First-Year Experience course. This comprises roughly one-half of the annual Gordon College new student enrollments. With the comprehensive assessment of the program during the 2010-11 academic year, Gordon will be able to address additional needs: expanding the Learning Communities Program to include more students, breaking out a selection of stand-alone First-Year Experience courses, initiating a Learning Communities Program with First-Year Experience Course specifically for Learning Support students, etc.

**Enrollment:**

One of the most significant questions regarding the establishment of a First-Year Experience Course is the question of who will take it. Will it be required of all students or to a cohort of students identified as exhibiting academic literacy deficiencies? How will such deficiencies be measured and what will be the penalty for students who refuse to enroll in or successfully complete the course? The problem of requiring all students to enroll in such a course was best expressed by a faculty member who had previously served at a college that made that demand: “The faculty generally came to dislike the course because it demanded a lot of their time and the students generally disliked the course because they felt it wasted theirs.”

As noted above in relation to the Learning Communities Program, testing incoming students for academic literacy is both impractical and problematic. Further, the breadth of experience and background represented by Gordon College’s primarily commuter population adds another complication to the implementation of a mandatory additional class for all new students.

We have decided, as with the Learning Community Program, to offer this course on a voluntary basis to those students who perceive within themselves a need for it. Further, by linking the first two years of offering of this course to established learning communities, we will both maximize its effectiveness, as noted in the research, while enhancing its profile among students and encouraging them to take advantage of its benefits.

**Academic Credit:**

Research demonstrates that the most successful First-Year Experience Courses, especially those designed to do more than simply offer a review of academic skills, should be offered for multiple units of credit. In their presentation “Best Practices in the FY College Year” at the 25th Annual Conference on the First-Year Experience in Atlanta, Georgia, in Feb. 2006, John Gardner and Betsy Barefoot maintained that for an institution that wishes to do more than provide, simply, basic orientation information, a 3-credit FYE course is the most effective.
We will propose to the Regents of the University System of Georgia that Gordon College’s First-Year Experience Course be granted 3 credits as an open elective for the Area B component of the core curriculum. The Task Force for Academic Literacy in the First Year will work with the Academic Policy Committee to review the proposal and make the formal request.
Part Six: 
Implementation Costs 
of the Gordon College Quality Enhancement Plan

Cost Analysis and Budget Requisition

New Student Orientation:

Gordon College’s New Student Orientation will continue to grow and undergo annual review of services according to the following regular assessment schedule. Each Fall semester will see a review of assessment materials collected during the preceding academic year (Fall, Spring, Summer). Each Spring semester will see a review of recommendations for changes or enhancements to the program. Approved changes will commence during the following Fall semester’s programs.

Anticipated Additional Costs Related to the New Student Orientation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>College Student Expectations Questionnaire (CSXQ)</td>
<td>$200.00 program fee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per Student Cost (average 700 annually)</td>
<td>$2.00 each</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total estimated annual cost: $1,600.00

Use of the CSXQ Survey will commence in New Student Orientation sessions in Summer 2007.

Learning Communities and First-Year Experience Course:

Gordon College’s Learning Community program will begin with two test clusters in Fall 2006, and First-Year Experience course will be developed in conjunction with the learning community program starting in Fall 2008. Participants in the learning community programs will be faculty volunteers representing the four General Education Divisions of Humanities, Math and Natural Sciences, Nursing and Health Sciences, and Social Sciences. As an institution committed to providing a general education and completion of a core curriculum for transfer, Gordon College will not utilize a theme-based approach within its learning community clusters; rather, a common cohort of students will take a time-linked sequence of two or three classes within each learning community. Faculty will utilize these linkages as a means to address cross-curricular understanding while maintaining primary focus on teaching material necessary for core-curriculum completion and transfer.

As demonstrated in the schedule below, Gordon College will spend two years (four semesters) establishing the Learning Communities program, then slowly fold the
First-Year Experience course into the existing and established learning communities offerings over the course of the next three years (six semesters). By Fall 2008, Gordon College’s goal is to be supporting 10 learning communities and 4 First-Year Experience courses each semester. The 2010-11 academic year will also see the comprehensive review and assessment of the program in process and the formation of a plan for its continuation and growth into the next five years.

In order to implement learning communities and first-year experience programs, Gordon College will seek two volunteers from among faculty and support staff who will receive training in the development and administration of these valuable programs. Gordon College will provide monies for membership in the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience & Students in Transition and attendance at that organization’s annual Conference on the First-Year Experience. Gordon College will also establish a library collection of useful books, journals, and electronic materials related to the programs which will be housed initially in the Hightower Library. Further, Gordon College will arrange for an annual visit by a nationally known expert in this field who will conduct open-campus workshops and individual training for faculty/staff volunteers.

Anticipated annual costs for training, materials, and hosted seminars (and anticipated start date of costs) are as follows:

**Academic Year 2000-07:**

- Conference on the First Year Experience (per participant): $585.00
- Pre-Conference Workshops (per participant): $125.00
- Travel & Lodging (per participant): $700.00
- Total costs for two participants: $2820.00

**Subscriptions to the Following Journals:**
- The Journal of the First-Year & Students in Transition: $40.00
- The Journal of College Student Development: $125.00
- The Journal of Higher Education: $150.00
- Additional Print Material Purchases: $250.00

**Academic Year 2007-08:**

- Estimated Cost of Hosting First-Year Experience Seminar Speaker[s]: $5,000.00

**Academic Year 2008-09:**

- Faculty Compensation (8 courses, 24 total credits @ $700/credit): $16,800.00

**Anticipated Total Annual Expenses upon full implementation: $25,195.00**
Quality Enhancement Plan Account:

Budget Allocation for all QEP related programs will come from an account established at Gordon College to specifically fund and oversee the programs. The Quality Enhancement Plan Account will be a regularly funded account within the Gordon College annual budget and will cover all personal services, travel, and operating supplies & expenses.
Part Seven:  
Assessment of the Gordon College Quality Enhancement Plan

Overview of Assessment Tools

Gordon College will utilize a collection of assessment tools combining those already in use with a selection of tools developed specifically to measure the attainment of academic literacy goals within the programs established via the QEP Action Plan.

Assessment tools already in use include the following:

- **Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE):** This survey will provide valuable insight into our success in engaging our students both within and outside the classroom. We will pay special attention to student engagement in campus activities and events and to student use of academic resources and faculty advisement as measures of an engaged, informed student population exhibiting the necessary characteristics of academic literacy to ensure their future success.

- **Survey of Presently Attending Students (SOPAS):** This survey offers Gordon College an opportunity to customize questions for our students which relate directly to our academic literacy goals. Reviewed in conjunction with CCSSE survey results, the SOPAS results will offer valuable insight into our progress towards those goals.

- **Gordon College General Education Goals:** Beginning in Fall 2005, Gordon College began assessing its students’ pass rates in central core-curriculum courses amongst its four major academic divisions. We expect that our focus on academic literacy will result in a steadily growing percentage of student success in these core courses, in particular as related to those courses organized into our Learning Communities program. We will track the passing percentages of students both within and without that program in relation to the General Education Goals as a means of measuring the effectiveness of our focus upon academic literacy.

- **University System of Georgia Regents’ Test:** Student performance on this literacy test of reading and written communication will offer valuable insight into student success on an important academic component of academic literacy. We expect that a rising percentage of passing grades for first-time takers of this test will be a measure and result of our focus upon strengthening academic literacy at Gordon College.

In addition to the above, already established assessment tools, Gordon College will develop and implement the following assessment tools in order to chart the success of our focus upon academic literacy and the programs described in the QEP action plan:

New Student Orientation:
• **College Student Expectations Questionnaire (CSXQ):** As noted in Action Plan Two, this survey will be distributed during the NSO in order to generate reviewable data of student expectations that can be analyzed in relation to data generated by the CCSSE and SOPAS surveys of students following a period of engaged enrollment at Gordon College.

• **Student and Parent Surveys of NSO Program:** These surveys will be distributed at the close of the NSO and will allow for comprehensive review and revision of this program, particularly in relation to its success at establishing the first positive impression of the importance of academic literacy for students and parents.

Learning Community Program:

• **Pre-Survey:** A preliminary survey of academic literacy practices will be distributed to two student cohorts at the start of each semester: first, to all those students participating in the LC program; a second, equal-numbered group of students not participating in the LC program will be given the same survey. Surveys will be distributed in the English Composition classes of the LC cohorts, and in an equal number of English Composition classes that are not part of an LC cohort.

• **Post-Survey:** At the end of the semester, the same classes that completed the Pre-Survey will complete this survey, intended to measure the academic literacy practices and enhancements related to the LC program. Copies of the pre- and post-surveys are included as Appendix C of this document.

First-Year Experience Course:

• **Pre-Survey:** A preliminary survey of academic literacy practices will be distributed to three student cohorts at the start of each semester: first, to all those students participating in the FYE; a second, equal-numbered group of students not participating in the FYE course, but who are participating in an LC cluster will be given the same survey; a third group of students, who have volunteered for neither program, will also be given the survey. Surveys will be distributed in the FYE classes, and in English Composition classes of the selected LC cohorts, and in an equal number of English Composition classes that are not part of an LC cohort.

• **Post-Survey:** At the end of the semester, the same classes that completed the Pre-Survey will complete this survey, intended to measure the academic literacy practices and enhancements related to the FYE program. Copies of the pre- and post-surveys are included as Appendix D of this document.

In addition to these formal tools, we will also track and examine several key data components at the close of each academic year:

• **Grade Point Averages:** Do the GPAs of students who take part in the LC and/or FYE programs exhibit a marked improvement compared to those who have opted not to participate in the programs?
• **Progress Towards Degree as Measure by Credit Hours Attempted:** Do students who have taken part in the LC and/or FYE programs exhibit a significant increase in the amount of hours attempted each semester and in their progress towards completion of the Associate’s Degree?

• **Graduation Rates:** Do participants in the LC and/or FYE programs exhibit a higher overall graduation rate than their peers who have not participated in the programs?

• **First- to Second-Year Retention:** Do participants in the LC and/or FYE programs exhibit a higher retention rate than their peers who have not participated in the programs?

In all, the programs created through the Quality Enhancement Plan of the Gordon College application for reaccreditation will undergo comprehensive and consistent assessment and review in order to gauge their effectiveness and revise the programs to best serve our students.
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Appendices

Appendix A – Report on Class Attendance Policies
Appendix B – Copies of New Student Orientation Surveys
Appendix C – Copies of Learning Community Surveys
Appendix D – Copies of First-Year Experience Course Surveys
Appendix A:

Report on Class Attendance Policies

Introduction

Attending class is often a prerequisite for gaining the course content. Attendance is obviously essential in some cases, as in a lesson on a musical instrument or on using laboratory equipment. In other cases, class attendance may be an efficient way to gain knowledge; but it may be possible to acquire some or all of the necessary information or skills through reading a text or employing other means such as online resources. Although it is widely accepted that consistent attendance at class meetings is associated with better grades when one is tested on material covered in class, examining whether a cause-and-effect relationship between class attendance and mastery of course content exists is more problematic. Also of interest is whether an attendance policy is helpful in enhancing student achievement, and, if so, what sort of policy or policies are appropriate or effective.

Literature survey

A variety of studies have been done by instituting experimental attendance policies, or at least monitoring attendance, for multiple sections of the same course (e.g., Berenson et al., 1992; Gump, 2005; Moore 2003, 2004). Studies on college-wide attendance policies are infrequent in the literature, and it appears that no class-by-class analysis of an entire college or university’s attendance and grades has been undertaken. King et al. (2004) examined grade point averages (GPAs) for all first year students before and after a policy required that attendance for “first year courses” was enacted, but their detailed look at attendance and performance involved only a few course sections, as other studies have. As discussed below, studies on reasons for students’ absences have been performed as well; and some authors have investigated methods for reducing truancy in the college classroom.

Attendance and grades

Researchers commonly note that determining whether a cause-and-effect relationship exists between attendance and grades is difficult due to the fact that the internal motivation that leads students to voluntarily attend class may also lead them to exhibit other behaviors helpful to mastery of coursework: reading the textbook, studying notes after class, and doing any assigned homework (e.g., Friedman et al., 2001). However, a number of studies have demonstrated that higher attendance is correlated with higher grades (Gump, 2004b, 2005; King et al., 2004; Marburger, 2001 as cited in Hassel et al, 2005; Moore, 2003; Silvestri, 2003; Van Blercom, 1992) or higher rates of passing a course (Burdge and Daubenmire, 2001).

Attendance may not be the most important factor in every course, and it may not be enhanced under every policy intended to encourage attendance. Aldosary (1995) found that in an environmental design course, the correlation between homework completion and final grade was greater than between attendance and final grade. It was
recommended that attendance policies be relaxed and homework and assignments be counted more heavily. Berenson et al. (1992) reported on the effect of instituting an attendance policy in a developmental algebra class. Although they found that attendance “improved dramatically,” there was no significant difference between the final grades of classes of students before the policy and after the policy. Another researcher used email to remind absent students that attendance was important. Attendance did increase in most sections of the course, but course exam scores did not (Jacobson, 2005). Moore (2004) performed a study that compared the effect of having no attendance policy to the effect of having a policy in which an automatic F was awarded if students did not attend a minimum of 60% of introductory biology classes. The data indicated that this penalty for excessive absences enhanced neither grades nor attendance.

**Reasons for absence and attendance**

Researchers have investigated reasons for attending and being absent from classes, often by checklist surveys. Friedman et al. (2001) asked students to monitor their attendance for all their courses during a semester. They found that the more often students checked off that they attended classes because they felt guilty for not going, because the instructor would take attendance, because they worked on projects in class, because they enjoyed the class and wanted to ask questions, and similar reasons, the more often they actually attended classes. The most often cited reasons from people who skipped classes were that attendance was not taken or “the teacher does not notice or care if I am there” (Friedman et al., 2001). Other research ranks the interesting nature of a class and feeling obligated to attend much higher than whether or not attendance was monitored by the instructor (Gump 2004a). In Launius’ (1997) survey of attitudes at the end of a psychology course, students reported their feelings on the course’s attendance policy. Eighty-four percent of students from four large lecture sections said credit for attendance (which the instructor had awarded) influenced their decision to come to class, particularly when they did not feel like attending. Some stated that the researcher’s class was the only one for which they had perfect attendance and noted that the attendance policy and the enjoyable nature of the class were the reason. Other students (16%) said the policy did not affect their attending class (Launius, 1997).

**Reducing truancy**

It is clear from the literature that groups of students at different colleges or in different types of classes may claim different primary reasons for not attending class (Friedman et al., 2001; Gump 2004a). Also, not all attendance-promoting strategies are equally effective in all settings. Thus, a variety of strategies are employed. At the completion of his study on penalizing absent students with Fs, Moore (2004) reported choosing to “repeatedly emphasize that high rates of class attendance usually produce rewards.” St. Clair (1999), in considering student motivation, suggests that being forced to attend a class that is not valued could produce frustration and, ultimately, infrequent attendance. On the other hand, Launius (1997) was apparently successful in manipulating the behavior of her classes by giving credit for attendance (and, as mentioned above, by making the class interesting). Lai and Chan (2000), who found improved grades in the mandatory attendance group in their small study, suggest an
attendance policy to positively influence students’ choices about how they will spend their time.

**Recommended action**

We, as an institution of higher learning, should promote a culture of attendance. In terms of policy, however, what is appropriate for one course may not be appropriate for another. For example, awarding points for attending a lab or, say, choral instruction and practice may be appropriate in that being exposed to certain techniques and the practice thereof during the class or lab is the goal. The points represent acknowledgement of this. In other settings, professors may deem awarding points for attendance and participation appropriate while other professors do not. Some, with Cross & Frary (1993), may think that mastery of course content (not attendance, participation or other factors) should be the sole criterion for grading. Recognizing that there are different levels of motivation in students, different course characteristics, and different philosophies on grading, the following actions are recommended.

1. As a QEP committee, provide a reference list of techniques for enhancing attendance. Examples from the literature that appear to be effective in some (but not all) classes include:
   - Offering points for attendance as part of a grade
   - Offering bonus points or “benefit of the doubt” points for consistent attendance
   - Conducting quizzes (required or bonus) during the class period
   - Enhancing opportunities for “active learning” to encourage attendance
   - Making the class relevant and engaging to students (e.g., by giving striking examples or helping the students connect concepts with their own experiences)
2. As a faculty and staff interacting with students, speak of the importance of attendance repeatedly throughout the semester and as the occasion arises.
3. As a college, promote attendance by stressing its importance in very obvious (and perhaps clever) ways online and in print media, including the student newspaper and the schedule of courses. Perhaps a dramatic individual could concoct and perform something memorable for orientation, too.
Works Cited


Appendix B:

Copies of New Student Orientation Surveys
(Copies are not scaled to final size; larger font used here for clarity)
New Student Orientation Survey
(Students)

We appreciate our coming today. In an effort to ensure continued quality we ask you to please rate the following areas indicating your response with a circle along the scales in each. Thank you.

Did you call to make a reservation for this orientation? Yes_____ No ______

Check-in Process

The process was easy.

Strongly Disagree----------Disagree----------Uncertain-----------Agree---------------Strongly Agree

Staff was courteous and helpful.

Strongly Disagree----------Disagree----------Uncertain-----------Agree---------------Strongly Agree

Morning Orientation Sessions

a. Financial Aid and Student Records

Session was helpful to me as a new student.

Strongly Disagree----------Disagree----------Uncertain-----------Agree---------------Strongly Agree

Materials were clear and concise.

Strongly Disagree----------Disagree----------Uncertain-----------Agree---------------Strongly Agree

b. Academic Integrity

Session was helpful to me as a new student.

Strongly Disagree----------Disagree----------Uncertain-----------Agree---------------Strongly Agree

Materials were clear and concise.

Strongly Disagree----------Disagree----------Uncertain-----------Agree---------------Strongly Agree

c. Student Session

Session was helpful to me as a new student.

Strongly Disagree----------Disagree----------Uncertain-----------Agree---------------Strongly Agree

Materials were clear and concise.

Strongly Disagree----------Disagree----------Uncertain-----------Agree---------------Strongly Agree

d. You’re not in High School Anymore

Session was helpful to me as a new student.

Strongly Disagree----------Disagree----------Uncertain-----------Agree---------------Strongly Agree
Materials were clear and concise.

**Strongly Disagree**---------**Disagree**---------**Uncertain**---------**Agree**---------**Strongly Agree**

**e. Student Affairs and Public Safety**

Session was helpful to me as a new student.

**Strongly Disagree**---------**Disagree**---------**Uncertain**---------**Agree**---------**Strongly Agree**

Materials were clear and concise.

**Strongly Disagree**---------**Disagree**---------**Uncertain**---------**Agree**---------**Strongly Agree**

**f. Learning Strategies**

Session was helpful to me as a new student.

**Strongly Disagree**---------**Disagree**---------**Uncertain**---------**Agree**---------**Strongly Agree**

Materials were clear and concise.

**Strongly Disagree**---------**Disagree**---------**Uncertain**---------**Agree**---------**Strongly Agree**

---

**Banner Web Session**

Presentations were clear and understandable.

**Strongly Disagree**---------**Disagree**---------**Uncertain**---------**Agree**---------**Strongly Agree**

Materials were clear and concise.

**Strongly Disagree**---------**Disagree**---------**Uncertain**---------**Agree**---------**Strongly Agree**

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**Academic Division/Advisement Groups**

Presentations were clear and understandable.

**Strongly Disagree**---------**Disagree**---------**Uncertain**---------**Agree**---------**Strongly Agree**

Materials were clear and concise.

**Strongly Disagree**---------**Disagree**---------**Uncertain**---------**Agree**---------**Strongly Agree**

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**Group Registration**

The process was easy.

**Strongly Disagree**---------**Disagree**---------**Uncertain**---------**Agree**---------**Strongly Agree**

Advisors were courteous and helpful.

**Strongly Disagree**---------**Disagree**---------**Uncertain**---------**Agree**---------**Strongly Agree**
ID Card Procedure

The process was easy.

*Strongly Disagree*---------*Disagree*---------*Uncertain*----------*Agree*----------*Strongly Agree*

Staff was courteous and helpful.

*Strongly Disagree*---------*Disagree*---------*Uncertain*----------*Agree*----------*Strongly Agree*

**General Comments and Questions**
New Student Orientation Survey  
(Parents)

We appreciate our coming today. In an effort to ensure continued quality we ask you to please rate the following areas indicating your response with a circle along the scales in each. Thank you.

Check-in Process

1. The process was easy.

   *Strongly Disagree*----------*Disagree*---------*Uncertain*----------*Agree*----------*Strongly Agree*

2. Staff was courteous and helpful.

   *Strongly Disagree*----------*Disagree*---------*Uncertain*----------*Agree*----------*Strongly Agree*

Morning Parent Orientation

1. Presentations were clear and understandable.

   *Strongly Disagree*----------*Disagree*---------*Uncertain*----------*Agree*----------*Strongly Agree*

2. Materials were clear and concise.

   *Strongly Disagree*----------*Disagree*---------*Uncertain*----------*Agree*----------*Strongly Agree*

Parent Tours

1. Tour guides were courteous and helpful.

   *Strongly Disagree*----------*Disagree*---------*Uncertain*----------*Agree*----------*Strongly Agree*

2. Tours were informative and useful.

   *Strongly Disagree*----------*Disagree*---------*Uncertain*----------*Agree*----------*Strongly Agree*

Question and Answer Session on Student Services and Safety

1. Presentations were clear and understandable.

   *Strongly Disagree*----------*Disagree*---------*Uncertain*----------*Agree*----------*Strongly Agree*

2. Materials were clear and concise.

   *Strongly Disagree*----------*Disagree*---------*Uncertain*----------*Agree*----------*Strongly Agree*
3. Staff was courteous and helpful.

*Strongly Disagree*---------*Disagree*---------*Uncertain*---------*Agree*---------*Strongly Agree*

Comments and Overall Impressions: ____________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________________
Appendix C:

Copies of Learning Community Surveys
Appendix D:

Copy of First-Year Experience Course Survey