

Invigoration from Within

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Over the weekend, I attended a two-day academic affairs faculty symposium sponsored by the University of Georgia (UGA), and it was an invigorating experience. Over 75 invited faculty and administrators discussed issues of importance in teaching and learning as part of the program on “Enhancing the Undergraduate Experience through Discovery, Engagement, and Transformation.” A major focus of the meeting was the discussion of six areas that could serve as a primary project for the University’s next accreditation review by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools scheduled for 2010 (<http://www.sacs.org/>). The accreditation guidelines allow an institution to select an area for intensive study and planning called “Quality Enhancement Plans (QEPs)” as part of the accreditation process. The idea of the QEP is to identify a significant area of institutional involvement that could be enhanced, expanded, and institutionalized through intensified planning and study.

One suggestion for a QEP is in the area of service learning, an area of explosive growth at UGA where we have a newly established service learning office that reports to both the Vice President for Public Service and Outreach and the Vice President for Instruction (<http://www.servicelearning.uga.edu/>). While we are now strong programmatically in service learning with local and international projects and there is much enthusiasm for combining classroom work and community service, much more work is needed to understand sustainability and impact on the community and the student. Once again, assessment seems to be an afterthought.

Another possible QEP is in the study abroad program (<http://www.uga.edu/oie/studyabroad.htm>). UGA is a leader in this area with more than 90 traditional study abroad programs, 47 exchange programs, and more than 25 nontraditional programs (e.g., graduate student independent internships). Overall, more than 30% of UGA students have participated in a study abroad experience. The challenge now is to take a program that has been widely successful through faculty and departmental entrepreneurship and to integrate the program fully into the curriculum of the sponsoring departments. It is time to ask questions of value, impact, and sustainability to ensure that study abroad is about substantive learning, not just travel abroad. Again, assessment is an important aspect of documenting program value and individual learning. Also, as in other programs, it is

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important to maximize university resources through coordination and some standardization of workload so as to ensure that these programs are not merely add-ons but are worthwhile learning experiences for students and rewarding for faculty.

Undergraduate research was another proposed QEP. In the last SACS review, the Center for Undergraduate Research Opportunities (<http://www.uga.edu/honors/curo/>), which is housed within the Honors Program but serves other students as well, received a commendation from the SACS committee for its important work in involving undergraduates in research with faculty members. UGA has several programs offering research opportunities to undergraduates; for example, SURP, a summer undergraduate research program, coordinated by UGA's Graduate School targets minority students to encourage careers in the sciences and mathematics. By developing a QEP in undergraduate research, the University could coordinate the various undergraduate research programs, many of which are departmentally based, to yield an even stronger, more comprehensive program reaching larger numbers of students and tying the research interests of the faculty closer to student learning. Too often, the research interests of faculty are singled out as an impediment to quality teaching and as the source of disinterest in undergraduate education. What a singular achievement this would be, to have a campus-wide engagement of young students and faculty in conducting research!

The other QEPS that were discussed included internships; improving classroom instruction; and improving academic services including advisement, mentoring, and the overall first-year experience. As I have written before, I am a strong believer in the value of making the first year an intentional, planned, and holistic experience which builds community for those students in transition. Too often, college is course taking, and then the out-of-class hours are not fully tapped for learning and building community. The National Policy Center on the First Year of College (<http://www.firstyear.org/>) assists colleges in improving the first year through a self-study that involves students and faculty and culminates in an action plan for the future. UGA has numerous policies, activities, and programs for first-year students that cut across academic and student service areas; and a QEP on the first year could bring to light strengths and weaknesses in serving first-year students.

In addition to discussing QEPs, we heard about the University's writing program, an impressive electronic portfolio named <emma>. This electronic markup and management application built in-house allows students to keep drafts of work throughout their college careers and beyond and allows access to course-related work by faculty and peers. We heard a chemistry professor explain item response theory and the elaborate test bank developed in-house for testing students, while simultaneously giving feedback on course content and learning. At the end of a unit, the faculty for the large lecture and smaller lab sections can analyze test data to see where learning has (and has not) occurred and can adjust the content and pedagogy accordingly. Overtime, the use of this system, "JEXAM," has cut dropout from the large lecture sessions in half.

On the whole, the weekend was tiring and exhilarating. At a large research university with almost 35,000 students, the scope and depth of faculty and student work are difficult to comprehend. As we go about work in our disciplines and in our departments, it is easy to become insular (and sometimes a little cynical) about what we encounter on a daily basis—small problems are seen as big problems and imperfections are interpreted as systemic. The faculty symposium was invigorating, and I wish all UGA faculty could be invited to next year's event. I was impressed by the genuine concern shown for students, the extent of faculty work to improve teaching and learning, and the administrative commitment to working with faculty to reward activities that improve teaching and learning at UGA. My advice to the readers of *Innovative Higher Education* is to learn what is happening on your campus; you might find some new collaborators and colleagues, a great way to energize a career.