

Process Used to Develop the QEP

The goal of New River Community College's Quality Enhancement Plan is to improve student performance, persistence, retention, and, ultimately, graduation rates through goal setting/tracking and community building in the students' first semester. In order to identify this focus, the college community went through its own iterative, organic process of data analysis, evidence-based planning, goal setting/tracking and community building. Like all planning processes, this QEP discernment process was influenced by initiatives external to the institution as well as internal initiatives that predated it.

Complete 2021

At the Virginia Community College System's (VCCS's) August 2014 Chancellor's Annual Planning Retreat, Chancellor Glenn DuBois unveiled the newly proposed strategic plan that will help Virginia's Community Colleges focus on one goal through 2021:

Virginia's Community Colleges will lead the Commonwealth in the education of its people by tripling the number of credentials awarded for economic vitality and individual prosperity.

This singular VCCS goal ("Complete 2021") coupled with its incremental performance-based funding model has focused all major decisions at NRCC, including the selection of the focus area for the Quality Enhancement Plan, on how to strategically improve student completion rates. The Chancellor's goal ultimately enhanced efforts already underway at NRCC. The College, with wide participation and support from faculty and administration, had begun work to support its students in their learning and to improve student completion by addressing the academic needs of developmental students and reducing the financial burden of many more.

Pre-QEP Student Success Initiatives

The 2014 announcement of the VCCS “Complete 2021” goal came on the heels of two other initiatives promoting student retention and completion at NRCC—developmental education redesign and the promotion of low-cost to no-cost course materials. The convergence of the three illustrate the early story of NRCC’s movement toward its current QEP proposal.

The VCCS implemented a comprehensive redesign of developmental math and English education in Spring 2012 and Spring 2013, respectively. NRCC’s revised developmental math education model uses a computer-based, self-paced, emporium-style classroom setting that places a priority on individual instruction to ensure students are able to meet learning outcomes. The revised developmental English education model blends writing and reading instruction to prepare students for success in 100-level English classes. Both models aimed to reduce students’ time in developmental education courses to a single year and to increase the number of developmental education students graduating or transferring in four years from 25 percent to 33 percent (*Turning point: developmental education in Virginia’s community colleges*, 2009). Although a December 2014 VCCS report suggests some success with the redesign initiative (*Initial review of the impact of the developmental education redesign at Virginia’s community colleges*, 2014), the impact was not sufficient to improve student retention and completion rates significantly.

However, the developmental education redesign did bring to light across the College the need for broad, organized efforts to support developmental student success. It opened the door to increased professional development opportunities, and English and mathematics faculty extensively participated in VCCS professional development trainings and institutes as part of the redesign effort. Specifically, three mathematics faculty members and three English faculty members attended the annual Chancellor’s Developmental Education Institute, a week-long professional development opportunity aligned with the VCCS goal of student success and

redesign efforts. Others have participated in one-day Southwest Virginia Center for Teaching Excellence training events related to developmental education. Campus momentum toward student success began to grow.

In fact, with its increased attention to student success during the developmental education redesign, NRCC began to offer its own professional development through summer workshops for faculty and staff in 2012, 2013, 2014, and 2015. The two-day workshops provided professional development opportunities for faculty and staff to discover broader strategies to support student success at the College. Sessions included topics such as employing classroom assessment techniques to drive academic improvement, creating Advanced Learners Program (ALP) courses, professional goal setting with student success and retention in mind, using existing tutorial videos and developing original multimedia tutorials, and enhancing social engagement of students in online learning.

In addition to the work NRCC was doing in 2012 and subsequent years in the area of developmental education, faculty across several programs were also looking for ways to help students overcome the stumbling block of high textbook costs. In fall 2012, NRCC faculty, with support from the College's president, began collaborating with IT staff to develop a virtual library of linked and original documents as well as resources chosen and uploaded by faculty from a variety of disciplines. The aim of the project was to help preserve the affordability of college for NRCC students through lowered textbook costs. With some effort and planning, many NRCC faculty found they could use the virtual library to customize and deliver course materials and resources and thus no longer needed a required course textbook. A spring 2013 calculation showed that the use of the virtual library resources in place of costly textbooks in the first-year composition courses saved enrolled students a total of \$45,115 during AY 2012-13. Since this early work to remove a financial barrier to student completion, faculty have continued to develop

courses that require low-cost or no cost materials. In fall 2017, 22 percent of the College's classes require low-cost or no-cost materials.

While these early efforts to address the academic needs of developmental students and the financial needs of all students were steps in the right direction, data indicated that they were not enough to shift success trends significantly. The next steps of the process – including the QEP discernment effort – needed to do more than just work to support subpopulations of students (i.e. developmental students). Furthermore, they needed to do more than simply address the financial and academic needs of students, so many of whom are low-income and first-generation college students.

Spring 2014 – Implementation of Early Alert System

With all of this in mind in Spring 2014, NRCC along with the other VCCS institutions, began implementing an early warning notification system (SAILS) for identifying and intervening with students not attending and/or not performing well in class. The system allowed faculty to raise flags and kudos about individual students, and these flags and kudos generated emails to the students as well as outreach by three part-time college success coaches. Two main lessons emerged from the first two semesters of SAILS implementation: (1) NRCC faculty (full-time and adjunct) were willing to use the early alert system (almost 90 percent completed the progress surveys during those first two semesters) and (2) the simple feedback provided to the students made a difference in their persistence. An analysis of end-of-semester grades during Spring 2014 showed that withdrawals were significantly lower (by more than one standard deviation) for the college. The decrease in “Ws” was not accompanied by an increase in “Fs”. The combination of “F” and “W” grades assigned was also significantly lower (by more than one standard deviation). The analysis strongly suggested that the program as implemented at NRCC was effective in achieving its target goals.

Summer/Fall 2014 – Submitted Student Success Plan, Research on Student Success Models, Created Accountability in Student Learning Program Office

In July 2014, NRCC prepared its first Student Success Plan (see Appendix 1), describing how the college would invest its resources into innovative efforts to improve student completion rates. In preparing the Student Success Plan, the President's Staff reviewed student success data for the College as well as national statistics, both of which indicated that the greatest predictor of student success was family income, regardless of academic ability (Pell Institute & Penn AHEAD, 2015). This leadership team agreed with leaders in the field like David Laude at the University of Texas at Austin that any effort to address low student completion rates had to do more than simply address students' academic and financial needs. They also had to address students' fears of not belonging in college – fears that are especially prevalent among community college students who are disproportionately likely to be first-generation and/or low-income. (Tough, 2014)

In an effort to help students believe that they belong in college and assist them in following up successfully on that belief, the Student Success Plan described the college's plan to create the Accountability in Student Learning Program (ASLP). This new program was tasked with tracking students through their entire tenure at NRCC, developing interventions with a special focus on helping students overcome their doubts about their abilities and/or whether they belong in college, and determining which intervention strategies are most effective in helping students to overcome self-doubts. At the annual General Session in August 2014, the college president led a discussion with faculty and staff about the plans to establish the Accountability in Student Learning Program. Faculty and staff were generally supportive of the idea. After an extensive search process by a large committee of faculty and staff from across the campus community, a director of ASLP was hired in December 2014.

Spring 2015 – New Student Experience Innovation Team

In February 2015, the following cross section of faculty and staff were appointed by President Lewis to an innovation team tasked with expanding the new student summer orientation program:

- Dr. Deborah Kennedy (co-team lead, then the Director of Enrollment Management)
- Jill Williams (co-team lead, Director, Accountability in Student Learning Program)
- Peter Anderson (then Dean of Business and Technologies)
- Dr. Paige Cash (Professor of English)
- Megan Doney (Professor of English)
- Peggy Taylor (then Director of Student Services)
- Peggy Dunn (Academic Advising Manager)
- Janet Hanks (Professor of English, Academic Assistance Faculty Liaison)
- Dr. Donald Stowers (Associate Director, Accountability in Student Learning Program)
- Ellen Oliver (Instructor, Developmental Math Coordinator)
- Janice Shelton (Dean of Arts and Sciences)

Later, Amy Hall (Coordinator of Emergency Planning and Special Projects) was added to this team. The charging memo for this group (see Appendix 4) gave context for this task: “Your team’s creation was an outgrowth of recent discussions and work evolving from the Student Success Initiative and the formation of the Accountability in Student Learning Program.”

One of the team’s greatest challenges was to “develop an incentive plan that will entice students to attend the program.” Indeed, figuring out how to get students – particularly those who could benefit from it the most - to attend orientation was a significant challenge the group faced. In the end, the innovation team proposed telling students that attending new student orientation is required without actually blocking any students for failing to do so. In order to make the “requirement” meaningful, however, staff time was set aside to contact students directly and repeatedly (if necessary) to encourage them to sign up for a session.

Summer 2015 - Expanded New Student Orientation, Hiring connection specialists, Launched CLAS (Connecting Learning Assets and Students), Designed Intentional Engagement

Summer 2015 was a productive time for the College's student success initiatives. In addition to the newly required orientation program, NRCC offered developmental boot camps for students who did not place into college-level English and math courses. Four connection specialists were employed to manage caseloads of NRCC students, connecting campus and community resources in a timely fashion and generally giving students a go-to person for when they have questions and do not know where to turn. (See Appendix 2 for connection specialist job description.)

These individuals shouldered the brunt of the outreach necessary for the new orientation system and the model worked extremely well even in its first implementation. Data showed that 83 percent of the first-time-in-college, program-placed students completed an in-person orientation or online alternative during that first term in which it was "required."

The senior leadership team also created the Student Success Advisory Team (SSAT) tasked with guiding the College's student success initiatives. The initial team was made up of:

- Dr. Jack Lewis, President
- Dr. Patricia Huber, Vice President for Instruction and Student Services
- Jill Williams, Director, Accountability in Student Learning Program
- Dr. Don Stowers, Associate Director, Accountability in Student Learning Program (ASLP)

Later, Dr. Deborah Kennedy, Dean of Student Services, and Dr. Amy Hall, subsequently Associate Director of the ASLP, were added to the committee.

The initial success of the "required" approach to new student orientation was shared with all college stakeholders (faculty, staff, and members of the college and foundation boards) through meetings and internal correspondence, and later presented at the college-wide meeting

in August (prior to the start of the fall semester). An understanding of the idea that “students don’t do options” grew into a commitment to become more intentional in serving students in several service areas of the college, like Academic Assistance, and ultimately led to the adoption of an intentional engagement framework for all of NRCC’s student-facing services. Intentional engagement at NRCC is defined as “purposeful, directed intervention with appropriate communication and an exchange of information with the intent to improve behaviors.”

To support the implementation of the intentional engagement model, a custom-designed technology platform was developed in-house during Spring and Summer 2015 and called CLAS (Connecting Learning Assets and Students). In CLAS, instructors can see a roster of students in each class (along with photos and a range of information on each student), take attendance, and create a referral for the ASLP team, tutoring center, or any other NRCC employee to follow up with a student about any identified needs. All NRCC instructors and staff have access to student information through this system and are strongly encouraged to use the system regularly to support student success. Three times each academic term (twice in the summer), instructors are required to complete early alert progress surveys in CLAS in which they have the opportunity to efficiently evaluate each student in each course.

CLAS and the intentional engagement model were introduced to the faculty and staff at a campus-wide general session and at the annual adjunct faculty dinner in August 2015. NRCC submitted its Student Success Plan #2 this month as well (see Appendix 3).

Fall 2015 – Implementation of Intentional Engagement Model, VCCS Student Success Leadership Institutes

Fall 2015 was the first semester in which the intentional engagement model, empowered by connection specialists and CLAS, was fully implemented. In this term 95 percent of instructors completed both of the required progress surveys during this term, generating 5,360 referrals to connection specialists and career coaches, 4333 concerns and 3,839 praises to students.

Although it is not possible to determine causality, the college saw a 21 percent decrease in withdrawals during this term without a corresponding increase in Ds, Fs, or Us. The decrease in withdrawals was even stronger in online courses, at 27 percent.

Data from this semester indicated that the newly required orientation sessions might be helping improve retention trends. First term students attending Orientation that semester withdrew from classes at a rate 43 percent lower than those who did not attend orientation. Furthermore, the percentage of first term students attending orientation receiving an A, B, or C increased at a rate 26 percent higher than those who did not attend orientation. Such improvement led the Innovation Team and Student Success Advisory Team to decide to continue the required orientation program and to begin looking at other ways to improve the first semester experience.

The Academic Assistance (tutoring) program also implemented an intentional engagement model of student support during this term by reaching out to students referred by instructors to schedule a tutoring session instead of waiting for the students to request a session. The numbers of tutoring sessions increased. At this time the department also began using data to develop targeted strategies for what they deemed as “high risk courses.” Some of these strategies included embedded tutors, online tutorials and a combined position of tutor/connection specialist for one particular program of study.

During this term, the VCCS also initiated its series of planning meetings called the Student Success Leadership Institute (SSLI). Colleges were invited to send a cross section of administrators, staff and faculty. Representing NRCC at this series of meetings were:

- Dr. Jack Lewis, (then) President
- Dr. Patricia Huber, (then)Vice President for Instruction and Student Services
- Dr. Deborah Kennedy, Dean of Student Services
- Dr. Fredrick Streff, Director of Institutional Research
- Dr. Paige Cash, English Professor

- Jill Williams, Director of ASLP

The first SSLI gathering was a student success summit November 10-11, 2015. During this summit, teams examined their college's student success data (see Appendix 5), learned about promising student success strategies, and began to imagine applying them on their own campuses.

Spring 2016 – Appointment of QEP Team, Review of Institutional Data, and Identification of QEP Topic

In January 2016, Jill Williams, ASLP Director, was appointed the chair of NRCC's QEP team and on February 1, the full QEP Leadership Team was appointed with a charging memo that included the following guidance:

NRCC has been involved in this “recursive process” for determining the focus of the QEP for the last two years and has now committed to “Advancing Accountability in Student Learning: an Intentional Engagement Model” as the working title for the QEP. While NRCC’s intentional engagement model is evident in nearly every aspect of the college’s operations, the practical topic of the QEP will be the college’s evolving New Student Orientation Program and the groundwork that program lays for advancing accountability in student learning throughout a student’s college career.

The original QEP Leadership Team included the following individuals:

1. Jill Williams, Director, Accountability in Student Learning Program
2. Dr. Amy Hall, Associate Director, Accountability in Student Learning Program
3. Dr. Deborah Kennedy, Dean of Student Services
4. Dr. Fredrick Streff, Director of Institutional Research
5. Dr. Pablo Chalmeta, Professor of Mathematics
6. Amber Clark, Professor of Business

7. Peggy Dunn, Academic Advising Manager
8. Serena Moore, Student (later became ASLP Administrative Specialist)
9. Dawn Glass, Student (later became Assistant to the Director of Institutional Research)
10. Sarah Tolbert-Hurysz, Assistant Professor and Assessment Coordinator (ex-officio member)

Megan Doney (English professor) joined the team in Fall 2016 as well.

The first few meetings of the QEP Team involved coming to a common understanding of the QEP assignment and delving into institutional data related to student success and completion rates. The team noted the following themes during a review of the data:

1. The key for student success initiatives at NRCC is to get people committed. Full time, program placed, financial aid students are the ones who finish.
2. First-generation students don't stick around for as long as non-first-generation students. This may have something to do with a support system, the committee reasoned. Students who attend new student orientation have the same availability of support systems that every other student does, but they tend to use them more and to be more successful.
3. The common wisdom is that developmental students don't do as well, but students who finish developmental courses seem to do fine.
4. Students who enroll prior to the semester start get better grades and withdraw less than those who enroll later.
5. Students seeking associate degrees are more likely to withdraw from at least one course than students seeking diplomas or certificates (which tend to be shorter programs of study). The committee hypothesized that when students find that a course has specific relevance to their lives/careers/goal they are more likely to see the value and, therefore, are more likely to persist.

Based on this information, the QEP Team identified the following opportunities for improving student success vis-a-vis the orientation program:

1. Recognition that orientation could be a process and not a one-shot/one day event.
2. Recognition of the difference between orientations that are structured around information and those that are structured around socialization. The latter is more difficult, but perhaps more useful in the long run.
3. Incorporation of more advising in orientation before starting classes. (Both students on the committee indicated that this would have helped them tremendously.)

QEP team members then identified and examined models for these sorts of interventions and shared those with each other. There was a general theme within all the models shared: orientation should be extended into the semester in some way, making it more than a one time, four-hour session. Other ideas included:

1. More interaction in the orientation sessions would be a benefit. The old model of talking heads in front of a PowerPoint screen with words on it does not lend itself to engaging students.
2. Smaller groups generate more interaction and foster engagement, which ultimately leads to commitment. (Instead of a few large orientation sessions, consider delivering many smaller sessions so that students get more one-on-one attention.)
3. Trust student leaders to deliver some content.
4. Conduct an open house session separate from orientation so that parents and other supporters can participate in that and get answers to questions while also keeping the orientation sessions specifically geared toward students.
5. Develop learning outcomes for orientation and other first semester events – for students, supporters, and the institution.
6. Develop a webpage that is a one-stop shop for orientation- pre/post orientation checklists, videos from orientation, etc.

7. Look at the flipped classroom model and try to create a flipped orientation. The online piece could come at beginning and would always be available for students to access.
8. Utilize time students come to campus – whenever that is – as a community building piece, during which students will feel comfortable asking questions.
9. Socialization needs to be a main component of process; through that process, students learn everything they need to know. Students need to know that they are not alone, they are not the only one going through it, there are people here to help them whether they want it or not, and it's not a sign of weakness to ask for help.
10. Consider orientation for faculty and staff. Consider orientation to be a two-way street. Set expectations for faculty/staff.

Based on these conversations, the QEP Team decided to expand its focus from a narrow new student orientation program to the First Semester Experience, a combination of experiences spanning the summer before the first semester and going through the fall term with a slightly different timeframe for students entering in the spring term. This First Semester Experience would also include a faculty/staff training component.

In an attempt to begin identifying learning outcomes, the QEP team began working on a logic model to represent the inputs, proposed QEP components and long-term goals, and then backed into identifying learning outcomes. (See Appendix 6 for QEP logic model from Spring 2016.)

Summer/Fall 2016 and Spring 2017 – Collecting Community Feedback and Incorporating It into the QEP

The QEP team spent the majority of the past year collecting feedback from stakeholders (students, staff, faculty and community employers) about the proposed plan and revising their plans to incorporate the themes that emerged. The QEP team developed and disseminated a survey about the first semester to the career and technical education (CTE) advisory groups, which are made up of local employers. (See Appendix 7 for survey.) The survey was designed to

obtain general feedback from regional employers about how they think the College could best support students in their first semester. Because employers are generally engaging with NRCC students after their two or more years in college, it turns out that they are less well-equipped to home in on what students need in their first semester. The feedback the College received on the survey echoed the feedback it generally receives from regional employers: they want the students to have a strong work ethic, to respect the chain of command, not be distracted by cell phone use, and to complete work in a timely fashion.

The QEP team held focus group sessions with a variety of faculty and staff. The NRCC Faculty Assembly generally supported the proposed QEP focus. Their main feedback was that even seasoned faculty would benefit from understanding what students learn during the first semester experience so that they can reinforce those points in their coursework. The most significant feedback from academic advisors, connection specialists and coaches was that the first semester experience should be as social of a process as possible in all components. College Success Skills (SDV-100) instructors, especially, noted the disparity in student experiences between those who take the course online versus in-person.

A variety of student groups and individuals provided QEP feedback, some in focus group settings and some individually. The team purposely consulted a range of groups from first semester classes, second year students, online and in-person classes, transfer and Career and Technical Education students. Some of the major themes that emerged from these consultations included:

- Students generally do not understand or take advantage of all of the advising resources available to them.
- Students tend to underestimate how much work college courses take, especially online classes.
- The current orientation program and SDV-100 courses are already doing a fairly good job of introducing and reinforcing college norms like checking email every day and accessing

online resources. These programs are less effective in terms of socializing students to get to know each other, their faculty/staff and feeling like they are a part of a larger community committed to helping each other succeed.

After collecting and considering this range of feedback on the proposed QEP goals and components, the QEP team decided to alter the proposed points of focus. Most notably, the team decided to narrow the categories of learning outcomes to focus on (1) community building and (2) goal setting/tracking and, furthermore, the team decided to (3) expand the first semester seminar into a more robust combination of courses and opportunities for engagement. These three areas are at the center of the College's Quality Enhancement Plan.