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Chapter 1
Introduction

In 2002 the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools made major changes in
its re-accreditation process. Today, new guidelines challenge us to create a plan to
analyze and improve student learning on our own campus. The Principles of
Accreditation 2.12 reads:

The institution has developed an acceptable Quality Enhancement
Plan (QEP) that (1) includes a broad-based institutional process
identifying key issues emerging from institutional assessment, (2)
focuses on learning outcomes and/or the environment supporting
student learning and accomplishing the mission of the institution, (3)
demonstrates institutional capability for the initiation,
implementation, and completion of the QEP, (4) includes broad-
based involvement of institutional constituencies in the development
and proposed implementation of the QEP, and (5) identifies goals
and a plan to assess their achievement.

Sul Ross State University (SRSU) serves two-
thirds of the 1,200-mile Texas-Mexico border,
including the main campus at Alpine and the Rio
Grande College campus 200 miles away. The
university draws its student population primarily
from almost 45,000 square miles of West Texas
border country—the Trans-Pecos area of West
Texas. This culturally rich, but economically
impoverished, service area is enormous by most
standards. With an 18-county primary service
area, SRSU also draws students from 157 of
Texas’ 254 counties to rural areas of Canada,
Mexico, and states ranging from California to
Wisconsin and Florida.

SRSU history of success

In order to serve the needs of both students with advanced skills and skills
needing development, SRSU provides a rich web of student support services ranging
from an honors program to an Academic Center for Excellence (ACE), which offers
courses in developmental reading, writing, and math. SRSU is ranked 1st in the state of
Texas for percentage of freshman and sophomore classes taught by tenured and tenure-
track faculty. In order to better serve students located in our three-county primary area,
we offer on-line courses and distance education via teleconferencing. We have created
freshmen learning communities through grouped enrollment, Upward Bound, and Gear
Up. Our Counseling and Advising Center offers numerous services including “early
warning” and a mid-semester review for students reported by their professors as at-risk of
failure due to excessive absences or poor performance. We provide numerous services for
learning impaired students, including Sign Language Interpreters. Some departments also
hire graduate students in order to provide tutoring for undergraduates. In addition to on-
site Helpdesk technicians, our online Central Help Desk provides 24/7 support. Students
have a toll free number they can call anytime from off-campus and always get a support person. We also provide Student Health Services.

SRSU is located in a small town. Alpine’s population is 5,796. SRSU is also located in the middle of a low-population area: Brewster county, the largest county in Texas—roughly the size of the state of New Jersey, has a population of 9,048, Jeff Davis county is 2,315, and Presidio county is 7,713, with a total population for the area of 19,076 (USCB 2006). So SRSU provides a rich array of social, cultural, service, club, and athletic activities that are designed to engage students with college life and provide healthy alternatives to substance abuse, boredom, and isolation. According to Tagg (2003:113), “In high school, most students have a stable peer group for four years. When they come to college they lose this vital support system, and if they cannot replace it fairly quickly, they are at grave risk for returning to [or creating] an established peer group that excludes college success.” Sully Productions, the SRSU programming board composed of student volunteers, provides programs in stress relief, substance abuse, music, comedy, movies, tournaments, karaoke, outdoor trips, games, game shows, as well as sponsoring community service activities, homecoming festivities, guest speakers on social issues, and an extensive array of activities involving the over 30 student clubs.

Complementing campus life, SRSU currently has over $20M in government and private funding devoted to programs that foster interdisciplinary scholarship, both on campus and in cooperation with collaborating institutions elsewhere. SRSU along with partner institution, Midland College, received a Title V Science Initiative grant for almost $3,000,000. This pilot program, in addition to funding strong curricular revision in natural science, provided funding for distance technology improvements, for media development, and for specialized teaching materials. The History Faculty has been involved in two distinct Teaching American History grants with Alpine ISD, enabling public school teachers in Brewster, Jeff Davis and Presidio counties to earn an M.A. in American history and continue post-graduate work in Texas history, Early American history, and Civil War history.

Scholastically, our graduates posted a 92% final pass rate on the Texas State Board for Educator Certification in 2007. On the Licensed Vocational Nursing exam we posted a 100% pass rate in 2006, averaging over 94% during the past 10 years. Census data indicate that 60% of the West Texas 19-county population that surrounds SRSU is currently Hispanic and growing. As a designated Hispanic Serving Institution, SRSU serves a student population of roughly half Hispanic and half Anglo or white, with 5% Black and very low percentages of students from other ethnicities. National reports consider Hispanics “high risk,” yet during the late 1990s, we had 10 times the number of successful Hispanic graduates (29%) as the national norm of 3%, although the cohorts do not compare exactly (IRE 1995-1999:3). National figures have since risen, but SRSU still graduates over twice the national numbers: 26% in 2006, compared to a national norm of 11% (IRE 2006b).

The Hispanic Outlook has chosen SRSU among the top 100 universities nationwide for Hispanic students for the past 13 years. We are 3rd nationally among undergraduate institutions in producing future Hispanic doctorates in the physical sciences, 6th nationally in producing Mexican-American doctorates in science and engineering, and 1st in Texas for laboratory space per full-time student. Our alumni surveys show that Hispanic graduates achieve career success as elected officials, state
and federal employees, college presidents and professors, teachers, bank presidents, coaches, attorneys, Texas Rangers, writers, artists, musicians, performers, business owners, and veterinarians. One of our recent Hispanic history graduates, now ABD at the University of Arizona, received a Fulbright Garcia-Robles research grant to Mexico. Although national reports lament the fact that less than 13% of college students achieve basic competence in a language other than English (LEAP 2007:8), many of our students, representing diverse backgrounds, come to us already fluent as Spanish speakers. Many SRSU faculty members consider fluency in a language other than English to be the Hispanic student’s greatest asset, not a handicap.

We also retain and graduate more students from first-generation and low-income backgrounds than national averages. According to data from the Center for Postsecondary Research, “Underprepared, first-generation students and ethnic minorities are especially at risk, particularly those from lower income levels” (Kuh et al. 2007:37), yet our success rates are almost equal, and often better for first-generation and low-income students.

![Graduation Rate after Six Years at SRSU](image)

Although our graduation rates are low overall, almost eleven percent of first-generation, first-time students who entered SRSU in 2001 have graduated within 6 years.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SRSU Fall 2001 to Fall 2002 Retention and 6-year Graduation by 2007</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percent Retained</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Generation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not First Gen.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In 2003, 53% of SRSU graduates receiving Baccalaureate degrees and 63% receiving Master’s degrees were first generation (IRE 2003:1). Of those, 83% were also receiving financial aid, and 27.4% of low-income students who entered SRSU in 2003 have already received a bachelors or higher degree. After graduation, more SRSU alumni also report being recruited by their employers than the national average (SR 21%, national 13%). Using data comparing self-reported salaries, SRSU graduates also report earning equal or slightly above national norms at every level (IRE 2001:13, 21).

Also, across the board, SRSU students rank our faculty in the top quarter (above 3.0 on a 4.0 scale) on faculty evaluation forms. Although still ranking fairly high, “The instructor uses a variety of teaching methods to promote learning” (question #16)
consistently received the lowest student ratings in all three schools: Agriculture and Natural Resource Sciences (ANRS), Professional Studies (PS), and Arts and Sciences (A&S) (IRE).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2006 Student Evaluations of SRSU Faculty</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching methods (#16)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition, SRSU has undergone over $80 million in new construction and renovation since 1990, including a new child care and family support center, new student housing and family housing, a new student center, new athletic and multiple use center, as well as renovations to the Museum of the Big Bend, the library, the learning center, the recreational sports center, the Warnock Science Building, and Agricultural and National Resource Science facilities.

One long-time faculty member, in a recent letter announcing his retirement eloquently wrote and gave permission for printing the following summary of what we do well:

I have enjoyed my work here at Sul Ross, and I thank you and my fellow faculty and staff members for creating an excellent educational environment.

I want to thank you [SRSU President R. Vic Morgan], first, for your great dedication in making Sul Ross the fine institution it is today. I’ve served here during the terms of five Sul Ross presidents, and you are easily the best. The others were content to occupy the office, but you had a vision. I appreciate not only the extraordinary improvements in the physical plant, but also your great progress in instilling a unifying spirit in the institution. In my early years of teaching here, Sul Ross was less of a university than it was a “collection of buildings,” but through your leadership, it has become more and more a vibrant educating community.

I also thank my fellow faculty and staff members, who have been extraordinary colleagues these last 36 years. I have always appreciated their professionalism and dedication, and it has been a pleasure to work with them.

Finally, I want to thank all of the Physical Plant staff members who have made our campus a beautiful and pleasant place to work. Such maintenance, of course, does not happen by accident, but rather by many long hours of dedication.

Selection, overview, and oversight of QEP

Originally, our reaffirmation Leadership Team recommended choosing one QEP for both SRSU campuses. However, as the Alpine and Rio Grande College campuses represent somewhat different communities and interests, the committees at each campus agreed that their student bodies would be best served if each campus developed their own QEP plan.
Alpine campus: After considering over 82 ideas generated by the campus and wider community, the lack of student engagement rose to the top position as a problem we wanted to solve. Faculty consistently report high absenteeism among students and observe a lack of student engagement in their courses. High drop-out rates and low retention of freshmen support these perceptions.

These non-persevering students represented a standard cross-section of all undergraduates, not just those considered under-prepared. The committee’s consensus was that if students are engaged in a class, an assignment, an activity, or a lecture, then learning comes more easily. When students are resistant, bored, absent, or have dropped the class, then learning is almost impossible. In addition, committee members felt success rates were also low for students taking required developmental courses due to engagement in those subjects. So, riding on an exhilarating consensus vote, the committee chose “Enhancing Academic Learning through Student Engagement” as our theme, and received a unanimous vote of confidence from the Faculty Assembly as well.

The committee then chose three major strategies for developing the plan: faculty support, outdoor learning, and a structured pilot program. Student questionnaires, discussion groups, and student members of the committee indicated consistent student requests for more hands-on, outdoor learning. SRSU advertises itself as a university where opportunities for hands-on learning and outdoor experiences abound. Therefore, SRSU attracts students who desire and probably learn best under those situations. Our QEP also includes and encourages innovation from faculty as well as the larger campus community. This strategy, called Pilots of Engagement, provides flexibility and
adaptability for piloting ideas that may be adopted into faculty support, outdoor learning, or improving students’ critical thinking skills. A Faculty Support Center will provide centralized services, opportunities to learn about new techniques for student learning, and will help develop pilot projects and incorporate outdoor learning into courses and student activities.

Originally the committee targeted four learning goals important to student success in and after college:

- **Professional Success Skills** (reading, writing, speaking)
- **Critical Thinking** (problem solving, analysis, interpretation, judgment)
- **Life Skills** (accountability, self-motivation, time management, work ethic, self-expectations, citizenship skills, ethics, self-efficacy, acculturation, technology, professionalism)
- **World View** (global perspective, appreciation of diversity: class, gender, age, etc)

However, as the plan developed, these four goals became focused into one assessable learning goal targeting critical thinking. Critical thinking seems to be a logical goal for engagement and also provides the foundation for most of the original learning goals desired by the committee as well as the list of 82 original ideas contributed by our campus community. In order to facilitate critical thinking, students are often asked to react to what they have read, express their own ideas in oral or written form, take leadership risks, and consider various racial, religious, economic, gendered, and regional perspectives. Critical thinking assessment also spreads responsibility for improvement across the entire campus and prevents any one department from using the QEP to protect turf or expand course offerings and budgets. Focusing on critical thinking has the potential to improve all four of the original goals, the potential to encourage broad-based participation, and the potential to be assessable with one standardized test.
Oversight: The QEP Advisory Committee will be composed of the Provost and Vice President for Academic and Student Affairs as chair; the Coordinator of Faculty Support and Outdoor Learning (CFS), a representative from the Office of Information Technology (OIT) and two members who served on the QEP development committee. Sub-committees will be appointed by this committee as needed. The two QEP committee members will cycle off after two years, and the provost will appoint two new members who have graduated from previous faculty support seminars. The only new hires will be the CFS and two graduate assistants. This commitment of new personnel will help to insure that QEP duties will not be assigned to those already shouldering heavy responsibilities, and will prevent overload and burnout. The QEP Advisory Committee will recommend additional personnel as use of these services increases.

This developed QEP plan and strategies received a consensus vote from the QEP committee.

A Call for Change in Higher Education

In 1995, an article written by Robert B. Barr and John Tagg began a paradigm shift that is still rocking the foundations of colleges and universities across the nation. They suggested that an instruction-centered philosophy ranked a college’s quality of instruction according to research reputation, number of Ph.D.’s on the faculty, and selectivity in student admissions. They encouraged universities to stress value added both for students with high entrance scores and those needing remediation. They explained that “under the Instruction Paradigm, the teacher’s job was to ‘cover the material’ as outlined in the disciplinary syllabus.” This caused faculty to “classify and sort students, in the worst cases into those who are ‘college material’ and those who cannot ‘cut it’” (Barr and Tagg 1995:10). In other words, the Instruction Paradigm promoted the bad habit of seeing students as “SAT scores with legs” (Tagg 2003:197). This resulted in a destructive cycle of blaming the students, blaming the faculty, and blaming the administration (Tagg 2003:21). Instead, they recommended a shift to a Learning Paradigm.

This shift to a learning-centered philosophy intends to measure how much the students are actually learning regardless of at what level they begin and end. The emphasis is on progress or value added. Barr and Tagg (1995) urged faculty to use before
and after assessment to discover how much progress students were actually making. They reported that just seeing the data persuaded a startling 88% of faculty that they had studied to make changes in their teaching behavior when faced with evidence that revealed how little their students were actually learning. Barr and Tagg (1995) observed that great strides had been made to provide access to college for diverse students from minority and low-income backgrounds, but colleges were not providing success for those students. They said top students suffer under the Instruction Paradigm as well. They are able to successfully graduate, but often remain at the same level of skill as they entered with very little additional progress. Barr and Tagg’s (1995) plea was not for grade inflation or diploma mills, but for genuine learning and progress for all students.

According to Barr and Tagg (1995), when the university assumes responsibility for actual learning, the college mission becomes the end result—that students actually learn the material. In the learning paradigm, exiting student knowledge is compared to entering student knowledge in order to determine value added. Barr and Tagg’s (1995) ideas have received almost unanimous support from educators. U.S. News & World Report has been recently criticized for “measuring, more or less, how selective a school was, rather than how good an education it offered” (Mathews 2004:1). Most recently, even a former president of one of those top-ranked, prestigious schools has become a champion of value-added education. Derek Bok, former president of Harvard University, has been quoted as saying,

> The college that takes students with modest entering abilities and improves their abilities substantially contributes more than the school that takes very bright students and helps them develop only modestly. We really need to take the focus off entering scores and put it more on how much value is added. (Brush 2006:28)

The differences in goals after this paradigm shift that are especially interesting for SRSU include:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Old “Instruction”</th>
<th>The New “Learning”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Achieve access for diverse students</td>
<td>Achieve success for diverse students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of entering students</td>
<td>Quality of exiting students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students as fixed IQ scores with legs</td>
<td>Students whose intelligence rises</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University measures intelligence</td>
<td>University measures value added</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A quality program is selective</td>
<td>A quality program increases learning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Barr and Tagg (1995) championed not only a paradigm shift from “instruction” to “learning” in American higher education but also a funding shift. They explain that funding creates a powerful leverage for change and recommended tying funding to student progress rather than hours of instruction. The accrediting agencies have been listening to these suggestions. A recent Wall Street Journal article quotes Russell Edgerton, president emeritus of the American Association of Higher Education as saying that “There’s been a kind of renaissance within accreditation agencies in the past five to six years. They’re helping institutions create a culture of evidence about student learning” (Golden 2006:1).
How do students learn?

The paradigm shift to learning has caused extensive research concerning the barriers to and enhancement of student learning. Tagg (2003:330) summarizes much current theory and many teaching innovations. He recommends “designing courses that involve students in continual performance, provide ongoing feedback, and extend the time horizon for learning.” He uses several chapters to carefully explain each:

- **Extending the time horizon:** Tagg means constantly helping students see the relevance of each assignment and course toward larger goals related to success in their vocation, family life, and community. A short time horizon results in quickly forgotten surface learning rather than deep and permanent learning. Tagg (2003:218) explains that “students who adopt a surface orientation seem to be operating on the assumption that they won’t have to live with the consequences of their academic decisions for very long.” Students often “think more in terms of getting a job than of keeping it or thriving in it” (Tagg 2003:237). It is the responsibility of major advisors, counselors, and the entire campus community to help students understand the importance of accumulating the skills, habits, and attitudes necessary to thrive both at the university and in their lives and careers, rather than simply checking off a list of required courses, or pursuing what Bowden and Marton (1998:234) call a “Bachelor of Bits and Pieces.”

- **Performance:** Tagg (2003) basically means concentrating on what students do (solving complex problems, doing creative work, doing research, doing service projects, giving presentations and demonstrations), rather than what faculty members do. He recommends increasing student performance in order to increase learning but spends several chapters carefully explaining the difference between short-term ego- or competition-based performance and performance as demonstration of or aid toward learning.

- **Feedback:** Tagg (2003) means encouraging learning progress by giving continuous coaching toward improvement rather than judgmental evaluation. He recommends envisioning students as growing plants rather than as finished products and discourages judging, ranking, and labeling their intelligence.

Tagg (2003) explains that successful individuals are those who seek opportunities for personal growth rather than validation of their present worth; however, our focus on grades and SAT scores rather than learning, offers only validation or invalidation and creates students who believe they are either smart or dumb and that no amount of effort or lack thereof will change that fact. A focus on growth, on the other hand, would create students (and faculty) who believe that effort produces a rise in intelligence and skills. Praise should be directed at the performance not the performer: This is a great demonstration of your progress and effort, and not This proves to me that you are a gifted and talented artist. In contrast the Instruction Paradigm, with its focus on simply delivering content, causes judgment-based evaluation rather than coaching toward step-by-step improvement through effort. Instruction and evaluation (rather than learning and coaching) cause students to be labeled and often segregated as honors, average, or
remedial. These labels can become psychologically set in concrete for both teachers and students and result in a belief in fixed intelligence rather than effort.

Dweck (2000) identified two common theories of intelligence held by students: students who believe intelligence is an unchangeable gift or curse, and students who believe that effort can increase intelligence. She found that students who believe intelligence is unchangeable are at risk either because they believe they are “gifted” and should not need to work hard for good grades or because they believe they are dumb and no amount of effort will change it. Perhaps most interesting is Dweck’s evidence that parents and teachers may be influencing which theory students embrace. Praising intelligence rather than effort causes both types of “labeled” students to become afraid of a challenge because they imagine that expending effort will prove or further prove that they are not intelligent. Praising students for their effort and product rather than their intelligence allows them to continue to learn by doing, and subsequently to flourish. The table below illustrates differences between these views of intelligence:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intelligence is a Gift</th>
<th>Intelligence is Developed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Desire to look smart</td>
<td>Desire to learn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoids challenges</td>
<td>Embraces challenges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gives up easily</td>
<td>Persists in spite of setback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sees effort as fruitless</td>
<td>Sees effort as path to mastery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ignores feedback</td>
<td>Learns from feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer’s success is threatening</td>
<td>Peer’s success is inspirational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remains static</td>
<td>Continues to grow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achieves less</td>
<td>Achieves more</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(table based on a graphic by Nigel Holmes)

Dweck’s research (2000) found that these “beliefs” not only caused poor performance but could be changed—that “bright” students who were asked to read a phony “theory” paper supporting fixed intelligence and then “failed” an assignment would avoid both tutoring and future assignments. “Less intelligent” students, who were asked to read a paper supporting improved intelligence through effort, embraced both tutoring and future assignments. Imagine the devastating effect that well-meaning parents or teachers who believe a fixed-intelligence theory would have on students over time! Research has found that these beliefs have indeed caused numerous dysfunctional behaviors: students would rather be labeled lazy or delinquent than dumb, successful students deny or hide the amount of effort their success entails, students believe their intelligence will see them through and exert no effort, students avoid new challenges, etc. A belief in fixed intelligence also promotes “teaching” rather than learning and encourages blame and labeling rather than problem solving. Tagg (2003:54) reminds us how children who are learning to walk seem to “positively enjoy” falling and that learning has always involved “a process of courting failure and learning to play with it.” Higher education research has clearly demonstrated that “college outcomes are tied to the effort that students put into their work and the degree to which they are involved with their studies and campus life” (Davis and Murrell 1993:1). Our goal at SRSU is to support learning as based on effort not inherent intelligence.
One of the plenary speakers at the 2006 COC/SACS convention, Rosabeth Moss Kanter (2004), a professor at Harvard Business School, studied winning and losing athletic teams and businesses, looking for patterns and methods that turned losers into winners or vice versa. What she discovered seems applicable to almost any situation, including designing a quality enhancement plan for a university and investigating how students learn and don’t learn. Losers, she says, are mired in a culture of blame, disrespect, favoritism, and turf protection; micromanagement, autocracy, and tight control of budgets; denial, neglect, and panic; and mired in “learned helplessness” (the belief that nothing they can do will change their fate); corruption, absenteeism, gallows humor, temper tantrums, petty tyranny, selfishness, and a desire to hurt others.

Winners, on the other hand, use open dialogue and collaboration, believe effort will pay off, and support high standards achieved through measurable smaller goals that ensure performance evaluation is objective not political. Confidence, of course, is the “secret” to winning but Kanter (2004: 35) stresses that confidence must be grounded in reality and evidence. People see right through pep talks based on fantasy and hype. She quotes one winning coach as explaining “the way you feel good about yourself is when somebody forces you to do something you didn’t think you could do.”

Poor students may also be exhibiting what psychologists call “defensive pessimism,” caused by a debilitating anxiety toward risky situations. Their solution is to accept their fate and expect failure. They do not want to take risks and no one believes they would succeed even if they did. They give up. Kanter says, “They are physically present but mentally absent--a state now labeled ‘presenteeism’ to distinguish it from ‘absenteeism.’ The body is there, but the spirit is gone.” (Kanter 2004:109). According to Kanter (2004:256), of all the pathologies that accumulate in a losing streak, one of the most damaging to individuals and eventually to the places they work and live, is passivity and learned helplessness. When people become resigned to their fate, nothing ever changes. . . . When people are surrounded by pessimism—that feeling that they are the victims of uncontrolled forces around them—they drag others down with them, finding the worst in everything, or resisting other people’s ideas but offering none of their own. With diminished initiative, innovation disappears, problems go unsolved, opportunities go un-seized. The cycle gets harder to break.

Kanter (2004:44) found inspiration for higher education in the philosophy of people who had turned around losing sports teams and declining businesses. One successfully turned-
around business set high standards yet made those standards attainable: “Jobs were broken down into actionable, measurable components, so that every day people knew exactly what to do to add value to the business. Measurable goals ensured that performance would be objective, not political, . . . to prevent any hint that one group was favored over another.” However, sometimes even those who have read all the books and journal articles and studied the trends, were still unable to reverse the losing streaks because of lack of imagination or power, and fear of failure or reprisal when taking risks. She also warns to remember Kanter’s Law: “Everything can look like failure in the middle” (Kanter 2004:67).

Tagg (2003:324) agrees that fear of failure is paralyzing: “What I mean to suggest is that we are afraid. . . . And it is fear, over and above all else, that inspires the defensive routines that lock us in and keep us from changing. We are afraid of embarrassment, afraid of failure, afraid of being held up to ridicule, afraid of feeling inferior.” Covington (1992:231) agrees, “Failure is interesting partly for the fact that successful thinkers actually make more mistakes than those who give up easily and therefore preserve their unblemished record of mediocrity, and also for the fact that mistakes can usually be set right by trying again.” Therefore, a belief in, and consequently fear of, fixed intelligence can also cause bright people to say nothing, do nothing, and publish nothing in order to avoid discovering “the truth” about themselves or risking the embarrassment of a possible mistake and being reclassified by their peers from bright to dumb.

Higher education research has also long recognized a need for variety in teaching methods. No one method is a cure-all and indeed focusing on one method can cause the disengagement it was intended to help. Tagg (2003:331-333) further warns that “the issue of faculty engagement in teaching is vital because any mode of pedagogy can be used as a cover for disengagement. Collaborative learning can serve as a front for the passive instructor as easily as old lecture notes.” Mixing small-group discussion, audio-visual presentations, brainstorming, debate, guest speakers, role playing, and case studies can reawaken student motivation and interest (Forsyth and McMillan 1991).

Computer technology, as well, is beginning to receive mixed and even negative evaluation from educators (Noble 1998:2). When used as a crutch rather than a teaching tool, it can isolate students, deny them significant feedback, prolong or prevent development of learning communities or friendships and become simply a way to avoid contact and responsibility through gadgetry. As students become more technology savvy, they seem to be using it more for entertainment purposes than learning. Text messaging phones, wireless computers, and iPods are being used for sophisticated cheating and in-class entertainment (Read 2004). In Australia, where rural students often receive much of their education via the web, researchers found that availability of university class notes on the web increased absenteeism, decreased motivation to study, and possibly contributed to inertia deteriorating into “despondency and disengagement from the university community” (Krause 2005:8). Computers may also fall into what research has long recognized as the class of “structural features” that “tend to isolate students,” and features that “promote an ethos of anonymity produce poor college outcomes” (Davis and Murrell 1993:2). In any event, only careful assessment of both student learning and faculty productivity can insure that only those methods and technologies that are “both cost-effective and learning-effective be adopted” (Frye 1998:5). The rise of technology in
the classroom and recent indications of its failure to enhance learning seems to be a classic example of student burn-out when one teaching method is seen as a cure-all.

**Engagement increases learning**

The most promising method for increasing student learning seems to be engagement. Yet, across the nation, student engagement seems to be dropping rather than increasing. Sadly, Tagg (2003:46-47, 128, 129) says that even most high school students who make good grades are not genuinely interested in their classes, and that if we separate rewards like grades, graduation, and college admission from learning, most would find their classes “neither motivating nor rewarding” and failure “neither unpleasant nor threatening.” He warns that unless colleges can change these attitudes, efforts toward creating student engagement will be ineffective. He says that for long term investment, the student needs to “care about both the process and the outcome” and that all of us “invest ourselves in what really matters to us. . . .People who don’t grow aren’t happy.” Extrapolating these statements to cover college experience, employment, family life, and even university teaching careers is easy. Perhaps committee work is a classic example of tasks that seldom inspire genuine engagement. Finding engaging purposes greater than ourselves is not easy. Csikszentmihalyi (1990:137) summarizes the general malaise that seems to affect our entire nation: “Many people spend their entire lives feeling like puppets who move only because their strings are pulled. . . .So the question is, why don’t we want to do more things?”

Research says the route to engagement for students, faculty, and everyone is to dig deeper, raise the bar, and struggle together to solve real problems that plague not only the classroom but our lives. Entertainment, diversion, and busy work are not answers. Tagg (2003:131) says, “If we try to design an environment that simply does what the students come to us wanting to do, we trivialize the whole education process.” He says students come to college to discover their goals and potentials and “to surprise themselves.” He finds it a disservice to treat students like customers, and that “One of the most important jobs of colleges is to get students to do things they don’t start out wanting to do.” Or as Bandura (1997:218-219) puts it,

Most of the things people enjoy doing for their own sake originally held little or no interest for them. Children are not born innately interested in singing operatic arias, playing contrabassoons, solving mathematical equations, writing sonnets, or propelling shot-put balls through the air. But with appropriate learning experiences, almost any activity, however trifling it may appear to others, can become imbued with consuming personal significance.

Engagement, as those of us who have pursued careers in academia will recognize, can be explained as what Csikszentmihalyi (1990:49) calls “flow”—a sudden realization that hours have flown by as our concentration intensifies. He says the combination of confronting a difficult task, receiving timely feedback, and gradually making progress “causes a sense of deep enjoyment that is so rewarding people feel that expending a great deal of energy is worthwhile simply to be able to feel it.” In short, for those who are lucky enough to experience “flow,” genuine engagement is better than drugs, alcohol, food, or sex.
What should students learn?

The paradigm shift has also caused a major curriculum review. Changing the focus from what students should be taught to what students should learn seems to beg a different question. Carol Schneider, current American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) president, asks, “What are employers or communities asking for?” (Schneider 2006). A 2007 report, “College Learning for the New Global Century,” released from the National Leadership Council for Liberal Education & America’s Promise (LEAP 2007:7), finds a dangerous silence:

Stunningly . . . American society has yet to confront the most basic and far-reaching question of all. Across all the work on access, readiness, costs, and even accountability, there has been a near-total public silence about what contemporary college graduates need to know and be able to do. . . . This public silence about what matters in college is dangerous. To students, it can send the self-defeating message that the diploma itself—rather than the quality of learning it represents—is the key to the future. And this seems to be exactly the view that many students have adopted. With frustration, Schneider says colleges and universities “are delegating what matters to the testing industry.” She warns that “Higher education is at a crossroads. What we want is something worthy of our mission—not just what the testing industry has determined is testable” (Schneider 2006).

In an article for College Teaching, Marshall Gregory (2005:95) writes that “Teachers should confront the fact that most of the content they teach will be forgotten by students. Once this fact is accepted, then it follows that teaching content that teachers know will be forgotten as if it should never be forgotten is myopic and perhaps dysfunctional.” He goes on to explain that students should learn how to learn, how to analyze, how to look for and make connections between the subject being taught and their own lives and futures. According to Gregory (2005:97), “Mostly, students do not get educated because they study our beloved content. They get educated because they learn how to study our beloved content, and they carry the how of that learning with them in the world as cognitive and intellectual skills that stick long after the content is forgotten.” Our students learn how to become good students, but not necessarily how to continue learning on their own once graduated.

Much public criticism of modern education relies on the antiquated paradigm of memorization and surface error—Johnny can’t spell, left out a comma, and doesn’t know the capital of Oregon—and university faculty often agree. As an example, in a 2005 SACS workshop, Flateby (2005) attempted to help participants upgrade their skills in evaluating student writing. Although her Cognitive Level and Quality Writing Assessment (CLAQWA) rubric assigned only a small percent of the possible points to grammar and mechanics, most workshop participants still found a way to rank a vapid error-free paper over a brilliant ESL paper. When Flateby attempted to retrain the participants, many responded that a paper like that would not be considered outstanding at their university because they had “higher standards.” She was unable to convince some participants that they actually had lower standards in thinking, and higher standards only in regard to surface error. LEAP (2007:30) stresses that “the key to educational excellence, therefore, lies not in the memorization of vast amounts of information, but rather in fostering habits of mind that enable students to continue their learning, engage
new questions, and reach informed judgments.” LEAP (2007:24) also warns that “it is the nation’s first-generation and less advantaged students—young and old alike—who are the most likely to enroll in institutions and programs that provide narrow training.”

Job training is also out of fashion except for the lowest levels of employment. Job training, like memorization, is based on stability and the belief that what instructors cover as content today will serve graduates throughout their lives. However, the reality of today’s world is instability. A corporate leader of Intel has said that “90 percent of the products his company delivers on the final day of each year did not exist on the first day of the same year” (qtd. in LEAP 2007:16). The LEAP study found that employers do not want narrowly specialized employees but rather those with broad-based skills and an understanding of communication, civics, ethics, and diversity. Today’s job market changes rapidly with narrowly focused expertise often obsolete only a few months after graduation if not before. Consequently, American workers before the age of 28 often change jobs ten times. The study recommends essential learning outcomes connected to “work, life, and citizenship,” as well as a shift away from accumulating course credits, and toward “building real-world capabilities.”

**Agreement on critical thinking**

One unanimous agreement between employers, accrediting agencies, and government employed education representatives seems to be that students should learn critical thinking skills. Graduates should be flexible and skilled in critical thinking and cross-disciplinary learning, rather than trained as “experts” in a narrow field. Businesses are asking for “leadership, teamwork, problem solving, time management, communication, and analytical thinking” (LEAP 2007). Critical thinking skills have been tied to improvements in learning (Paul 2005, Tsui 2002), behavior, gpa, and reading comprehension (Facione 2007:5, 18). It is interdisciplinary (AAC&U 2005) and creates flexible graduates who can adapt to a changing world (Bernstein et al. 2004).

SRSU has chosen to adopt the core curriculum learning goals mandated by The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) for all courses and programs (for the full list see http://www.thecb.state.tx.us/AAR/UndergraduateEd/fos_assumpdef.cfm). These THECB learning goals are full of mandates for higher-order critical thinking skills:

- Critical thinking is one of the Basic Intellectual Competencies, which THECB defines as embracing “methods for applying both qualitative and quantitative skills analytically and creatively to subject matter in order to evaluate arguments and to construct alternative strategies. Problem solving is one of the applications of critical thinking used to address an identified task.” They also stress the importance of critical thinking in each of the other five competencies (reading, writing, speaking, listening, and computer literacy).

- Critical thinking is the corner stone of their mandated “perspectives” that reflect the students responsibilities as an ethical, healthy citizen in a diverse world.

- Educational objectives for each of the major university divisions (communication, mathematics, natural sciences, humanities and visual and performing arts, and
social and behavioral sciences) also focus on critical thinking through objectives for each.

Therefore, critical thinking seems to be a key goal for enhancing student engagement, improving academic performance, and creating well-educated citizens.

However, defining critical thinking is not easy, nor is deciding how to teach it or who should be responsible. Studies reveal “confusion among faculty in regard to what constitutes critical thinking, what classroom activities are best employed to encourage development, and how to assess whether those skills have been attained” (OOA 2006: 8.)

Paul et al. (1998:3, 5-6) investigated 38 public and 28 private university teacher education programs in California. Although 89% of faculty “claimed critical thinking to be a primary objective of their instruction,” they found that only 9% were “clearly teaching for critical thinking on a typical day in class.” Although all faculty participants claimed that their student teachers “lacked intellectual standards when they entered their classes,” virtually all also claimed that their students “left with those intellectual standards in place,” as well as “a good level of critical thinking.” The study found that across the board, teacher education faculty confused active cooperative learning in groups with critical thinking, were unable to clearly define critical thinking, could not provide plausible examples of fostering critical thinking in their classes, could not name specific critical thinking skills, and could not plausibly explain how they reconciled covering content with critical thinking. The most common confusion appeared between active engagement and critical thinking. To illustrate, the researchers used gang involvement: “Many gang members are actively engaged in gang activities, but that does not make them critical thinkers.” The study also warns that familiarity with Bloom’s taxonomy and Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences is not equivalent to understanding critical thinking.

The researchers recommended four interventions:

- Disseminate information that clearly articulates critical thinking
- Provide convenient ways for faculty to upgrade their knowledge and skills in critical thinking and how to teach it
- Mandate systematically teaching critical thinking to prospective teachers
- Develop an exit exam in critical thinking for prospective teachers

Paul et al. (1998:5) list as basic critical thinking skills “the ability to clarify questions, gather relevant data, reason to logical or valid conclusions, identify key assumptions, trace significant implications, or enter without distortion into alternative points of view.” But these criteria would probably receive very different interpretations across the disciplines.

Responding to a 2004 Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE), 93% of the nation’s faculty claimed to be teaching critical thinking, 51% of students responding to the 2004 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) claimed colleges contributed “very much” to their critical thinking skills, yet only 6% of college seniors were found proficient in critical thinking (Academic Profile 2003-2004).

| Faculty who claimed to be teaching critical thinking (FSSE 2004) | 93% |
| Students who said college contributed “very much” toward critical thinking skills (NSSE 2004) | 51% |
| College seniors proficient in critical thinking (Academic Profile 2003-2004) | 6% |
critical thinking when tested in the 2003-2004 Academic Profile (OOA 2006:8-9; AAC&U 2004a). Thus, even considering the possibility that the standardized AP test does not adequately measure critical thinking skills, these figures indicate rich potential for discussion, innovation, clarification, and improvement.

Critical thinking offers the opportunity for all disciplines and all members of the campus community to design courses, assignments, projects, and experiences that will increase higher order thinking skills. SRSU’s QEP goal is not to design a new course to teach critical thinking in one department. One law school professor over 10 years ago warned, “If we are not careful, the teaching of critical thinking skills will become the responsibility of one university department, a prospect that is at odds with the very idea of a university” (A. Sweeting qtd. in Barr and Tagg 1995:7). Although his warning has not become a reality, the possibility still exists. Terry W. Noel (2004:206) also warns that the pursuit of critical thinking can sometimes encourage faculty members to give students too much freedom and not enough guidance. Thus, he never tries “a new teaching method without first deciding what it is I want the students to learn. I never ask them to do my job.” At SRSU, critical thinking has already become the focus of a campus-wide search for definition and application with several focus groups meeting to discuss various aspects.

Critical thinking commonly refers to mental activities typically associated with solving complex real world problems:

- generating multiple (or creative) solutions to a problem
- drawing inferences
- synthesizing and integrating information
- distinguishing between fact and opinion
- estimating potential outcomes

It can also refer to the process of evaluating the quality of one’s own thinking. Developed critical thinking includes the ability to analyze data and information to discover significant content, which in turn can be used to solve problems and further understand ideas uncovered in the process of analysis. In nearly all cases, acquiring critical thinking competence requires that students be provided with opportunities to identify and challenge assumptions and meaningful problems in a discipline as well as to explore alternative hypotheses or ways of thinking and acting. Potts (1994) listed the following skills and situations that educational research identified as important for overall ability in critical thinking:

- Generating multiple (or creative) solutions to a problem
- Finding analogies and other kinds of relationships between pieces of information
- Determining the relevance and validity of information that could be used for structuring and solving problems
- Finding and evaluating solutions or alternative ways of treating problems
- Promoting interaction among students as they learn
- Learning in a group setting
- Asking open-ended questions that do not assume the “one right answer.”
• Encouraging students to think and respond creatively, without fear of giving the “wrong” answer
• Allowing sufficient time for students to reflect on questions asked or problems posed
• Discovering “rules” rather than memorizing rules
• Testing their own discoveries through transfer to other situations
• Finding solutions to complex problems rather than being given a simple problem with only one variable
• Transferring newly acquired knowledge or skills to new or different situations
• Applying newly acquired knowledge or skills to students’ own experience

We also embrace Peter A. Facione’s (2007:20) definition of critical thinking as explained in his periodically updated seminal essay, “Critical Thinking: What it is and why it counts”:

Critical thinking goes way beyond the classroom. In fact, many of the experts fear that some of the things people experience in school are actually harmful to the development and cultivation of good critical thinking. Critical thinking came before schooling was ever invented, it lies at the roots of civilization. It is a cornerstone in the journey human kind is taking from beastly savagery to global sensitivity. (9). . . . Imagine an electorate that cared not for the facts, that did not wish to consider the pros and cons of the issues. . . . Imagine your life and the lives of your friends and family placed in the hands of juries and judges who let their biases and stereotypes govern their decisions. . . . Without critical thinking people would be more easily exploited not only politically but economically.

Obviously, although Facione asks us to “imagine” these scenarios, they already exist. Facione (2007: 19, 20, 21) explains that critical thinking should free students from dependence on parents and faculty, prevent schools from becoming “places of indoctrination,” and allows citizens to “properly evaluate the claims made by the unscrupulous and misinformed.” He further expands the meaning by defining words typically used to define critical thinking and challenges universities to recognize the inherent complexity of this goal. Parini (2005:151, 88) wishes that more college professors would challenge student values, overturn some of their blind allegiance to patriotism, organized religion, and even athletic teams. He says, “I often feel that the wildness has gone out of teaching, a wildness that pushes students to question basic assumptions, about themselves and the world.” Thus, genuine engagement, as well as critical thinking, not only can be threatening, but probably should be to faculty as well as students.

Daniel Yankelovich (1991:186, 196) explains that the current university paradigm rests on the assumption that experts are in charge, using rules they created, and students as future citizens should just adopt what faculty members tell them. Any challenge to that status quo causes anxiety or “a feeling that your special way of making sense of the world is being threatened.” According to Schilling and Schilling (1999), even science students reported “rarely using the scientific method” and instead said their courses relied on passive memorization of formulas rather than higher-order thinking. Hervieu (2000) calls
for a multi-disciplinary interface between science and society. Or what Fear et al. (2006:214) explain as critical engagement to challenge “all forms of ‘knowing orthodoxies’—be they instrumental or communicative, reductionist or holistic, expert or lay, profane or sacred, and rational or intuitive.” They warn that we face the dangerous possibility that “one way of knowing—can dominate others and, in so doing, colonize all life worlds.” Of course the tendency is to see one’s own biases as good critical thinking and everyone else’s biases as ignorance.

Thus, when critical thinking succeeds in causing engagement, it may also cause conflict, which causes more critical thinking and gets at the heart of both the traditional foundations of democracy and postmodern ideas of “dialogics” (Bakhtin 1981), “deconstruction” (Derrida 1985), “Orientalism” (Said 1978), and Foucault’s investigations into “discourse” (1972) and the constructs of power (1979, 1981). As an example of the importance of deconstruction, Fear et al. (2006:215) caution that a word like engagement can be co-opted by various factions for almost opposite meanings, especially when connected to other multiple-meaning words like “development,” “transformation,” or “learning.” Raising the academic bar results in engagement, but far too often, for struggling students, the bar is lowered. When faculty stop asking for higher-level thinking and instead fall back to drill on lower-level thinking like memorization and surface error; the result is usually dis-engagement. Raising the bar means asking for genuine thinking, not increasing the busy work for students or faculty.

A statement on integrative learning from the Association of American Colleges and Universities and The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching states: The undergraduate experience can be a fragmented landscape of general education courses, preparation for the major, co-curricular activities, and ‘the real world’ beyond the campus. But an emphasis on integrative learning can help undergraduates put the pieces together and develop habits of mind that prepare them to make informed judgments in the conduct of personal, professional, and civic life (AAC&U 2004b:1). Real learning has only taken place when students have a sufficient grasp of skills, principles, and concepts in order to solve basic problems and questions that were not covered in class and appear in slightly different form (Barr and Tagg 1995:10). Focusing on critical thinking can facilitate collaborative efforts across the university.

Chapter 3
Strategies and Resources for Fostering Engagement and Critical Thinking

As the SRSU QEP committee developed our ideas to increase student engagement, critical thinking became the obvious learning goal. Research has shown that by concentrating on critical thinking, students become more interested in tasks and studies. Critical thinking also provides an umbrella for our three chosen strategies for increasing student engagement: faculty support, innovation, and outdoor learning. Encouraging faculty members to design courses around critical thinking will focus our efforts in the most productive direction. Most of the ideas for piloting changes for student engagement already seem to concentrate on critical thinking. And, finally, outdoor learning easily lends itself to fostering critical thinking and provides a rich potential for
use by all disciplines. These three strategies provide much freedom for faculty, staff, students, and the entire university community to participate in various ways.

**Pilots of Engagement**

The Pilots of Engagement strategy is the most versatile part of our plan. Several members of QEP teams from other universities have informally and formally lamented at recent SACS conferences that they chose a major project, sunk considerable funding into it, hired staff, and then discovered 2 or 3 years in that their plan did not work. This strategy is designed to prevent that kind of setback. Pilots of Engagement represents an open invitation to faculty, staff, and students for innovation. Successful ideas will be expanded; unsuccessful ideas will be modified or eliminated. We encourage ideas based on experience at SRSU. Participants will incorporate a way to document pre- and post-learning in order to provide evidence of value added.

Other universities have also reported an initial excitement and enthusiastic response to their QEP by a faculty hungry for answers; however, their actual results have been more mixed. Fear et al. (2006:144) warn that initial enthusiasm is often difficult to maintain: “Faced with the reality of workloads—and with long-standing obstacles to collaboration—individuals and teams struggled. . . . [and] within six to nine months, most of the action teams had dissolved.” They found two kinds of trust: “goodwill trust” that was easy to generate, and “competence trust,” which comes only with confidence in the ability to actually complete the work agreed upon. According to Kanter (2004:335), losers resist other people’s ideas but offer none of their own, and losers use busy work for punishment (write a paper as punishment for absence, run laps as punishment for striking out). She found that winning coaches “never forced an athlete who broke a rule to spend more time on the practice field or in the weight room; instead, a violator was side-lined.” In that spirit, we invite participation in the QEP through Pilots of Engagement, but do not require it. This strategy of the QEP is for those who want to play, and we hope momentum for voluntary participation will develop as successful projects are publicized. However, deans (Student Life, Arts and Sciences, Professional Studies, and Agriculture and Natural Resource Sciences) have been charged with and have accepted the responsibility to provide 10% participation each year from their respective schools and employees. This 10% participation may overlap with outdoor learning and faculty seminar participation.

Innovation is not new to the SRSU campus. SRSU has maintained a successful culture of teaching innovation by offering faculty the opportunity to teach “problems” and “topics” courses. Successful new courses are then submitted as “new course proposals” and eventually become part of permanent curriculum and degree plans. In addition, faculty members have been given the freedom to design individual approaches to sections of large service courses in order to capitalize on their own classroom strengths rather than adopt program-wide texts or curriculum guides. SRSU has traditionally believed in the competence and creativity of our entire campus community, so this strategy simply provides further encouragement, support, structure, and recognition to an ongoing tradition.

Pilots of Engagement is also open to the entire university community: staff, students, and local citizens, as well as faculty. According to Tagg (2003:325) the arena for college learning extends beyond the classroom:
Of course, the staff at every college is deeply involved in the education of students. At some institutions . . . department secretaries do more actual student advisement than counselors or faculty mentors. The staff in the library and the admissions office, the groundskeepers and the nurses in the student health center, see and hear and speak to students, often at times when students are seeking crucial information or facing important decisions. . . . Being outside the classroom does not put you outside the community. Or it should not.

At SRSU, quite often the student’s first job is on campus, supervised by staff members. As an example of a great idea for staff participation, Human Resources will pilot expansion of their successful “Partners” training program for student employees, to include more incoming freshmen. The Physical Plant will also pilot an idea to give their student employees more responsibility and ask them to formally write up reports on job assignments. Student athletes have volunteered to pilot a tutoring program.

The SRSU plan encourages participation from all members of the university community. According to Kanter (2004:366), “A vital part of Continental Airlines’ return to health was the discovery by people at every level that there was something they could do to make a difference in on-time performance.” One winning coach discouraged the emergence of “stars” and instead “focused his women’s basketball team’s attention on the small, unseen things that helped win the game, such as a rebound that somebody grabbed at a crucial time. It is those little things on the part of everyone that separated a win from a loss” (Kanter 2004:367). She described an organization, which had inspired Nelson Mandela, that began its meetings with “ripples”: “an opportunity to tell a personal story about a recent accomplishment or sign of success, however modest, that sends out a ‘tiny ripple of hope’ to remind everyone that taking action is worth it. Celebration of the small wins creates confidence that bigger goals can be attained” (Kanter 2004:367). So, we solicit ideas for ways to encourage similar “good news bites.”

**Pilots of Engagement Proposal Process**

Pilots of Engagement will begin in Fall 2008 with a designated grant budget of $5,000 to be allocated by the QEP Advisory Committee. Only projects that request funding need approval from department chairs, deans, or supervisors. As has been the SRSU tradition, internal course changes will be the sole responsibility of the individual faculty member. Participation will require only that participants report the results of their innovations. Proposals requesting funding will require:

- copy of detailed syllabus with tentative course schedule or narrative description of proposed project
- cover sheet with approval of department chair and dean or immediate supervisor
- budget or narrative explaining how monies will be used

Funding grants for Pilots of Engagement will be awarded throughout the year on a first come, first served basis as soon as successful proposals are determined.

Pilots of Engagement will especially encourage development of courses and projects that celebrate our uniqueness based on location, as well as increase student engagement and critical thinking. What are our strengths? How can we be different in
order to be more successful? Funding preference will be given to projects that involve the outdoors and collaboration. Participants will also be encouraged to develop innovative ways to assess learning (i.e., on-line portfolios, pre-post exam, rubric scoring). Pilot projects will be evaluated according to the following 50-point system:

- Potential for enhancing student engagement (1-10 points)
- Potential for enhancing critical thinking or other significant academic learning (1-10 points)
- Potential for increasing accurate assessment of student learning (1-10 points)
- Potential for collaboration (1-10 points)
- Potential for increasing outdoor learning opportunities (1-5 points)
- Potential for other (as determined on a case-by-case basis, 1-5 points)

Members of the QEP advisory Committee may apply for funding but may not vote on their own proposals. Large projects or successful projects warranting expansion that require extended funding will be handled through existing departmental channels and budgets.

Each spring semester, the QEP Advisory Committee will query the university community for the next fall’s Pilots of Engagement participants. Preliminary ideas initially offered by our university community are listed below.

### Examples of QEP Pilots of Engagement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Affairs</th>
<th>Arts &amp; Science</th>
<th>Professional Studies</th>
<th>Ag &amp; Nat. Res. Sci.</th>
<th>Other</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Students)</td>
<td>(Bio) A Capstone Research project – for those students interested in going on to a Masters or PhD degree, allow them to conduct independent research projects (as we do now), but have them write it up into a senior thesis. This would give them writing practice for the field.</td>
<td>(Ed) Shift to concentrating on world population (nationality, sexual orientation, etc.)</td>
<td>(ANSC) Within a capstone course students will develop and implement a comprehensive livestock management plan for the Faskin Ranch.</td>
<td>(Physical plant) give student employees work orders, assign to write report, assess, track, hold responsible</td>
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<td>(Students)</td>
<td>(Bio) A biweekly or monthly seminar series – this would tie into the above Capstone research project, by allowing these students to “defend” or present their ideas and findings to other students, and show that it is not just their teachers who can do this. It could include undergrads, graduate students, and faculty (to fill in empty slots). It would provide technology experience (PowerPoint), verbal presentation skills, and help to develop a professional demeanor.</td>
<td>(PE) hands-on, experience with real world problems: how to organize a truck meet, keeping stats, etc.</td>
<td>(AVP) require students to either volunteer or take a course in life skills (vote, active in civic, real-world experience)</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Students)</td>
<td>(Bio) Incorporating more writing and oral presentations into our</td>
<td>(PE) Digital portfolios for Kinesiology Majors. All Physical Education Department Faculty will require assignments involving each student’s portfolio for the classes they teach.</td>
<td>(AVP) encourage students to participate in a one-week exchange experience in Chihuahua</td>
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<td>(Bio) A Capstone Research project – for those students interested in going on to a Masters or PhD degree, allow them to conduct independent research projects (as we do now), but have them write it up into a senior thesis. This would give them writing practice for the field.</td>
<td>(BA) Expand and integrate speech recognition technology into Management Communications courses.</td>
<td>(Alumni) Guest speakers (Human Resources) expand “Partners” program for all students</td>
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<td>Required component in community service as part of one course in every department. Advertise for service opportunities on KVLF’s early morning community service program.</td>
<td>(BA) Develop personal blogs and/or social networking sites for professional portfolios to present job skills</td>
<td>(Human Resources) do student employee evaluations (Human Resources) place student workers in other workshops</td>
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<td>(Students) Mentors in the dorms to work with the advisors on life decisions. (Counseling) work more closely with faculty regarding Texas Success Initiative (TSI) and advising issues.</td>
<td>(BA) Assigning more books, papers, reports</td>
<td>(time mgmt., diversity, supervisory, etc.)</td>
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<td>Required component in community service as part of one course in every department. Advertise for service opportunities on KVLF’s early morning community service program.</td>
<td>(BA) Increase student’s active learning by having community-based projects and class projects.</td>
<td>(Physical plant) give student employees work orders, assign to write report, assess, track, hold responsible</td>
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<td>(AVP) encourage students to participate in a one-week exchange experience in Chihuahua</td>
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<td>(ANSC) The Equine Science Facility will permit students to develop and implement horse management protocols.</td>
<td>(Alumni) Guest speakers (Human Resources) expand “Partners” program for all students</td>
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<td>Required component in community service as part of one course in every department. Advertise for service opportunities on KVLF’s early morning community service program.</td>
<td>(ANSC) The animal science calling will develop, write and present a senior thesis as a component of a capstone course. This experience will facilitate critical thinking and analysis through hypothesis development and literature review, writing and speaking skills.</td>
<td>(Human Resources) do student employee evaluations (Human Resources) place student workers in other workshops</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>(Student Life)</td>
<td>(Students) Mentors in the dorms to work with the advisors on life decisions. (Counseling) work more closely with faculty regarding Texas Success Initiative (TSI) and advising issues.</td>
<td>(ANSC) The animal science calling will develop, write and present a senior thesis as a component of a capstone course. This experience will facilitate critical thinking and analysis through hypothesis development and literature review, writing and speaking skills.</td>
<td>(Physical plant) give student employees work orders, assign to write report, assess, track, hold responsible</td>
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| (Student Life) develop some kind of group (e.g. life skills class for freshmen (and beyond)) | courses. Require most courses to have at least one major writing assignment that involves literature research. Incorporating individual student presentations into courses to vary learn styles, and encourage the students to help each other (empowerment of their education). An example of this would be to have students prepare summaries of text book chapters and pick questions to lead a class discussion to review the concepts covered in that chapter after the professor has lectured.  
(L&L) Enhance ESL learning opportunities 
(L&L) Support more writing classes being held in computer classrooms 
(L&L) Supports pre-test/post-test of material or portfolio methods of assessment 
(L&L) Support tightening of current attendance policy 
(L&L) Support changes in classroom layout to a non-lecture format  
(L&L) Offer “themed” freshman composition classes to give students a choice of topic to enhance their interest (e.g. ecology, literature, narrative film, etc.) 
(L&L) Attend freshman orientation in order to “sell” their courses  
(L&L) Faculty agrees to participate in workshops or seminars conducted by experts from outside the university in order to learn effective teaching methods  
(L&L) Supports collecting portfolio of literary critical analysis essays from freshman through senior year  
(BASS) Integrate current events into the core curriculum teaching and have students do weekly emphasis on analysis, interpretation and implementation in business case analysis.  
(BA) Research the use of personal blogs and/or social networking sites as professional portfolios for job seeking purposes.  
(BA) Enlist student support and assistance in providing free tax preparation services to community members in need.  
(BA) Syllabus and course calendar—put student in charge to accomplish in a timely fashion 
(BA) Establish and more fully enforce course deadlines 
(BA) Discuss the implications of plagiarized work. 
(BA) Increase student's learning experience by having more seminars, speakers, etc 
(BA) Increase opportunities to work with faculty members on course-related projects 
(BA) Through in-class exercises work through actual situations to analyze and interpret based upon course materials 
(BA) Increased emphasis on comprehensive computerized business simulations 
(BA) Arrange field trips where appropriate to show students various business operations and/or functions at work. 
(BA) More fully integrate a global perspective by exposing students to cultural nuances and differences across a variety of cultural situations. 
(BA) Enlist more guest speakers | address problems associated with urban wildlife populations (e.g. deer in town) by addressing information needs (e.g. home ranges and dietary preferences) and developing management recommendations with the assistance of wildlife management professionals. 
(NRM) Students interested in pursuing advanced degrees will develop, write, and present a senior thesis as a component of a capstone course. This experience will facilitate critical thinking and analysis through hypothesis development and literature review, writing and speaking skills. 
(NRM) Require a public service or volunteer effort component within one or more introductory or advanced courses. 
(NRM) Increase international student experience with expanded international class experience such as classes taught in Mexico, or more field trips to Mexico and other foreign countries. |
discussion and reports on current events through online newspapers and quiz them and integrate questions into the final exam.

(BASS) The Psychology department can implement tests and measurements over a variety of life skills components such as those found in LASS-Weinstein.

(BASS) Increase overseas exposure through European and other regional world trips.

(BASS) Involve students with international issues such as letter writing to American troops in conflict zones or through charitable work such as the Casa Hogar in Ojinaga, Mexico

(Downing) By presenting the material on techniques of persuasion, I could get them to bring in and analyze examples from the financial world (credit cards, mortgage debt, and the state lottery) that play upon people's hopes and fears for their financial well being. I could also emphasize personal applications of research from the area of judgment and decision making in regards to loan rates of interest, etc.

(Downing) an encounter group experience to consider the viewpoints of others

(Computer/math) Self-evaluation or peer-evaluation

(Computer/math) History of Math, incorporate more of historical and cultural aspect of math

Ideas for needed projects will also be provided by the QEP Advisory Committee. As an example, we suggest the following:

- Brochure to explain Pilots of Engagement to the campus community
- Reformed degree plans that help give students a longer view, rather than checking off courses toward a degree.
- Ways to use student vocational and family goals to help develop more engagement with required core courses
- Design and offer one-hour freshman seminars as introductions to majors that do not offer freshman courses.
- Challenge departments offering courses in multiple sections to create “communities of like-minded learners” in order to attract and engage students who have a particular interest (i.e., developmental math for agricultural majors, developmental reading about Mexico, developmental writing about horses or athletics)

**Assessment of Pilots of Engagement:** Participants will submit brief annual reports to their department chairs or supervisors, who will in turn submit brief reports up their respective chains of command to the Provost and QEP Advisory Committee. Results will be posted on the web. In addition, the QEP Advisory Committee will contact participants whose chair and dean report promising results and select one project for recognition from each long semester and one project for recognition from both summer sessions combined with the mid-winter term. Certificates of recognition for the most successful Pilots of Engagement will be presented by the university President at the first fall faculty meeting. Selection will be data driven, using the criteria of reduced absenteeism and drop-out rates, increased scores on student evaluations, and increased student learning. The honorees will each be invited to explain their pilot projects at faculty support seminars. Successful ideas will become model “best practices” for faculty support.

Our goal with Pilots of Engagement is to build on what is already working, share what works, and expand innovation to include all members of the campus community.

**Faculty support center**

The faculty provides the intellectual foundation for achieving the university’s mission. Therefore it is vital to provide support and opportunities to assist faculty in meeting this charge. The impetus for a comprehensive faculty support program stems from several related objectives:

- First, we have a continuous need for training in cutting edge techniques, methods, and research and then integrating that training into courses. Faculty members need opportunities to engage in the focused study of innovative learning techniques that affect their disciplines and that may, in turn, affect the way in which they impart these changes to their students.
• Next, there must be a change agent that motivates and develops faculty involvement in the QEP. And, as these two components (motivation and support) are not mutually exclusive, they must be delivered with considerable overlap.

• Finally, on-going faculty support will be based on and facilitate career progression. For instance, new faculty might need mentoring and orientation workshops, while seasoned professors might desire exposure to new technologically and learning approaches. For those with considerable experience, faculty support will also offer opportunities to enhance the transition from full professional engagement to part-time or retirement.

The QEP has created an opportunity that not only addresses student engagement but also faculty rejuvenation in their respective disciplines as well as increased collaboration with peers.

**Review of literature.** Fear et al. (2006:157) report that “Teacher educators, in particular, are raising questions about how best to prepare novice teachers to teach *all children well* in an environment characterized by testing and accountability, teacher shortages, and high attrition among beginning teachers.” The same situation exists at the college level. Patterns of frustration, avoidance, and disengagement among faculty are very similar to the patterns seen in students because, according to Tagg (2003:101), today’s university classroom “is more conducive to risk avoidance than to risk seeking.”

Much distrust, gossip, and lack of cooperation between departments and schools is based on ignorance. As Tagg (2003:282, 115) explains, “The life sciences instructor does not know what the sociology instructor is doing, and neither knows what the counselors are telling their students.” He also found that when talking to student service personnel on various college campuses, they often regard “the conventional curriculum as the enemy and view themselves as guides to help students pass through the minefield of institutional requirements without serious injury.” Instead, major advisors and counselors should adopt the responsibility of steering students into courses that will enhance the skills that need development and of encouraging student performance that will benefit their career goals. Farmer (1999: 201) explains that “Since most students cannot master a skill at the expected level for a graduating senior by taking a single freshmen-level course, faculty in each major program must assume responsibility for helping students further develop their skills within the framework of the discipline in their respective major programs.” In addition, faculty members and advisors, isolated from one another’s classrooms and programs, sometimes rely on hearsay and complaint. And some of that hearsay and some those complaints are designed for manipulation. Advisors need to assume responsibility for improving skills. No amount of faculty support or assessment can combat the circumventing effect of “helpful” advisors who steer weak students into “easy” classes.

Creating an atmosphere for faculty support at the university level is equivalent to situations Kanter (2004:146) found among businesses and sports teams. She says, “Turnarounds are not for the impatient or the faint of heart” (Kanter 2004:146). Turnarounds are like a three-legged stool composed of accepting accountability (facing
facts rather than finding fault), cultivating collaboration, and inspiring initiative and innovation. Kanter (2004:243-263) found that winning solutions included respect for internal talent, rather than bringing in outside consultants, in order to develop confidence in one another based on results. She said consultants tended to send the message that current employees were incapable, which led to “doom loops” of more consultants and reverse competition, which means “hoping that other divisions didn’t do well, because that might jeopardize one’s own budget, or hoarding funds rather than committing them to new ventures, which further reduced initiative and creativity.” Instead, colleges have been embracing collaborative problem solving to create engagement, team building, and confidence. Fear et al. (2006:149) explain that collaborative problem solving recognizes the university community’s creativity and “that important learning emerges, sometimes mysteriously, from being together.” Collaboration increases opportunities for insights, commitment, and energy. This collaboration is sometimes also conducive to solving problems hidden from individual faculty members. Tagg (2003: 213) quotes a chemistry professor who related an example of scientists engaged in the process of discussing classroom teaching. They discovered an important confusion that had been invisible to all but the students:

I was very intrigued and excited by a conversation that happened with my colleagues in which five other Ph.D. scientists sat around and argued intensely about what the word “fact” meant. We had a geologist, a couple of biologists, I’m a chemist, and we’re all scientists, but we were all using this word differently. So what does that mean? Well, it means that we took it out of our outcome because if we couldn’t agree on it, to pretend that our students could meet it, that just doesn’t work.

Their conversation sounds quite similar to the one that has been raging (and creating engagement and critical thinking) in the humanities over the word “truth” for several years. The collaborative Liberty Hyde Bailey Scholars Program in the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources at Michigan State University intentionally even blurs distinctions between students and faculty as they meet together and jointly decide what they want to learn and then pursue that knowledge together (Tagg 2003:140).

What we are already doing. Faculty members at SRSU are not required to “publish or perish.” SRSU faculty members receive promotion and tenure based primarily on teaching and service. Faculty support programs that are currently in place emphasize various opportunities to allow faculty to augment their specializations:

- SRSU offers traditional faculty sabbaticals. Although usually focused on individual and professional activity, faculty who receive sabbaticals are expected to enhance the university's research and teaching mission and benefit students and colleagues upon returning to their campus positions.
- Research-service grants provide or supplement research opportunities available to untenured faculty who have given unusually large amounts of time and effort to university service outside their own departments (e.g., campus- or system-wide committees). The grants provide summer salary support for the grantees to pursue worthy research projects.
• The office of Human Resources provides orientation for faculty, administrators, and staff who are new or at early stages of their careers. These orientation programs may be intensive across several days or focused, with completion in as little as a few hours. In any event, objectives revolve around orienting the new hire to policies and procedures in place across campus. Programs of this type are also offered on an online interactive basis.

• Schools and departments have traditionally provided travel funds and registration for conference attendance, release time, and mentoring.

• Sul Ross Media and Instructional Technology Services (MITS) provide an ongoing schedule of up to 20 faculty/staff/student workshops every semester. These workshops cover topics from beginning to advanced instruction in MS Office, multimedia, computer maintenance, as well as instruction in using and administering our online distance learning courseware (Blackboard). In addition, special topic workshops, presentations, and brown-bag discussions dealing with current technology tools and innovations are also offered every semester by MITS.

• Several departments offer seminars and colloquia for faculty and graduate students, often inviting the campus community to the presentations.

• The SRSU Faculty Assembly has maintained a culture of faculty support through
  o Research Enhancement Grants (Research Council) and Faculty Development and Enrichment Grants (Teaching Council). These assist faculty in tenure-track positions with monetary incentives, release time, or extra compensation for research and teaching development. Joint work with graduate students and undergraduates has been encouraged through these grants.
  o The Teaching Council has also been sponsoring Teaching Forums as outlets for sharing good ideas and new teaching methods among faculty.

• SRSU offers faculty and staff scholarships to enroll in courses for career enhancement.

Overall, these support programs are intended to provide a cohesive framework of campus initiatives and opportunities from a myriad of sources. Yet, in spite of these many faculty support programs, faculty members have not been expected to keep up with higher education learning research and data indicate low student engagement. Time constraints, with full-time faculty teaching four courses and often over-loads, prohibits keeping abreast of new research. A new faculty support center will provide assistance. Once faculty support has been implemented, faculty who desire to continue to be evaluated primarily on the basis of student learning rather than publication will need to demonstrate value-added student learning success either through data (standardized tests and surveys, OIT tests and surveys, or faculty/participant designed and approved tests or questionnaires) and/or enrichment by updating their student learning skills through further development.

We have organized faculty support through the QEP with two strategies: syllabi or “Learning Contracts” and seminars or “Collaborative Faculty Learning Communities.”

**Learning contracts for critical thinking.** SRSU has traditionally used faculty syllabi as a contractual agreement between faculty and students for course requirements. In fall 2006, the QEP committee asked faculty members to use verbs targeting higher
order thinking that were supplied during a SACS workshop led by Flateby (2005). One portion of Flateby’s workshop concentrated on the importance of designing test questions (and therefore course objectives) to address four levels of thinking skills: 1) knowledge, 2) comprehension, 3) application, and 4) analysis (see also the revised Bloom’s Taxonomy in Anderson and Krathwohl 2001). Flateby stressed that although our final goal should always be level-four critical thinking, teachers should also remember to begin at level one, progressing through two and three in order to help students reach level four. Ideally, this step-by-step increase in higher-level thinking should be applied in each class period, throughout the semester, and become a progressive part of departmental curriculum plans. Flateby provided a list of verbs to help design questions targeting the different learning and thinking levels. During post-conference committee discussions, we wondered if it might not be possible to design course syllabi objectives to demonstrate a learning progression from level 1 to 4 by using these verbs.

In preparation for SACS reaccredidation review, several committee members, along with the SRSU provost, created a list of desired syllabi components. The QEP committee then supplied faculty with the verbs listed below as well as a request to improve learning goals on their syllabi by using this language:

- **Level 1**: define, list, match, recall, name, report, select, recite, state, label, identify
- **Level 2**: describe, paraphrase, summarize, generalize, estimate, classify, explain, predict, illustrate, give an example of, state in your own words, translate
- **Level 3**: determine, chart, solve a problem, implement, prepare, use an approach, develop, choose an appropriate procedure, apply a principle, relate, demonstrate
- **Level 4**: compare, contrast, design, plan, appraise, discriminate, infer, create, organize, generate, critique, judge, weigh, evaluate, combine, conclude, support (Flatby 2005).

The QEP committee also advised the faculty that a good course syllabus should demonstrate critical thinking progression from level one to four by using these verbs to design learning objectives. We supplied faculty with a syllabus template, a list of other desired components, a copy of the learning goals required by THECB, and asked them to submit copies of their revised syllabi electronically to Institutional Research and Effectiveness.

The committee received very good cooperation with 81% of faculty from the Alpine campus and 93% of faculty from the RGC campuses supplying improved syllabi during the 2006-2007 academic year (http://shire.sulross.edu/cgi-bin/syllabi/syllabi.pl). Since preliminary results were very encouraging, we believe that syllabi have the potential to help increase faculty awareness and focus on higher-order thinking as well as evaluate progressive learning goals within each course and from grade level to grade level (i.e., 1000 to 2000 to 3000 to 4000, and on to the graduate level). Syllabi can be used to help faculty clearly plan sequencing for courses, clearly convey learning objectives to students, and provide one means of assessing faculty participation in the QEP. Results from Fall 2006 and Spring 2007 syllabi analysis can be used to benchmark...
higher-order learning goals. We emphasize the importance of syllabi and learning goals by calling them “learning contracts” between faculty and students and using them to help monitor progress toward higher level or critical thinking goals and corresponding assignments and activities.

In addition, one of the top student complaints from the 2004-2005 Enrolled Student Survey was that faculty do not provide timely feedback about student progress in courses. So, faculty will be encouraged to list a feedback policy on syllabi. As we are able to pinpoint problems that can be addressed and monitored through changes to syllabi, those changes will be implemented as part of the contract between faculty and students. Therefore, syllabi have become a key component of our new faculty support program as “Learning Contracts.”

Collaborative Faculty Learning Communities. Faculty support for one another will be organized primarily as a voluntary, interdisciplinary, collaborative learning community that will meet once a month in a 2-hour seminar for one full year. This will follow the same model of higher-order critical thinking objectives recommended for students. Collaboration will also emphasize “respect for internal talent” (Kanter 2004:224), and help to develop interdisciplinary understanding and trust. SRSU believes that our problems need to be solved by our own faculty who know our students best. This plan is based on several strong beliefs:

- The best and most credible sources of good ideas are our own colleagues because of our common experience with SRSU students. SRSU believes most members of our faculty are interested in student learning or they wouldn’t be teaching here, but time for good talk about teaching is rare. Some faculty members seem to be almost starved for good talk about teaching. They want to tell each other about the good things they are already doing, but nobody has time to listen. The seminars will provide time to listen and learn from one another.

- Many of our faculty members are also creative problem solvers, they just need time. They need re-engagement with teaching. Student engagement is not possible without faculty engagement. SRSU believes that nothing would be more rewarding to most faculty members than to find students engaged in their classes. One goal of the seminars is to instill more pride in the teaching profession.

- SRSU believes that the best way to model the behavior we want from our students is authentic demonstration of our faculty’s own capacity to become learners. So SRSU invites faculty to become active and engaged learners through faculty support seminars.

The guiding philosophy will be to work as a group to discover ways to improve student learning at SRSU. The seminars will be guided by a Coordinator of Faculty Support, hired prior to Fall 2008, and the QEP Advisory Committee. The coordinator will be a service resource not “teacher” or “director” for the group.

Each fall semester, the coordinator will solicit current faculty for volunteers. As support for the Human Resources orientation program, new full-time faculty hires will also be required to participate in a faculty support seminar during their first year of
employment. Depending on the number of volunteers and new hires, the coordinator will create one or two 10- to 15-member seminar groups with deans responsible for 10% representation from all three schools (A&S, PS, ANRS) and at least one representative from Student Life each year. Seminar participants will help one another to solve learning problems, create better understanding between schools, promote team work, and promote interdisciplinary collaboration. New faculty will be valuable resources of new ideas gleaned from other universities. Current faculty will provide valuable experience with the SRSU campus community. Each seminar will also include a representative from Student Life or Recreational Sports in order to foster integration of activities with academics and vice-versa. Through faculty support seminars, participants will be exposed to the university’s diverse learning cultures and develop better understanding and teamwork. Participation in outdoor learning and pilots of engagement may overlap with seminar participation; however, deans will be responsible for participation in faculty seminars by at least 10% of faculty from each school.

Faculty support seminar participants will design their own program of study, determine subjects for the seminars, and share responsibility for research and peer critique. The literature stresses over and over that it is often simply the process of inquiry that creates faculty engagement, which in turn results in student engagement, which results in student learning. The coordinator will provide research support, logistic reservations and media equipment, and arrange requested guest speakers, as well as volunteer to give presentations or suggest new ideas for the group to consider. The main objective of interdisciplinary collaboration is to develop the group as a diverse learning community in order to promote creative course design and share ideas for engagement or critical thinking strategies across the disciplines. In short, the group will use the familiar seminar format to explore learning methods in order to design or redesign their courses, course assignments, and student assessment. The faculty support seminar groups will be encouraged to periodically provide information to part-time faculty, graduate teaching assistants, and the faculty at large in various formats of their choice (email, newsletter, web, presentation, panel discussion, forum, etc.)

The program will be assessed through a method chosen and/or designed by faculty support seminar group consensus. Upon review of assessment data, the QEP Advisory Committee will make suggestions for improving faculty support seminar design. Assessment of individual faculty members will be described in the assessment chapter of this document and will use data from student learning, as well as changes in the participants’ student evaluations, course drop rates, and self-designed before and after student learning assessment tools. All participants in the faculty support seminars will be encouraged to design their own new assessment tools as we search for better measurements. As an example, Tagg (2003:211) quotes one teacher who describes using course syllabi and entering the learning goals (outcomes) and course content on a spreadsheet:

Across the top of the spreadsheet were the outcomes for the course. Down the side in a vertical column they listed their class sessions, all their readings, all their assignments, any service-learning component, a lab—everything they did in that class. Then they worked on this grid to see which sessions were working on which outcomes, which readings were working on which outcomes, or where there was a reading that wasn’t
working on any outcome, or where there was an outcome that wasn’t getting any attention. . . . Now many of the outcomes have been clarified and rewritten, and we’re going to do it again, as a check to see whether what they’re doing in the course really is working on the outcomes. The group eventually used this process to design rubrics for learning assessment.

The coordinator will also be responsible for collecting and monitoring the use and evaluation of Learning Contracts, for creating and maintaining a one-stop-shopping website to help all faculty become and remain up to date on higher education teaching theory, for providing links to information on opportunities for national teaching symposia, workshops, conferences, and for providing support to the Teaching Council as a source for possible development grants or to help locate innovative ideas, participants, and material for future forums. The website will include a discussion board, strategies, tips, forms, announcements, and video seminars available through the web. The literature is full of good ideas, and the coordinator will help to provide that material by stocking the seminar room and website with relevant material.

We hope to change the instruction-centered attitude that high failure rates are indicative of quality programs to the learning-centered view that a high failure rate indicates poor support and poor strategies for learning. We also hope to change the idea that learning success can be measured by the number of A’s given. All students, both those labeled “weak” and those labeled “outstanding,” must concretely demonstrate increased learning through data-driven assessment either by using faculty-designed instruments or standardized critical thinking tests. Tagg (2003:331) observes that “Today, teachers at many colleges are as feedback-deprived as are students.” According to Bandura (1997:217), “The less individuals believe in themselves, the more they need explicit, proximal, and frequent feedback of progress that provides repeated affirmation of their growing capabilities.” This is true of both students and faculty. SRSU supports using data to indicate value-added learning and improve strategies, not simply using it to label, judge, and rank, and grade, both students and faculty.

In addition to the seminars, current professors who score below 2.0 on questions number 9 to 22 on student evaluations for two semesters in a row, or who experience excessive student dropouts or failures in their classes, may be encouraged by their Deans to contact the Coordinator of Faculty Support for services. The coordinator will develop trust and a plan of enrichment through private and confidential interviews (Fear et al. 2006: 133-151), and collaborate with them to solve specific problems. The coordinator may share parts of the interview results anonymously with the seminar group in order to help search for solutions. Just as faculty will be encouraged to give feedback and coaching rather than evaluation and judgment, faculty evaluations will provide opportunity for growth, not punishment.

**Faculty incentives and opportunities.** The Provost, Deans, Department chairs, and Faculty Affairs Council will work together to design weighted rubrics for fair evaluation of faculty on FE3 forms, merit raises, and at tenure and promotion with a data-driven reward system to encourage faculty support.

**Outdoor learning as a pathway to engagement**

**Adventure, challenge, or recreation education.** Educators have long known that adventure education or Outward Bound experiences have proven to increase self-esteem
and improve behavior in children from poverty, delinquents, psychiatric patients, and corporate executives, indicating very little difference between gender, age, ethnicity, class or physical fitness level (Hattie et al. 1997, Cason and Gillis 1994, Marsh and Richards 1988). The Outward Bound process relies on tasks or challenges set in unfamiliar physical and social environments, which inspire engagement and risk, provide real roles in the decision making-process, and result in problem-solving. This process convinces participants that action, effort, persistence, thinking, and team work create success. Smith et al. (1992) suggest that challenge or adventure education also provided education in health, group dynamics, family, spiritual, and indigenous knowledge.

Although education research connected to the outdoors is not extensive, Neill (2003) in a meta-analysis of data from numerous outdoor adventure programs found promising, significant (.3 to .4) outcomes in both education and therapy. The outdoor adventure literature seems conclusive that strong connections exist between academic success and self-concept.

To capitalize on this proven success of adventure education and its connections to employment opportunities, some schools, like Lakehead University in Thunder Bay, Ontario, have created a School of Outdoor Recreation, Parks and Tourism. LU offers a variety of social science and professional preparation courses emphasizing recreational activities and leisure pursuits related to the natural environment (outdoor leadership, nature-based tourism, protected area management, natural science, group dynamics, ecological literacy, and sustainability management). They offer physical education courses in rock climbing, canoeing, back country travel (Leave No Trace), pre-trip planning, and risk-management; as well as related social and humanities courses in backcountry living, heritage interpretation, and natural history. Trips often combine readings from explorer’s journals, with stories from First Nations, with contemporary political issues (LU 2005). Utah State University lists over 30 courses in “Natural Resource Learning” with credit hours ranging from 1½ to 2 hours. Courses included outdoor cooking and camping, various hiking and backpacking destinations in a variety of seasons, canyoneering, fishing, natural history, nature photography, pistol marksmanship, animal behavior and tracking, three different courses in bicycle touring, and six different courses in rock climbing (UU 2003).

Recent publications, like Teaching in the Field: Working with Students in the Outdoor Classroom (Crimmel 2003), tout outdoor experiences as opportunities for quickly sparking friendships, instilling confidence, self-motivation, and enhancing student engagement in academics, especially reading, writing, and speaking. Research shows that in addition to academic preparedness, students’ personal and social adjustment to college life impacts their success and retention (Thomas and Minton 2004:11). So care should be taken that those students from all ethnicities, economic backgrounds, gender, age, and physical fitness “feel welcome and able to fully participate” (Davis and Murrell 1993:1). Organizers of outdoor activities should also ensure that working students and students from low-income backgrounds can be equally included and outfitted, as some types of outdoor excursions require expensive equipment and time away from campus, family, and work responsibilities (Nelson 2003). Textbooks like Outdoor Leadership: Theory and Practice (Martin et al. 2006) have been developed. SRSU already offers numerous courses that could help satisfy new majors in outdoor recreation, and we have tremendous potential for further expansion.
Academic outdoor education in public schools. While many outdoor programs concentrate on wilderness adventure, new scholarship has also been touting the academic value of less-strenuous programs in the public schools. An outdoor-based program in Washington State, called Environmental Education consistently increased public school students’ standardized test scores because it increased motivation, improved overall behavior, developed critical thinking skills, fostered the ability to work both independently and collaboratively, and related the school lessons to the students’ community and real world (MacGregor 2004).

Lieberman and Hoody (1998:1) investigated an interdisciplinary, collaborative, student-centered, hands-on, and engaged learning public school program called Environment as an Integrating Context (EIC). They explain that EIC-based learning is not primarily focused on learning about the environment, nor is it limited to developing environmental awareness. It is about using a school’s surroundings and community as a framework within which students can construct their own learning, guided by teachers and administrators using proven educational practices. EIC programs typically employ the environment as a comprehensive focus and framework for learning in all areas: general and disciplinary knowledge; thinking and problem-solving skills, and basic life skills, such as cooperation and interpersonal communications.

Their California study used 40 public schools, 400 students, and 250 teachers and administrators to compare paired schools using EIC to those that did not. Across the board, students from schools using EIC performed better on standardized tests in reading, writing, math, science, and social science, had better behavior, showed more engagement and enthusiasm for learning, and had more pride in their own accomplishments. Ninety-six percent of the students developed higher-level critical thinking skills. Ninety-five percent of EIC teachers also said the approach had revitalized their interest in education and their profession; 95% said the interdisciplinary program challenged them to continue “professional development, personal growth, to learn new content and skills, and to explore how to interconnect subject areas” (Lieberman and Hoody 1998:10). The National Center on Accessibility reports that special education students, those with low academic performance, and those with behavior problems responded positively to outdoor service projects that brought them in contact with professionals in order to build accessible trails for people of all abilities and plant a garden at a local nursing home (Moraes 2003).

The American Association for the Advancement of Science urges public school teachers to take science outdoors, to do science instead of learn from a textbook (MacGregor 2004). However, since most public school science teachers pattern their classes after their university classes, many are based on lab work rather than the outdoors. Humorously, Natalie Angier (2007:12) quotes a Harvard physics professor who “marvels cheekily at the thoroughness with which the public image of science has been drained of all joy. ‘We had to work really hard to accomplish this spectacular feat, because I’ve never met a little kid who didn’t think science was really fun and really interesting.’” Rickinson et al. (2004:2) also find that field work “can have a positive impact on long-term memory” and can lead to engagement and reinforce and influence both behavior and learning, as well as serve as a bridge to higher-order thinking skills. However, they also
caution that “Poor fieldwork is likely to lead to poor learning. Students quickly forget irrelevant information that has been inadequately presented.”

Forte and Schurr’s (2003) 10-page curriculum planner used in the SRSU teacher education program is based on Bloom (1984), Williams (1980) and Gardner (1983). The planner provides a full-page description of the “newest” addition to the list of multiple intelligences: “The Naturalist.” The planner offers a definition, occupations that appeal to naturalists, a checklist for identifying people with strong naturalist intelligence, learning strategies, and five steps to help students create natural collections. SRSU future teachers already participate in the Outdoor School Experience, a program sponsored by Fredericksburg ISD and Texas Tech. Last fall 60 fifth graders learned about math, science, language arts, and social studies through “an integrated approach to learning” by completing a variety of outdoor field studies in and around the banks of the Llano River. Local public schools could benefit from further emphasis in outdoor learning for our future teachers (Blanton 2006).

Outdoor learning has proven to be an ideal strategy for increasing critical thinking skills and student engagement across the disciplines in the public schools. Rickinson et al. (2004:3) found that school grounds or community outdoor projects have the capacity to link with most curriculum areas. Outdoor projects also increased confidence and motivation, renewed pride in community, and gave students a “greater sense of belonging and responsibility.” In addition the students developed better relationships with each other, faculty, and community. Although not targeted in the research, the projects also provided increased opportunity for exercise and physical fitness, another problem that is quickly becoming a national crisis.

**Academic outdoor education in universities.** Serious educational connections to the outdoors have also been on the rise in academia as our natural environment has become socially, politically, and personally important to most Americans. During the past two decades, environmental topics have expanded from agriculture and science into almost every discipline: ecocriticism and ecofeminism in the humanities (Glotfelty and Fromm 1996), ethnobotany (Nabhan 1985), ethnoecology (Nazarea 1999), environmental history (Nash 1990), ecopsychology (Roszak et al. 1995; Clayton and Opotow 2004), eco-friendly business practices (Hawken 1993), ecological architecture (Orr 2006), the “greening” of religion (Gottlieb 1996), an interdisciplinary interest in “wilderness” as a construct of the imagination (Cronon 1995), and even bicycle science (Wilson 2004). International treaties like CITES and CAMPFIRE now regulate endangered species around the world. World-wide interest in organic gardening, earth-friendly housing, and sustainable agriculture is growing, but college curriculums have not kept up with the demand.

Even locally, a new program, The Texas Master Naturalist Program, sponsored by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and the Texas Cooperative Extension Service, helps children and adults in the community learn about Texas’ natural resources in order to help preserve them. The local chapter, Tierra Grande, has now graduated 35 engaged participants, at the same time that enrollment in many SRSU science courses has declined. Interest in the outdoors is strong, but that interest is not always served by laboratory-based courses, and according to LEAP (2007:22), “the majority of Americans are scientifically illiterate.” Environmental issues have become politically important and engaging at least partly because of the general public’s lack of knowledge on the subject.
Numerous universities have recognized a need for broad and general education about the natural world, including MIT who initiated a graduate-level writing program several years ago to teach scientists how to write for the public. Sometimes programs establish formal relationships with park managers and conduct research such as assessing human impact on campsites (Cuthbertson et al. 2003). Since 1999, Clemson University has successfully combined service learning with outdoor learning in an on-going student project to research, fund, design, and install outdoor learning “habitats” for local K-12 schools. The project involved freshman composition, upper-level horticulture, communication, and computer design courses (Haque et al. 2002).

Although field experiences have long been a tradition in many sciences, Millenbah and Millspaugh (2003:129) stress the importance of incorporating critical thinking skills into fact-based wildlife management demonstrations because “biologists are never required to simply regurgitate facts; rather they must be proactive thinkers.” They also warn that a “Failure to demonstrate a solid foundation in scientific theory and an ability to apply that theory and process new information effectively leads to distrust and a loss of credibility.” They also stress the need for assessment based on learning rather than simply an experience. According to Lewis (1993:215), “One of the most common criticisms from those who have never taught, nor participated in, field-based education is founded on the assumption that field-based classes are not academically rigorous enough to compare to a traditional campus-based course.” Therefore, SRSU professors who already include field study and outdoor learning components in courses will design critical thinking components and assessment tools in order to measure the quality of learning that occurs during field experiences.

**Place-based learning.** Research has also found correlations between cultural identity and educational experience (Purdie et al. 2002). Therefore, place-based outdoor education seems a logical vehicle through which to create a sense of belonging at SRSU, to instill pride and confidence in students from this rural U.S. border area, and to increase their academic success.

This is not to say that place-based education at SRSU would seem provincial, but would instead give our students a sense of being in the middle of numerous contemporary issues. As a rural border university, many Sul Ross graduates have been active in or affected by important national issues like environmental justice (Pellow and Brulle 2005), NAFTA (Deere and Esty 2002), water allocation (Conca 2005), and environmental racism or the tourist/service racial divide (Sandler and Pezzullo 2006). The sparsely populated areas of northern Mexico and far west Texas have been threatened as repositories for sludge, radio-active material, and as a corridor for international shipping because, as the Environmental Protection Agency once said of the Navajo reservation, we are “‘too remote’ to be of ‘significant national concern’” (Kuletz 1998). We are also in the midst of land acquisition as a controversial conservation strategy (Fairfax et al. 2005). Emphasis in agriculture is shifting from mass production to maintaining rural employment and communities, protection of food quality and safety, and preservation of rural landscapes and natural resources (Hervieu 2000). SRSU is surrounded by rural landscapes that have been preserved through agricultural and natural resource management. These landscapes supply a living outdoor laboratory for serious economic, social, environmental, political, and aesthetic discussions.
One idea that can create an engaging opportunity, and could be important for SRSU, is the possibility of even challenging modernity. Ray and Anderson (2000) explain that people they call “Cultural Creatives” recognize that globalization, the environmental crisis, the widening gap between rich and poor are all causing a gradual cultural change. They posit that this is a cultural crisis, and people should re-evaluate what constitutes “the good life” (Fear et al. 2006: 318-320). According to Michael J. Sandel, political theorist at Harvard,

“…developments in information technology are enabling companies to squeeze out all the inefficiencies and friction from their markets and business operations….But a flat, frictionless world is a mixed blessing. It may…be good for global business. Or it may, as Marx believed, augur well for a proletarian revolution. But it may also pose a threat to the distinctive places and communities that give us our bearings, that locate us in the world . . . . Some obstacles to a frictionless global market are truly sources of waste and lost opportunities. But some of these inefficiencies are institutions, habits, cultures, and traditions that people cherish precisely because they reflect nonmarket values like social cohesion, religious faith, and national pride” (qtd. in Friedman 2005:204).

Davison’s (2001:213) discussion of the ambiguity inherent in the term “sustainability” is a good example. Although we are often asked to buy into the sustainability ideal, he says “there are no simple, universal, or transparent answers.” Yet, he considers this conflict a strength rather than a handicap because it fosters critical thinking and forces individuals to develop the “capacity to articulate what we feel most worthy of being sustained in our lives.” Fostering a conversation about what is most worthy of being sustained in our border community can provide rich material for all disciplines. Lieberman and Hoody (1998:7-8) found that

In the context of their local environment, students begin to make connections between geography, history, politics, economics, and natural resources in their region. Making such connections sparks students’ interests, [and] engages them. . . . [They] begin to ask thought-provoking questions, approach their teachers with creative ideas, and explore new ways of reasoning.

Regional theory has historically suggested that specific places actually cause certain types of housing (log, adobe, ice), transportation (boat, dog, horse), economic bases (trade, barter), foods and food preparation styles (drying, salting; whale blubber, rice), as well as metaphors and rhythms in prose and poetry (Austin 1932, Lewis 1993). Nature can also provide a bridge to understanding all world cultures. Water, mountains, sunlight, trees, birds, and flowers often have the same symbolic meaning across religions, languages, and political affiliations. Designing hands-on learning experiences in the outdoors naturally lends itself to recognizing analogies, one of the basic skills of critical thinking (Potts 1994). From science to metaphor to agriculture, nature is the universal language of critical thinking.

Outdoor Learning at SRSU. Thus, outdoor learning at SRSU is defined along the lines of what is sometimes called place-based education, pedagogy of place, place-based learning, environmental education, or regional studies. Place-based education
promotes learning that is rooted in what is local—the unique history, environment, culture, economy, literature, and art that has been shaped by and influenced by a particular place (Ryden 1993). According to this pedagogy, students have often been forced to abandon what place-based educators call their “sense of place” by focusing too quickly or intensely on national or global issues. This is not to say that international and national issues are unimportant or peripheral, but that students should also have grounding in the history, culture, and ecology of their immediate environment. Recent publications like *Teaching about Place: Learning from the Land* (Christensen and Crimmel 2008) explain that place-based education is often hands-on, project-based, interdisciplinary, and related to the immediate natural surroundings.

SRSU already includes the outdoors in many classes and student activities. Outdoor learning experiences in geology include a range of activities from simple hikes up Hancock hill for a local geology review to extended raft trips down the river canyons in the Big Bend region. Common destinations include Big Bend National Park, Big Bend Ranch State Park, Davis Mountains State Park, Carlsbad Caverns and Guadalupe Mountains National Park. The geology club routinely organizes trips to destinations of geologic interest outside of the immediate Trans-Pecos area. The Biology department also offers a variety of field-based classes for plant, animal, and microbial topics. In addition to specialized summer courses, standard long-term courses typically involve field trips throughout the tri-county region. Assets like the Archives and Museum of the Big Bend and programs like Environmental Studies, Outdoor Theatre, Center for Big Bend Studies, the Chihuahuan Desert Research Institute, and numerous on-going research projects and classes already provide serious academic connections to the surrounding outdoor area.

The SRSU wildlife management program offers undergraduate research experiences on campus (McCleery et al. 2005), and has recently formed a Borderlands Research Institute for Natural Resource Management (BRI 2007) (http://www.sulross.edu/brinrm/). The Institute’s website touts the Chihuahuan Desert Borderlands as one of the most picturesque and biologically diverse regions of the world. Mountain ranges erupt from the desert floor and exceed elevations of 8,000 feet. This contrast in elevation greatly affects the biological diversity that occurs in the Chihuahuan Desert. From desert grasslands to cienegas to ponderosa pine forests, plant communities and plant species are diverse with over 2,000 known species. These diverse habitats also support a variety of vertebrates including over 500 species of birds, over 170 species of reptiles and amphibians, and over 120 species of mammals.

SRSU also offers the unique opportunity of combining outdoor learning with an agricultural perspective, being situated in an area filled with fourth and fifth generation ranchers and ancient indigenous irrigation farming along the Rio Grande. Many courses offered through the School of Agricultural and Natural Resource Sciences include field trips, field-based course exercises, and field-based laboratories that include range and wildlife experiences, or pen and pasture situations involving work with beef cattle, swine, sheep and goats, and horses. Many local businesses and various state and federal agencies
are also strongly connected to this natural environment, offering employment opportunities connected to ranching, tourism, and hunting.

In addition, SRSU has recently joined the Gulf Coast Cooperative Ecosystems Studies Unit (CESU 2007), a cooperative that enables universities, non-governmental organizations and federal agencies to collaborate on environmental projects. SRSU partners with over 20 other universities, with government agencies like the Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and U.S. Geological Survey, and with non-government agencies like the Nature Conservancy of Texas, Coastal Conservation Association and Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center. A recent article in *The Teaching Professor* stressed that “making links between the disciplines and the lives students lead when they graduate, engages students’ thinking” (Mezeske 2006:3). Numerous universities from Princeton to Texas Tech have attempted to integrate the outdoors with academics. However, most are located in large cities. SRSU – with deer, antelope, wild turkey, javelina, fox, and raptors often traversing campus property – provides an ideal setting for outdoor learning. As one committee member put it, “By targeting outdoor learning, we can actually consider our location an asset.” SRSU is located in the middle of an immense low population area surrounded by two national parks, one national historical site, three state parks, one state historical site, and three wildlife management areas and literally millions of privately owned acres where livelihoods depend on land and resource management. Every geologic process and rock formation known to geologists (except glaciations) can be observed here, with schools such as Harvard University sending their students to West Texas on geology field trips. Alternative fuels such as wind and solar power are not abstractions to residents of this area. However, traditional departmental organization at SRSU, funding, and curriculum requirements inhibit interdisciplinary innovation, and off-campus travel seems an impossible dream for under-funded state border institutions.

**Integrating academics with student activities.** One budgetary solution may be integrating student activities with academics. Thus, outdoor or adventure education is also included in SRSU’s definition for outdoor learning. Outdoor education usually refers to organized learning that takes place in the outdoors. Adventure education programs often involve residential or journey-based experiences in which students participate in a variety of adventurous challenges such as hiking, climbing, canoeing, ropes courses, and group games. These programs draw upon the philosophy and theory of experiential education and may also focus on environmental education. This provides a focus for student activities, as a way to integrate important life skills (i.e., accountability, self-motivation, time management, work ethic, self-expectations, acculturation, appreciation of diversity) as well as academics into the outdoor experience.

The SRSU Pathway to Academic Success and Socialization (PASS) program incorporates the outdoors through swimming trips to Balmorhea, exploring Carlsbad Caverns, rafting and camping in Big Bend, and skiing in Santa Fe. Recreational Sports sponsored climbing Mount Livermore, Guadalupe Peak, and Emory Peak and canoeing Santa Elena Canyon in Spring 2007, and they also provide equipment rentals for camping and hiking. Student Activities annually sponsor club activities on the mall, relay races at the track and long-distance running, various homecoming activities on and around Hancock or SR Hill, outdoor games, outdoor socials, movies on the mall, and an inflatable extravaganza. Organizers of student activities will be challenged to integrate
academic learning goals and assessment into their planning, possibly as out-reach to specific courses or faculty, and/or as experiential education for outdoor employment opportunities. A 2004 ACT Policy Report found numerous studies suggesting that “retention programs can be improved if they integrate both academic and non-academic factors” and that in spite of poor academic performance, students will persist if they have “feelings of fit with their institution” (Lotkowski et al. 2004:15). Tagg (2003:80) found that the most engaging life-changing learning situations occurred during extracurricular activities, not during class. Thus, all members of the SRSU campus community will be challenged to integrate critical thinking situations into their outdoor activities with the goal of helping students to become engaged with learning and problem solving in order to construct outdoor learning experiences that will inspire engaging and life-changing learning. The campus community will also be challenged to design cooperative solutions for improved attendance in all classes.

The SRSU plan of action. The QEP committee desires primarily to address the needs of struggling students who are not yet successful and increase their opportunities, not simply to increase opportunities for students who are already successful. A comprehensive outdoor program for freshman leaders, ambassadors, honors students, and peer mentors that creates a four-year development continuum will provide engagement only for successful students. Therefore, each school will conduct a retreat consisting of selected faculty, staff, and students for the purpose of designing pilot programs to enhance outdoor learning for struggling students. The Student Government is challenged to conduct an outdoor retreat for SGA, future teachers, and club presidents to discuss “best practices” for student engagement through outdoor learning, with an emphasis on learning and retention. ACE is challenged to organize similar interdisciplinary and inter-staff retreats for remedial students. All members of the wider campus community are invited to participate by designing pilot programs, implementing them, and reporting their results to the QEP Advisory Committee.

Some faculty and staff have expressed concern that due to the nature of their disciplines or personal physical problems, they are not sure how they might contribute to outdoor learning. So a few concrete examples for inspiration follow:

- **Archives of the Big Bend** – The Archives holds resources which could be used in support of outdoor learning: maps, historical photographs of the area, theses and reports on the biology, geology, and geography of the region, and papers and records kept by residents who live and work in a desert environment.

- **Chemistry lab** – Phytochemistry (the study of the chemical constituents of plants), one of the botanical subdisciplines, often involves both undergraduates and graduate students in an appealing balance of outdoor and indoor activities. First, students get to experience the spiny ecological reality of the Chihuahuan Desert as they hunt for, learn to identify, and collect tissue samples from the living plants in their natural habitat. Then they experience the path of scientific discovery in the chemistry lab as they grind up the plant tissues and proceed to extract, isolate and characterize the chemical compounds likely to possess biological activity.
• **Nursing program** – During the first semester, the vocational nursing program schedules outdoor classes as a stage for developing fundamental skills. Half of the students take turns wearing glasses that simulate eye disorders such as macular degeneration, and earplugs to simulate deafness, while others pretend to be confined to wheelchairs or some other type of assistive device. Half of the students are the caregivers who must assist the “impaired” students. This experience takes place outdoors in order for the students to understand problems with access for the physically impaired client and their caregivers. It is very enlightening for all concerned.

• **Remedial math** — During the process of teaching about lines, one of the major concepts is the slope of lines. This concept extends very nicely to the grade of roads. In order to better understand this concept, we can incorporate the outdoors. In particular, the surrounding mountain sides. The students can take meter sticks and rulers to form a right angle to measure the rise and run along the mountain. Several groups can take readings from various spots on the mountain side. Averaging this data can give an estimate for the grade of the mountain, which is also the average slope of the mountain.

• **Nature writing** — Although this subject already seems to have obvious connections to the outdoors, some students often feel intimidated by nature. In order to help writers concentrate on senses other than sight, they work with a partner: one blindfolded and one taking notes on sounds, smells, and touch observed by the blinded partner. Asking a visually impaired student to lead the discussion on that day could greatly enhance that student’s confidence in his/her ability to do serious nature writing as well as provide inspiration to the class about how much our other senses can develop once we are forced to stop relying strictly on sight.

Faculty and staff have also contributed numerous other ideas for outdoor learning and engagement (see website [http://shire.sulross.edu/cgi-bin/qep/box.pl](http://shire.sulross.edu/cgi-bin/qep/box.pl)).

One significant benefit of an outdoor learning activity is the simple fact that students will be involved with each other and with faculty in engaging activities outside the classroom. Recent publications are full of calls for more student-peer and student-faculty out-of-class interaction. Specifically, this is expected to provide benefits to both faculty and students in several ways. First, it will show a genuine interest among participating faculty in student success as demonstrated by action. It will provide a basis for a more well-rounded relationship between faculty and students by offering shared experiences that are not part of a traditional classroom environment. It will also foster an atmosphere conducive to cross-discipline experiences, which are rare in “classroom only” environments. Recent publications stress the importance of integrating learning across the disciplines (Davis and Murrell 1993). According to Orr (1992:90, 101), “Issues facing contemporary societies are complex and cannot be understood through a single department or discipline. . . . Excessive specialization is fatal to comprehension because it removes knowledge from its larger context.” The outdoor approach will also offer unique opportunities for innovative and creative ways to present course material(s). And, finally, and possibly most importantly, outdoor learning will provide informal
opportunities for more candid communication than the classroom environment usually encourages. It is assumed that not all faculty members would be willing or even able to participate in such a program; however, self-selection by participating faculty would guarantee the desired level of 100% commitment from those who do choose to become involved. Involved faculty may also benefit personally both physically and professionally from a more balanced physical/intellectual lifestyle.

**Oversight of outdoor learning.** Oversight will be governed by the QEP Advisory Committee and a Coordinator of Faculty Support (CFS). In addition to duties outlined in the faculty support section, the coordinator will be responsible for

- developing and maintaining a website to include
  - destinations or opportunities available
  - volunteers with outdoor skills or expertise
  - assistant sponsors or drivers
  - outdoor research opportunities
  - outdoor work/study relationships
  - up-to-date list of available SRSU vehicles
  - check-off lists for various destinations or types of travel
  - opportunities for faculty support in outdoor learning
  - a prominent “public face” link on the SRSU homepage

- coordinating outdoor activities and learning experiences among student life, faculty, off-campus businesses, alumni, and government agencies

- conducting outdoor learning seminars for special skills (cooking, safety, map reading, plant i.d., “Leave No Trace” camping, risk management, and inclusive techniques for the handicapped)

- developing liaisons with outdoor organizations, government agencies, etc.

- determining and mapping facility needs

- coordinating and providing paperwork assistance with travel and reservations

- organizing campus-wide student conferences or discussion groups on outdoor learning

- designing and collecting faculty evaluation of the website

Funding of pilots in outdoor learning and requests for undergraduate travel will be tied to timely reports on learning assessment and providing the coordinator with trip recaps and photos to use on the website for recruiting efforts.

We have intentionally concentrated our QEP budget requests where we believe it will help students the most. One item is for a $10,000 increase in the undergraduate travel
budget. In addition, creative interdisciplinary activities, combining student activities with course field trips, can help spread our limited funding farther.

### Outdoor Travel Solutions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problems</th>
<th>Assets</th>
<th>Solutions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Travel is expensive</td>
<td>More annual funding is available for academic, undergraduate student travel than is currently used</td>
<td>CFS will search for appropriate funding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty are reluctant to shoulder the responsibility of keeping undergrads under control</td>
<td>Student leaders need projects</td>
<td>CFS will coordinate chaperone assistance from Ambassadors, Freshman Leadership, SGA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergrads are reluctant to miss work</td>
<td>Most students are employed by SRSU or SRSU alumni</td>
<td>Allow student workers 10% of employment hours per week for academic travel (can accumulate)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SRSU vehicles are “never” available</td>
<td>SRSU maintains a fleet of 11 vehicles available for student travel ranging from 3 to 33 passenger</td>
<td>CFS will post up-to-the-minute SRSU vehicle availability on the OL website</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel paperwork is daunting</td>
<td>New Coordinator of Faculty Support (CFS) needs duties</td>
<td>CFS will assist with paperwork</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty do not personally enjoy the outdoors, have conflicting physical limitations, or family responsibilities</td>
<td>Student Activities and Rec Sports offer numerous outdoor activities for students</td>
<td>CFS will provide a list of scheduled SA and Rec Sports outings with connections to academics, encourage for extra course credit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty do not know local professionals</td>
<td>SRSU alumni rule in West Texas</td>
<td>CFS will coordinate local experts and solicit their ideas for discipline-specific academic travel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty are too busy to figure out where to go and don’t know the area</td>
<td>Area has a wealth of destinations that could fit any discipline</td>
<td>CFS will maintain a website describing academic destinations in the outdoors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Campus outdoor learning environment.** Another budget request is to enhance our on-campus learning environment. Extensive literature has accumulated that praises connecting education to the outdoors for all disciplines—from the benefits of physical fitness, to psychological therapy for at-risk youth, to developing a sense of teamwork in corporate executives, to the importance of a sense of place for us all. To date research is “overwhelmingly clear about the advantages of teaching and learning in close association with natural spaces” (Cuthbertson et al. 2003:78). Yet, according to Orr (1994:112-13), “It is paradoxical that buildings on college and university campuses, places of intellect, characteristically show so little thought, imagination, sense of place, ecological awareness, and relation to any larger pedagogical intent.” These often window-less buildings imply that “serious study and the ‘distraction’ of the outdoors are not compatible” (Cuthbertson et al. 2003:78). These buildings also probably contribute to the feeling of imprisonment that students often voice. Our buildings all have windows, and we realize that construction and renovation are beyond the scope of QEP planning, but minor and inexpensive changes to the campus outdoor environment could make a significant difference and could be accomplished by our Physical Plant employees or Industrial Technology classes, possibly as collaborative projects.
SRSU campus facilities already include a few areas that can be used as outdoor classrooms: 2 outdoor theatre areas, bleachers at athletic and rodeo event facilities, and new tiered seating behind the Warnock Science Building. However, all of these are designed for eyes-front lecture format. So SRSU’s plan includes adding a cluster of tables for use with small group discussion on the shaded north side of the library, and one outdoor classroom on the mall to accommodate seminar or large group discussion. Winning businesses stress the importance of round tables to “produce better conversations” and a feeling of collaboration and equality (Kanter 2004:246-47). Locations and use will be chosen and monitored by the coordinator in conjunction with the QEP Advisory Committee, noting contributions toward student engagement and learning. One gazebo or kiosk will be built on the mall for shade and use during inclement weather by classes, clubs, musical activities, student forums, focus groups, small performances, debates, and more. We also challenge science faculty and students, the Physical Plant, the Museum of the Big Bend, Industrial Arts, and Fine Arts to work together to map and provide aesthetic interpretive signs along campus “trails,” at Kokernot Lodge, and along the newly designed Hancock (or SR) Hill hiking and mountain biking trail identifying native plants, geologic formations, and more.
Renovation of the existing swimming pool (paint, seating, lights, plants, and a nearby patio or deck) will provide a setting for academic and student activities beyond aquatic sports. This could utilize mall space and increase visibility of student organizations, encouraging passers-by to stop and congregate. Development of the Poet’s Grove at Kokernot Lodge with the addition of a firepit and the addition of big screen media access for the Old Outdoor Theatre will both provide additional spaces for outdoor performance and discussion. Shaded and lighted outdoor patio-grilling-hang-outs (near the SRSU sand volleyball courts, swimming pool, at ANRS, and near the UC) will provide areas for clubs, classes, and other student groups to gather for informal contact. Student Activities will help to develop outdoor cooking skills during student activities.

The campus outdoor learning environment will also be enhanced through placement of a few inexpensive and low-maintenance improvements like outdoor benches. Outdoor learning includes everything from the obviously beneficial landscaping with native plants for botany and natural resource management students to the less obvious benefits of placing benches around the campus mall. Reintegrating students and faculty, who may have lost touch with nature, into the outdoors can be facilitated by submersion in life-threatening situations as in an Outward Bound experience or be subtly progressive. A progressive approach may begin with the simple assignment to become aware of natural sounds and smells while sitting quietly under a tree on the campus mall. Nontraditional students, students with handicaps, or students fearful of bugs and pesticides may not feel comfortable sitting on the ground. Benches will also increase opportunities for out-of-class conversations between students as well as informal conversations between students and faculty. We also encourage investigation of feasibility and student interest for a climbing wall, high and low ropes course, and other “adventure” facilities.

As part of our plan for helping students understand and develop a sense of place, as well as integrating learning into the non-academic campus community, a co-op pilot program between Physical Plant and Student Housing will offer all freshmen an opportunity to “adopt,” care for, and “keep sacred” their own special place on campus. According to Davis and Murrell (1993:3), “Student responsibility doesn’t just happen. We must expect it, foster it, and nurture it.” Appropriate spots will be chosen, mapped, and monitored by Physical Plant employees. Incoming freshmen will be given the opportunity to choose a location from a list provided during Orientation. At the end of the year, awards for outstanding freshmen caregivers will be presented at the annual WOW banquet by the Physical Plant.

Other inexpensive outdoor facilities can be added on campus as demand increases (see possibilities at http://www.edfacilities.org/rl/outdoor.cfm). Use of outdoor facilities will be assessed by Student Activities, faculty end-of-semester reports, and Physical Plant, with additions made as demand increases.
## Preparation and Training Year 2008-2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Price</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Picnic-style round metal cluster table w/4 attached short benches for library</td>
<td>4 @ 700 = 2,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lighted umbrellas for above tables (make metal ones/wind?)</td>
<td>4 @ 135 = 540</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metal Tree circle bench (need 3 to make one full circle)</td>
<td>3 @ 380 = 1,040</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outdoor heavy-duty steel park bench 75”</td>
<td>10 @ 840 = 8,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gas grill range $1,500 -5,000 (islands @ $2,000-6,000)</td>
<td>1 @ 1,500 = 1,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small metal charcoal grills (like city park) near housing</td>
<td>10 @ 80 = 800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total purchases</strong></td>
<td><strong>15,080</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Price</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Build round concrete table/w seating for outdoor classroom</td>
<td>??</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20’ round Gazebo w/ inside benches around walls, wide rail to use as a “bar,” ceiling fan, lights--available installed from Texas Or 12’ (no frills) available @ $2,500</td>
<td>1 @ $15,000 = 15,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stools to place around outside of gazebo when used as a bar or to expand seating for a large class, etc.</td>
<td>??</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total building projects</strong></td>
<td><strong>15,000</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Annual Budget 2009-2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Price</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rope Hammock w/metal stand (fabric hammocks are cheaper)</td>
<td>4 @ 160 = 640</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rope hammock single-person tree swing</td>
<td>6 @ 120 = 720</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inflatable Movie Screen 12’</td>
<td>1 @ 250 = 250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25’x15’ available @ $4,250 seems too big?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metal picnic-style rectangular table w/2 attached benches</td>
<td>4 @ 630 = 2,520</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iron Porch swing</td>
<td>4 @ 200 = 800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lawn chairs (need to make permanent?)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camera traps for on-campus urban wildlife research</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larger animals</td>
<td>2 @ 500 = 1,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For birds</td>
<td>2 @ 250 = 500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total purchases</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Interpretive trail                                                  |             |
| Custom outdoor fireplace                                            | 3,000       |
| Or refurbish Kokernot Lodge cooking area                            |             |
| **Total building projects**                                          |             |
| Refurbish old outdoor theatre at Kokernot                           |             |
| Refurbish swimming pool                                             |             |

## Look Into

## Climbing Walls:

- Just a 4’x8’ panel is over $1,000
- May need to build this (numerous universities incorporate one into a new building design—fancy!!)
- Hand holds to purchase @ +/-$35/each, probably min. 100
- Full package portable pillar-shaped 32’ wall available
- Full package portable high ropes course w/12 harnesses

- $10,000+
- 29,000
- 49,000
Assessment seems to be the most frustrating and difficult portion of designing a QEP. Controversy over standardized testing is a political hot potato across the nation. Recommendations are conflicting, expensive, and unproven. As an example, at the end of the fall 2006 semester, IRE administered the College Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP) writing test to a sample of entering freshmen and a sample of exiting seniors and the CAAP reading test to a sample of exiting seniors. The CAAP national mean is based on testing exiting sophomores, since the test is usually used to measure skills after completion of core courses. Our freshmen scored only 8% below the national mean for exiting sophomores and our seniors scored slightly above the national mean in arts/literature reading, but slightly below the national mean in social science reading.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Writing Skills</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Usage/Mechanics</td>
<td>Rhetorical</td>
<td>Arts/Literature</td>
<td>Social Sciences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SRSU</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>SRSU</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>SRSU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>15.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frosh</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>15.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Another way to interpret these scores is to say that 34% of the SRSU freshmen who took the CAAP test scored at or above the national exiting sophomore mean in writing skills. Twenty-four percent of the SRSU seniors scored at or above the national mean in writing and 50% at or above the national mean in reading, with 62% at or above the national mean in the arts/literature portion of reading. This may indicate that the at least one-third of the freshmen who took the test came to us as well prepared as freshmen nationwide and that four years at SRSU seems to improve those writing skills only slightly. However, we have no knowledge of national improvement scores. At the 2005 SACS Annual Meeting, former Harvard University President, Derek Bok, said writing scores for even Harvard science and engineering students often declined between their freshman and senior years. Only by testing the same group of students as they enter and exit, both locally and nationally, could we make assumptions based on comparisons. During the QEP process, one important discovery has been our almost total lack of knowledge about value-added learning and where we stand compared to national norms. Although our students undergo numerous surveys and questionnaires, most of those have focused only on satisfaction, none measure actual learning.
In 2007 IRE administered the CAAP math and science tests with similar results.

Thus, our QEP will incorporate standardized testing even though Tagg (2003:197) says that today’s students have been tested from infancy, tracked on the basis of multiple-choice tests into programs designed to prepare them for more multiple-choice tests that in turn locked them into paths that systematically precluded the development of higher-order thinking skills and complex cognition. In short, many entering college students have been nearly evaluated to death, and have suffered an education that has trivialized engagement with learning to the point that they are almost disabled . . . . The Instruction Paradigm response to these students is, by and large, more tracking: To shunt them into developmental or remedial classes, usually severed from and uncoordinated with the curriculum proper, to teach them to do long division and write paragraphs with topic sentences. That is, they are most often excluded from participating in the curricular conversation.

As testing has increased, student morale and engagement with education, as well as faculty morale and engagement, have decreased. One speaker at the Summer 2007 SACS institute referred sarcastically to the “No Child Left Untested Act.”

Several years ago, when SRSU faced “accredited under review status” from the Examination for the Certification of Educators in Texas (ExCET) for prospective teachers, our students returned from the exam complaining that the questions did not seem to apply to small, West Texas rural public schools with few frills. So education and teaching-field faculty began advising future teachers to imagine when they took the test that they were going to teach at large, well-funded urban schools—the scores rose. SRSU
argues that the students who are able to pass the current test are no better prepared than the thousands of teachers produced since SRSU began offering classes in 1920.

Although our scores now hover between 80-90% pass rates, sometimes reaching 100%, many students who do not pass the test may have also proven to be talented, caring, and hard-working teachers. Subtle differences between the ways questions are worded are difficult for some students to understand, especially those from a bilingual background. Bollag (2007:A26), says that “despite pressure from government and industry, universities do not produce enough graduates fluent in ‘critical languages’” and that although 750,000 college students enrolled in Spanish in 2006, most courses “are at lower levels, giving learners a taste of a new tongue but nothing near fluency.” In a state facing severe teacher shortages, and in a nation crying for more language fluency beyond English, this is a frustrating situation.

Testing is also especially demoralizing for students who don’t score in the top 10% of the cohort, often creating a “cycle of doom” as described by Harvard Business School professor Rosabeth Moss Kanter (2004:353):

My teenaged friend Robert was on a personal losing streak, a classic downward spiral, as his performance in math got worse and worse. He had started at a new school in his junior year of high school and was surprised at how different and how much harder the math classes were. He received a failing grade on the first math test. He started to lose confidence, and he slid into losers’ behavior. The first failing grade was embarrassing, so he didn’t talk to his parents about it. He couldn’t wait to leave math class, and he didn’t want to see the teacher, either. He shut the door at home. He said he was studying math, but it began to seem too overwhelming. When his parents discovered halfway through the school year that he was failing math, Robert blamed the teacher for unfair treatment of kids like himself who came from a different background. The teacher gave him extra homework to help him catch up, but that just made Robert feel more ashamed and made math more distasteful. He began to think of himself as someone who couldn’t do math and brooded over whether he should go to college. He withdrew from his friends, because they all seemed to be adjusting well and making college plans. He lost energy and started sleeping longer; so his parents told him he wasn’t trying hard enough. That made him feel that no one understood him, and he began to neglect his other subjects. Robert’s response to his first small failure was making significant failure seem inevitable.

The student in this example is obviously disengaged from learning because of frustration with his own performance. Research has clearly shown that sometimes evaluation causes frustration and lower performance.

A large part of every university’s mission is also to provide a “half-way house” for our young people as they transition between dependent teen and adult responsibilities. During the first week of any freshman course, instructors and peers often opportunistically offer advice about laundry, staying healthy, using an alarm clock, designating drivers, handling homesickness, and making choices about morals and majors that will affect the rest of their lives. How does the university test for growing up, for
time management, work ethic, cooperation, and self-motivation? How does the university test for progress toward assuming adult responsibilities? Is this trivia or an important part of a college education?

Another part of a university’s mission is to provide a safe arena for exploring and developing innovative ideas. Testing agencies have discovered a few subjects that to some degree lend themselves to standardized testing such as math, reading, writing, and the memorization of facts from content areas. However, the kind of math used by the young entrepreneur who created YouTube and sold it for billions of dollars is not testable with a standardized test. No best-selling author writes in 5-paragraph themes. Some best-selling literary rebels like Cormac McCarthy openly defy hallowed punctuation rules. The question colleges should be asking is how do a few students successfully slip through the cracks of the straitjackets of mediocrity and boredom that our constant testing is creating? Instead, colleges should be designing plans to widen those cracks.

On the other hand, SRSU also believes in the right of taxpayers, parents, and students to hold higher education accountable for value-added learning. The cost of today’s college education to parents or to students receiving financial aid saddles them with huge debts. When students graduate without gaining the knowledge and skills they have paid for, those debts seem like fraud. Both parents and students want the option of “shopping around” for a university that offers the best learning progress for the lowest price. SRSU is ready to help shoulder the responsibility to search for better answers.

SRSU defines student success at the university as a multi-step process

• retention (no learning is occurring if students have dropped a class or withdrawn from the university)
• progress toward a degree (expense without progress is occurring if students persistently enroll in non-degree courses)
• gpa (poor learning may be occurring if a student’s gpa consistently remains low)
• graduation (successful completion of a rigorous program)
• successful alumni

These indicators of success are of course dependant on many variables and measuring actual student learning, as well as its cause, is therefore a challenge.

Outdoor learning at SRSU will be considered successfully implemented when low numbers of the following increase by 10% each year:

• Utilization of the outdoors to enhance learning as reported by faculty, staff, etc.
• Integrating field trips with academic goals and physical fitness activities with an increased percentage of courses and student activities reporting such integration
• Positive responses to corresponding questions on NSSE in
  o Self-confidence, self-awareness, self-understanding, and personal responsibility
  o Team cohesiveness through small and large group experiences
  o Creating situations for development of community
  o Developing trust, cooperation, and social connections among diverse members of the campus community
  o Developing critical thinking skills through group and individual problem-solving
  o Making experiential connections between disciplines
• Positive responses to corresponding questions on the Enrolled Student Survey in
  o Cultivating a sense of place and connection to the university
  o Fostering a sense of stewardship toward the natural environment
  o Infusing healthy exercise habits, wellness, and healthy lifestyle choices
tenough outdoor learning
  o Providing alternatives to boring weekends, alcohol, controlled substances,
etc. through outdoor learning
  o “Hands-on” learning experiences
  o Reducing inhibitions and increasing positive risk taking when outside
  normal comfort zones
  o Increased opportunities for outdoor learning
• Providing opportunities to gain self-competence through responsibility with an
increased percentage of freshmen responding positively to adoption of SRSU space
through a Physical Plant survey
• Providing experiential learning for outdoor-based employment
• Student learning scores on critical thinking standardized test increase
• Increased retention and recruitment as reported through contact hours
• Increased graduation rate
Increases in each of the above will also be compared to various forms of student learning
assessment (i.e., exit exams, standardized critical thinking test, faculty perception and
exam results).

In the past, due to the expense for both students and the university and the often
poor relevance of standardized tests, we have relied primarily on faculty assessment
combined with satisfaction surveys of entering students, enrolled students, graduating
students, alumni. In 2006 SRSU designed and piloted our own assessment document of
our learning and engagement environment and then participated in a free pilot for
CLASSE, modifying it to include questions of value to SRSU. Although measuring our
own learning environment indicators may be useful and provide some baseline
information, we also need to measure our expectations against national norms. CLASSE
seems to hold promise for evaluating the match between faculty learning goals and
student perception of the administration of those faculty goals, but again it does not
measure value-added student learning.

SRSU realizes that assessment choices will influence faculty to “teach to the test,”
so we have chosen to take advantage of that in order to move faculty behavior in the
desired direction: enhancing student engagement and critical thinking. According to Peter
T. Ewell, Vice President of the National Center for Higher Education Management
Systems (Tagg 2003:ixi),

[W]e need to take assessment seriously, not as the kind of accountability-
based external mandate that many faculty think of first when they hear the
‘A-word,’ but as rich and meaningful feedback about our own
performances. I have always maintained that the essence of assessment is
nothing more than the act of turning the basic principles of scholarship, in
which we all were trained, back onto our own practice of the arts of
teaching and learning.
In short, this QEP intends to use assessment as a tool to move the university toward improving our participation in the learning paradigm, rather than as a tool for punishment or ranking intelligence. Our goal is to use assessment to benchmark and then measure progress as we learn more successfully to engage our students in order to increase their learning as they prepare for life. Faculty will be encouraged to raise student performance scores against past SRSU student performance as well as raise performance scores against national norms.

**Assessment of engagement: NSSE**

We have chosen the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) in order to concretely benchmark and compare progress toward increasing our level of academic challenge, use of active and collaborative learning, level of student-faculty interaction, enrichment of educational experiences, and a development of a supportive campus environment. NSSE measures each of those through questions addressing student exposure to assignments and situations that foster student engagement:

- Level of academic challenge
- Active and collaborative learning
- Student interaction with faculty
- Supportive campus environment

According to their website, NSSE has now been adopted by over 1200 universities including 681 registered for Spring 2008, and has accumulated praise from administrators, faculty, and students. Research has shown that “results plainly indicate that the NSSE survey is both valid and reliable across different groups of students and different institutional settings” (Kuh et al. 2007:40). Tagg (2003:335) is encouraged that “Today, we can see the standards of academic reputation changing. New and better evidence is becoming available through tools like the NSSE that provide much more solid indications of the real quality of the learning environment at colleges than have ever been available before.”

NSSE data evaluates the learning environment through questions that ask how often students have received adequate practice. As an example, faculty members at SRSU observe that our graduates are poor writers. One indicator of engagement on the NSSE is writing assignments, so students are asked to indicate how many pages they write in a given semester or year. The table below shows the number of writing assignments required of the nation’s freshmen during their first year of college according to NSSE data from 2005. According to the SRSU Languages and Literature Department, faculty syllabi require an average of 13 pages for 1301 and an average of 17 pages for 1302. This seems to put us well over the national average for first year students, more than doubling it.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pages required During 1st year</th>
<th>NSSE 2005 (percent)</th>
<th>SRSU 2007 (1301 &amp; 1302)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-4</td>
<td>30</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-10</td>
<td>32</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-20</td>
<td>21</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 20</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>13 &amp; 17 = 30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
NSSE will also provide data on the number of pages students write during their entire college career. “Teaching-to-the-test” with NSSE may encourage faculty to increase practice opportunities. NSSE will also allow comparison of our program to national programs of similar sized universities.

**Assessment of critical thinking: CAAP**

Numerous tests for critical thinking have been developed. According to a comment made by critical thinking expert, Diane Halpern, at the 2007 SACS Summer Institute, most critical thinking tests are actually reading tests—the kind of tests that prove to be especially challenging for ESL students. Until better critical thinking tests are developed, our best solution seems to be the affordable critical thinking portion of Collegiate Assessment and Academic Proficiency (CAAP). CAAP has also been selected as one of the preferred learning outcomes assessment instruments for the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA), which SRSU joined this year. The VSA, a joint venture between the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges (NASULGC) and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) is an attempt to provide "greater accountability by public institutions through accessible, transparent, and comparable information." All participating universities must administer one student survey (NSSE is one option) and one critical thinking test (CAAP is one option).

Almost any assessment tool is biased by values held by the design/designers of the instrument. As an example, if a testing instrument for writing is designed by English faculty, it will measure the student’s ability to use active voice. However, as students progress to upper level courses they are sometimes taught to write in passive voice (still preferred by some disciplines, especially in the sciences). Thus, their test scores in writing could actually decrease as they became more proficient writers in their major fields. Similar problems may occur when students are encouraged to develop a unique “voice” based on unusual or unique syntax and grammar choices for creative writing. Critical thinking skills, however, do not seem to be as dependent upon discipline styles or preferences. Scores on critical thinking assessment should actually improve as students are exposed to conflicting views, variety, or varying degrees of expertise. Research indicates that good critical thinking increases student engagement as well as improving student skills in writing, speaking, listening, reading comprehension, analysis, and making life choices. Thus, SRSU believes non-discipline specific critical thinking assessment, rather than several standardized tests in various subject areas, would also improve student learning across the disciplines as well as encourage faculty to strive for higher-order thinking when planning courses. Faculty members care deeply about developing critical thinking skills according to research, yet the same research finds that tests and assignments seldom measure those skills (Gardiner 1994).

**Innovative local assessment**

Assessment, not opinion, should be our guide as we take risks in order to explore new methods of increasing student engagement and critical thinking. Tagg (2003:328) encourages innovation in assessment:
My advice as to accountability would be to forget, for a moment, about what the state legislature wants to know, about what the chancellor’s office or the board of trustees wants to know, and for that matter what employers want to know. Let us ask ourselves, with the utmost seriousness, these questions: What do we want our students to know about their own learning, about the state of knowledge? What are the goals of knowledge and ability that we hold for them? And what do they need to know in order to achieve those goals? If we can design a system of assessment feedback that will tell our students in a meaningful and coherent way what they need to know about the progress and the process of their own learning, then we will have created a system that simultaneously tells everyone else what they need to know. We have been haunted and harassed and nagged by the shibboleth of accountability for so long that we have lost our bearings. We should not forget what is of value in this work.

What assignments, experiences, and activities are genuinely improving student learning at SRSU? How can we measure learning? What should our students learn? How can they demonstrate that learning? Can we design rubrics for use in our own classes that we can all agree will measure the skills we want students to learn? We need to begin campus-wide conversations toward development of in-class assessment tools to measure critical thinking skills. Although most faculty members think that they include critical thinking in their classes, a deeper study of the definition for and application of critical thinking across the disciplines may provide much room for improvement and redirection. The QEP Advisory Committee will collaborate with pilot projects to search for innovative assessment tools.

These assessment tools will work together to encourage improving engagement through the learning environment (NSSE), to increase critical thinking as a learning goal (CAAP), as well as to further encourage engagement through higher-order thinking. As SRSU gathers information from these tests, and as faculty begin to modify their methods in order to teach to these tests and surveys, we may find that other instruments or new pilot projects may serve our purposes better and we may make changes. SRSU considers assessment a “work in progress.”

SRSU is committed to developing a culture of evidence for data-driven decisions. Results of all assessment will be available to the campus community via website (currently at http://www2.sulross.edu/ire). The QEP Advisory Committee is charged with analyzing collected data for relevance to student learning and providing advice about problem areas that need to be reported to faculty, staff, or members of the wider campus community in order to make data-driven decisions. This will supplement current department and school assessment measures (i.e., portfolios, tests, embedded curse assessment).
QEP Assessment Timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goal</th>
<th>Assessment tool</th>
<th>Schedule</th>
<th>Current Status (Fall 07)</th>
<th>Target</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increase engagement</td>
<td>NSSE</td>
<td>Sp 08, 10, 12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase graduation</td>
<td>Registrar/IRE</td>
<td>semester</td>
<td>15-20%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce drops</td>
<td>Registrar/IRE</td>
<td>semester</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce developmental failure and D’s, maintain non-developmental</td>
<td>Registrar/IRE</td>
<td>semester</td>
<td>Developmental 54.3%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase retention</td>
<td>Registrar/IRE</td>
<td>semester</td>
<td>50-55%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase critical thinking</td>
<td>CAAP</td>
<td>Bi-annual</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chapter 5

QEP Timeline and Responsible persons

This timeline may be subject to modifications as determined following the assessment of these objectives

| Fall 2008 |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Student Affairs | Arts & Science | Professional Studies | Ag & Nat. Res. Sci. | CFS/GAs |
| REC Sports | ● design critical thinking assessment for 10% of current activities as pilot | ● at least 10% of faculty will develop a pilot project | ● at least 10% of faculty will develop a pilot project | ● create web support site: webliography of learning & critical thinking research and campus-based research projects, outdoor “public face” website for students, ● create learning environment for FD |
| ● at least one representative in faculty support seminar | ● at least 10% faculty plus all new hires will participate in a faculty support seminar | ● at least 10% faculty plus all new hires will participate in a faculty support seminar | ● at least 10% faculty plus all new hires will participate in a faculty support seminar | ● solicit/select seminar participants, organize and conduct seminars |
| ● develop coop w/faculty to integrate at least one student activity with one class | ● at least 10% faculty will develop new outdoor activities in a class | ● at least 10% faculty will design critical thinking assessment for 10% of their current field/outdoor activities | ● at least 10% faculty will design critical thinking assessment for 10% of their current field/outdoor activities | ● design method to evaluate progress in Learning Contracts, present to QEP AC |
| ● all staff take one 15 min. break per week to engage students in conversation outdoors | ● all faculty staff take one 15 min. break per week to engage students in conversation outdoors | ● all graduate teaching assistants will participate in TA development seminar | ● all graduate teaching assistants will participate in TA development seminar | ● solicit information on critical thinking assessment tools |
| ● search/identify alumni as “employment advisors” for Freshman convocation, etc. | ● etc. | ● etc. | ● etc. | ● solicit needs for TA development seminar(s) |
| ● collab. w/meat science on feasibility for outdoor cooking | ● etc. | ● etc. | ● etc. | ● construct Learning Contract baseline w/FO6 syllabi |
| | | | | ● help Provost interpret QEP data |
| | | | | ● initiate feasibility studies for additional outdoor equipment & facilities |
| | | | | ● initiate feasibility of outdoor collab. w/ |
area high schools
● research new classes/majors, present to QEP AC
● coordinate use of facilities, maintain usage records of facilities & equipment,
● assist faculty interested in adding outdoor components to classes
● create web vehicle hub w/PP

### Other

- President increase awareness of QEP at faculty meetings and convocation
- Provost select QEP Advisory Committee, meet monthly with committee, schedule assessment & publish on academic calendar, interpret and report QEP data to faculty
- Deans and Faculty Affairs Council: create rubric adding QEP guidelines to tenure/promotion
- Chairs: incorporate QEP into FE3
- Library: plan “spruce” up with outdoor theme
- Physical Plant construct/place 10% of outdoor facilities, develop plan for freshman adoption of spaces program
- Alumni: search and assist with alumni as speakers, create opportunities for alumni to engage enrolled students
- Registrar: report semester drops to QEP AC
- Alumni: complete baseline data for career progress survey implemented in 2008
- ACE: plan retreat to design pilots for fall 2009
- Science/NRS collab. To map interpretive trail around mall
- Human Resources: increase Partners Program to include 10% additional incoming freshmen, evaluate and continue to increase by 10%/semester if successful
- All faculty submit Learning Contracts to website, add feedback policy

### Spring 2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Affairs</th>
<th>Arts &amp; Science</th>
<th>Professional Studies</th>
<th>Ag &amp; Nat. Res. Sci.</th>
<th>CFS/GAs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>REC Sports</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● at least 10% representation will implement a pilot project</td>
<td>● at least 10% of faculty will implement new pilot projects</td>
<td>● at least 10% of faculty will implement new pilot projects</td>
<td>● at least 10% of faculty will implement new pilot projects</td>
<td>● continue seminars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● at least one representative in faculty support seminar</td>
<td>● Faculty, chairs, &amp; deans report fall pilots up chain to Provost</td>
<td>● Faculty, chairs, &amp; deans report fall pilots up chain to Provost</td>
<td>● Faculty, chairs, &amp; deans report fall pilots up chain to Provost</td>
<td>● maintain &amp; update website</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● incorporate learning/critical thinking and assessment into 10% of activities</td>
<td>● continue to participate in a faculty support seminar</td>
<td>● continue to participate in a faculty support seminar</td>
<td>● continue to participate in a faculty support seminar</td>
<td>● solicit pilots for fall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● integrate at least one more student activity with one more class</td>
<td>● at least 10% faculty will develop new outdoor activities in an additional class</td>
<td>● at least 10% faculty will develop new outdoor activities in an additional class</td>
<td>● at least 10% faculty will develop new outdoor activities in an additional class</td>
<td>● organize FD conference on critical thinking, meet with Chairs to develop plan for TA development seminar(s), solicit seminar participants for fall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● design critical thinking assessment for another 10% of current field/outdoor activities</td>
<td>● at least 10% faculty will design critical thinking assessment for 10% more of their current field/outdoor activities</td>
<td>● at least 10% faculty will design critical thinking assessment for 10% more of their current field/outdoor activities</td>
<td>● at least 10% faculty will design critical thinking assessment for 10% more of their current field/outdoor activities</td>
<td>● solicit faculty for skills/workshop needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● continue outdoor breaks</td>
<td>● continue outdoor breaks</td>
<td>● continue outdoor breaks</td>
<td>● continue outdoor breaks</td>
<td>● evaluate the year’s success and adjust for next fall</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Other

- President remind faculty/staff of QEP at faculty meetings
- Provost report baseline data to faculty, attend advisory committee meetings, explain addition of feedback schedules to Learning Contracts in Fall 09
- Deans: responsible for 10% participation from schools each year, meet w/Faculty Affairs Council to design weighted merit rubric to include QEP participation
- Chairs: meet with CFS to develop TA development seminar(s), remind faculty to submit Learning Contracts to CFS
- Library: “spruce up” with outdoor theme, develop plan for outdoor book talks with students, evaluate
- Physical Plant map adoption areas, construct/place 10% more outdoor facilities, develop plan to monitor adoption program, select sites
- ACE conduct retreat to discuss pilots for Fall 09, submit pilots to QEP AC
- Fine Arts, IT, Museum, Physical Plant—collaborate to design, create, & place interpretive signs
- QEP AC: collect evaluations from deans, award funding for Fall 09 pilots
- FD Seminar participants present program to Faculty Assembly
- Faculty Assembly elect representative to attend learning enhancement conference and report back

### Fall 2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Affairs</th>
<th>Arts &amp; Science</th>
<th>Professional Studies</th>
<th>Ag &amp; Nat. Res. Sel.</th>
<th>CFS/GAs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>REC Sports</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>at least 10% representation will design a pilot project</td>
<td>at least 10% of faculty will develop a pilot project</td>
<td>at least 10% of faculty will develop a pilot project</td>
<td>at least 10% of faculty will develop a pilot project</td>
<td>maintain &amp; update website</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>at least one representative in faculty support seminar</td>
<td>at least additional 10% faculty plus all new hires participate in a faculty support seminar</td>
<td>at least additional 10% faculty plus all new hires participate in a faculty support seminar</td>
<td>at least additional 10% faculty plus all new hires participate in a faculty support seminar</td>
<td>organize and conduct FD &amp; TA seminars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>incorporate learning/critical thinking and assessment into additional 10% of activities</td>
<td>at least additional 10% faculty develop new outdoor activities in a class</td>
<td>at least additional 10% faculty design critical thinking assessment for 10% of their current field/outdoor activities</td>
<td>at least additional 10% faculty design critical thinking assessment for 10% of their current field/outdoor activities</td>
<td>host critical thinking conference,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>integrate at least one additional student activity with one additional class</td>
<td>at least additional 10% faculty design critical thinking assessment for 10% of their current field/outdoor activities</td>
<td>all graduate teaching assistants will participate in TA development seminar</td>
<td>all graduate teaching assistants will participate in TA development seminar</td>
<td>help Provost interpret QEP data,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>design critical thinking assessment for 10% of additional field/outdoor activities</td>
<td>all graduate teaching assistants will participate in TA development seminar</td>
<td>continue breaks</td>
<td>continue breaks</td>
<td>solicit ideas for future FD seminars,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>continue breaks</td>
<td>all graduate teaching assistants will participate in TA development seminar</td>
<td>continue breaks</td>
<td>continue breaks</td>
<td>workshops, conferences, plan one for each year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>invite alumni as “employment advisors” to Freshman convocation, monitor results w/survey</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>create feedback baseline w/F04 student evaluations and track progress</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Other

- President increase awareness of QEP at faculty meetings and convocation, present awards
- Provost meet monthly with QEP AC committee, publish assessment schedule on academic calendar, interpret and report QEP progress to faculty
- Deans: implement rubric adding QEP guidelines to tenure/promotion
- Chairs: plan retreat for Fall 2010 pilots, remind faculty to submit Learning Contracts w/feedback schedules
- Library: implement student talks on outdoor books
- Physical Plant construct/place 10% more outdoor facilities, implement adoption program during freshman orientation, monitor success
- Alumni: search and assist with alumni as speakers
- Evaluate use of interpretive trail, expand if warranted
- QEP AC provide list of new needs for possible pilots to campus community
## Spring 2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Affairs</th>
<th>Arts &amp; Science</th>
<th>Professional Studies</th>
<th>Ag &amp; Nat. Res. Sci.</th>
<th>CFS/GAs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>REC Sports</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>●at least 10% representation will implement a pilot project</td>
<td>●at least 10% of faculty will implement new pilot projects</td>
<td>●at least 10% of faculty will implement new pilot projects</td>
<td>●at least 10% of faculty will implement new pilot projects</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>●at least one representative in faculty support seminar</td>
<td>●Faculty, chairs, &amp; deans report fall pilots up chain to Provost</td>
<td>●Faculty, chairs, &amp; deans report fall pilots up chain to Provost</td>
<td>●Faculty, chairs, &amp; deans report fall pilots up chain to Provost</td>
<td>●maintain &amp; update website</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>●incorporate learning/critical thinking and assessment into additional 10% of activities</td>
<td>●continue to participate in a faculty support seminar</td>
<td>●continue to participate in a faculty support seminar</td>
<td>●continue to participate in a faculty support seminar</td>
<td>●plan and conduct outdoor skills workshop(s)</td>
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<tr>
<td>●integrate at least one more student activity with one more class</td>
<td>●at least additional 10% faculty will develop new outdoor activities in an additional class</td>
<td>●at least additional 10% faculty will develop new outdoor activities in an additional class</td>
<td>●at least additional 10% faculty will develop new outdoor activities in an additional class</td>
<td>●solicit pilots for fall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>●design critical thinking assessment for another 10% of current field/outdoor activities</td>
<td>●at least additional 10% faculty will design critical thinking assessment for 10% more of their current field/outdoor activities</td>
<td>●at least additional 10% faculty will design critical thinking assessment for 10% more of their current field/outdoor activities</td>
<td>●at least additional 10% faculty will design critical thinking assessment for 10% more of their current field/outdoor activities</td>
<td>●organize activities for next year</td>
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<td>●continue outdoor breaks</td>
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<tr>
<td>●evaluate the year’s success and adjust for next fall</td>
<td>●evaluate the year’s success and adjust for next fall</td>
<td>●evaluate the year’s success and adjust for next fall</td>
<td>●evaluate the year’s success and adjust for next fall</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Other

- President remind faculty/staff of QEP at faculty meetings
- Provost meet monthly with QEP AC committee, publish assessment schedule on academic calendar, interpret and report QEP progress to faculty
- Deans: responsible for 10% participation each semester
- Chairs: host retreat for planning Fall 2010 pilots, remind faculty to submit Learning Contracts
- Physical Plant map adoption areas, construct/place 10% more outdoor facilities
- QEP AC: collect and analyze evaluations from deans, report award winners to president, award funding to Fall 2010/Spring 2011 pilots
- FD Support seminar participants: present program to Faculty Assembly
- Faculty Assembly: elect representative to attend learning enhancement conference and report back

## Fall 2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Affairs</th>
<th>Arts &amp; Science</th>
<th>Professional Studies</th>
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<th>CFS/GAs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>REC Sports</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>●continue to increase participation by 10% or adjust according to assessment results</td>
<td>●continue to increase participation by 10% or adjust according to assessment results</td>
<td>●continue to increase participation by 10% or adjust according to assessment results</td>
<td>●continue to increase participation by 10% or adjust according to assessment results</td>
<td>●continue seminars &amp; workshops</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>maintain &amp; update website</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>plan activities for next year</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Other

- President
- Provost meet monthly with QEP advisory committee, schedule assessment & publish on academic calendar, interpret and report QEP data to faculty
- Deans: responsible for 10% participation each year
- Chairs: Design system to monitor changes overtime in faculty evaluations, discuss results with individual faculty, remind all faculty to submit Learning Contracts
- Alumni: conduct career progress survey
### Spring 2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Affairs</th>
<th>Arts &amp; Science</th>
<th>Professional Studies</th>
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### Spring 2012

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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Other

- President remind faculty/staff of QEP at faculty meetings
- Provost meet monthly with QEP advisory committee, schedule assessment & publish on academic calendar, interpret and report QEP data to faculty
- Deans: responsible for 10% participation each year
- Chairs: remind faculty to submit Learning Contracts
- Physical Plant
- SGA plan retreat with future teachers & club presidents to brainstorm ideas for pilots and suggestions to faculty
- QEP AC: award funding for Fall 2011/Spring 2012 pilots

### Fall 2011

- President increase awareness of QEP at faculty meetings and convocation
- Provost meet monthly with QEP advisory committee, schedule assessment & publish on academic calendar, interpret and report QEP data to faculty
- Deans: responsible for 10% participation each year
- Chairs: remind faculty to submit Learning Contracts
- Physical Plant

### Spring 2012

- President remind faculty/staff of QEP at faculty meetings
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- Deans: responsible for 10% participation each year
- Chairs: remind faculty to submit Learning Contracts
- Physical Plant
- QEP AC: award funding for Fall 2012/Spring 2013 pilots
### Chapter 6

#### Summary

The old-style of learning—to offer students books and lectures, and expect them to study—is no longer working. Parents often do not pay for today’s college educations, so students must work. Perhaps students suffer from too many distractions (work, tv, internet, cell phones, athletics). However, we can not change their world, so we must adapt. Class time needs to be active learning time. SRSU is therefore committed to “Enhancing Academic Learning through Student Engagement.”

SRSU provides the following goals for our Quality Enhancement Plan: establish expectations, provide support, and assess and reward progress.

- **Establish Expectations**
  - Hire faculty who want to become better teachers
  - Design courses so that objectives become increasingly complex during each class, during the semester, and across the program
  - Develop problem-based learning goals
  - Challenge administrators to reform FE3 and promotion and tenure to encourage successful data-driven student learning
o Monitor our comparative data on the Voluntary System of Accountability and set appropriate goals
o Challenge the Faculty Assembly to upgrade faculty evaluations to support faculty support participation
o Shorten turn-around time for increased amounts of feedback for students
o Create syllabi as learning contracts that clearly articulate learning goals
o Develop before and after learning goal assessment for classes
o Encourage development and piloting of new assessment tools: rubrics, scoring guides, electronic portfolios, skill demonstrations, etc.

• **Provide Support**
  o Challenge administrators to find ways to open up time for faculty support and course development
  o Provide a campus-based faculty support center and coordinator
  o Create a one-stop-shopping website for faculty needs
    ▪ Link to outdoor learning and pilot programs
    ▪ Link to learning conferences or other opportunities for development
    ▪ Create a webliography of readings for faculty to help them become and remain up to date with higher education learning research/ideas
    ▪ Overseer/provide assistance with paperwork for pilots and outdoor learning
  o Become involved with the Texas Faculty Development Network
  o Encourage collaboration between student activities and faculty in order to produce joint outdoor activities
  o Share “best practices” with other faculty
  o Develop interdisciplinary teams to design interdisciplinary outdoor activities and/or courses
  o Provide multiple forms of “value added” feedback to faculty

• **Assess and Reward**
  o Add “professional development in student learning” to FE3 as expected annual faculty work
  o Create a culture of appreciation for teaching
  o Assess faculty support with student learning outcomes and data
  o Develop faculty evaluation forms based on the QEP learning paradigm
  o Reform reward systems to encourage faculty support
  o Challenge Faculty Assembly to elect a representative to attend one teaching conference per year and present the information upon their return to the assembly. Travel will be paid through the Faculty Support budget.
  o Design weighted rubrics for fair evaluation of faculty at tenure and promotion

In summary, the SRSU Quality Enhancement Plan addresses all the requirements outlined by SACS.

1) *Includes a broad-based institutional process identifying key issues emerging from institutional assessment:* Our plan, “Enhancing Academic Learning through Student
"Engagement" was developed by a committee that involved 43 members, with 11 more added in September 2007. Members represented a broad sample of the entire campus community. The committee initiated discussions with input from student questionnaires, alumni surveys, faculty perceptions and records, analysis of registration records (drops, retention, graduation rate), data from standardized tests, development of in-house learning environment questionnaires, departmental exit evaluation tools, and various certification exams.

2) Focuses on learning outcomes and/or the environment supporting student learning and accomplishing the mission of the institution: Our plan focuses on improving critical thinking and improving the environment supporting that higher-order learning which is at the heart of our university’s mission. Our focus on the region and the outdoors also enhances the university’s mission as a designated Hispanic Serving Institution located on the border between the United States and Mexico.

3) Demonstrates institutional capability for the initiation, implementation, and completion of the QEP: The administration has committed a $100,000 budget for personnel, increased undergraduate student travel, innovative grant funding, and support services through a faculty support center and website. Responsibility for implementation has been accepted by deans, chairs, and all those listed as participants in the document.

4) Includes broad-based involvement of institutional constituencies in the development and proposed implementation of the QEP: Responsibility for participation in the QEP spans Student Life, Physical Plant, alumni, and all members of the campus community. These constituencies have already provided a long list of pilot projects. Deans of each of the three academic schools, as well as the Dean of Student Life, have pledged responsibility for 10% participation each year.

5) Identifies goals and a plan to assess their achievement: All faculty have been and will be involved with identifying and improving higher order learning goals through their own course learning objectives listed on syllabi. Assessment will be benchmarked and measured through before and after assessment of critical thinking via bi-annual standardized testing (CAAP) of freshmen and graduating seniors. In addition, in anticipation of deficiencies we expect to find after administering NSSE to graduating seniors, we will track progress toward improvement of our learning environment as the QEP progresses. We also encourage innovation and design of in-house before and after assessment tools as our QEP unfolds.
# Appendix A – Detailed Budget

## QEP Preparation and Training Year Budget
### September 2008 – August 2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personnel</th>
<th>Funding Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coordinator of Faculty Support and Outdoor Learning</td>
<td>$30,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate Assistant (2) @ $7,000/ea</td>
<td>$14,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Administrative stipends</td>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
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<table>
<thead>
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<th>Official Functions</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Faculty Development seminars (food, supplies)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Promotional meetings (food, supplies)</td>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advertising/Marketing</th>
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<tr>
<td>Prizes/giveaways</td>
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<td>Posters/brochures/printing</td>
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<td>Pilot Project Stipends 5/@$1,000</td>
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<td>Speakers (2) @ $1,000</td>
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<td>Host Workshops, seminar, conference (food, supplies)</td>
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**2008-2009 Preparation Year Grand Total**  **$100,000**

## QEP Annual Budget

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Faculty Support seminars (food, supplies)</td>
<td>$1,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>$1,000</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advertising/Marketing</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prizes/giveaways</td>
<td>$500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posters/brochures/printing</td>
<td>$1,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>On-site Professional Development</strong></td>
<td>Pilot Project Stipends 5@$1,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Host Workshops, seminar, conference (food, supplies)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Professional Development</strong></td>
<td>Coordinator and/or GA travel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Attend student learning conference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Attend skills workshop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Travel grant for nominees from Faculty Assembly (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Outdoor Travel for Undergraduates</strong></td>
<td>Grants will vary with destinations and logistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Supplies</strong></td>
<td>Faculty Resource library (books, videos, research studies, software, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Office supplies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Copy charges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Telephone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Miscellaneous</strong></td>
<td>Outdoor furniture purchases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Labor for outdoor projects and refurbishment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Annual budget</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note that some years, when testing will revolve into the schedule, the budget will need to increase.*

**Appendix B – Collaborating authors**
Ryan Baade – Recreational Sports
Elbert Bassham – former Director of Institutional Research and Effectiveness
Nancy Blanton – former News Writer
Brad Butler – Student Publications Advisor and Faculty (Languages and Literature)
Laura Butler – Assistant Professor (Languages and Literature)
Erin Caro – journal editor, Center for Big Bend Studies, and graduate student
Dale Christopherson – Institutional Research and Effectiveness
Jim Clifton – former Associate VP and Dean of Student Life
David Cockrum – Provost and VP for Academic and Student Affairs
Gaylan Corbin – Associate Archivist, Archives of the Big Bend
Kendall Craig – Curriculum Development Specialist – Title V Grant
Trey Darby, Editor of Skyline, student newspaper
Richard DeGear, private industry
e-bigbend, private industry
Liz Garcia – Dean of Student Life
Roger Grant – Chair and Professor (Physical Education)
Bill Green – Professor (Business Administration)
Donna Green – Secretary, Languages and Literature
Suzanne Harris – Director, Student Support Services
Louis Harveson – Chair and Associate Professor (Natural Resource Management)
Leslie Hopper – Grants Coordinator
Rob Kinucan – Dean and Professor (Agriculture and Natural Resource Management)
Keith Klein – Assistant Professor (Industrial Technology and Education)
Donna Kuenstler – Director and Lecturer (Vocational Nursing)
Steve Lang – Director, News and Information
Paul Lister – Professor (Languages and Literature)  
David Martin – Assistant Professor (Mathematics and Computer Science)  
R. Vic Morgan – President, Sul Ross State University  
Barney Nelson – Associate Professor (Languages and Literature)  
Stacy Ontiveroz – Secretary (Physical Plant)  
Judy Parsons – Associate Professor (Behavioral and Social Sciences)  
Tim Parsons – Instructional Technology Specialist  
Barbara Richerson – Asst Director, News and Information  
Chris Ritzi – Chair and Assistant Professor  
Victor Romero – Physical Plant  
Nelson Sager – Professor (Languages and Literature)  
Carla Spencer – US Department of Agriculture, alumnus  
Martin Terry – Assistant Professor (Biology)  
Kevin Urbanczyk – Professor (Earth & Physical Sciences)  
Cesario Valenzuela – Vice President for Finance and Operations  
Sue Zukowski - Administrative Secretary (Human Resources)

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