Success Matters at Southern Miss – Eagles Engaged

Rationale for Topic
Student success is at the core of the mission of any institution of higher learning, and indeed it is threaded through the mission and values of the University of Southern Mississippi (see http://www.usm.edu/about/vision/vision-mission-values).

However, student success at USM constitutes an issue of current critical importance. For the latest first-time full-time freshman cohort reported in USM Institutional Research data (Fall 2008 entry), the four-year graduation rate at USM was 20.7%, while the six-year rate stood at 45.1%, both of which are noticeably below the respective national graduation rates of 32% and 56.5% (as reported by the National Center for Education Statistics at http://nces.ed.gov/datalab/tableslibrary/viewtable.aspx?tableid=9125 for the 2005 cohort year).

Those statistics aside, a Quality Enhancement Plan that focuses on student engagement and success at USM is certainly in keeping first of all with the areas of strategic focus developed during the strategic planning process of 2007-08 (also at http://www.usm.edu/about/vision/vision-mission-values):
- **Climate of Academic Success**: the key performance indicators for the area included a variety of student success measures, including degrees awarded, retention rates and graduation rates. In addition to academic support, faculty development, and curricular innovation, enhanced learning environments will constitute a dimension to this proposal;
- **Image Development**: improved student success will improve the image of the institution both within the university and by those considering USM for a degree;
- **Community Connection**: the conceptual thread of student engagement is woven through this area of strategic focus. This proposal incorporates active, engaged, and collaborative learning and also promotes connections through peer mentoring and expanded faculty involvement;
- **Healthy Minds, Bodies, and Campuses**: while this area is perhaps somewhat less directly connected, enhanced student success could arguably lead to less stress on students and healthier attitudes towards their academic endeavors.

Secondly, President Bennett has adopted student success as an area of focus for forthcoming university-wide strategic planning, along with that of teaching [and research] excellence, which will also be incorporated in this QEP proposal. Furthermore, Provost Wiesenburg formed a Student Success Steering Committee in 2013, the recommendations of which the President and Executive Cabinet accepted in early 2014 (see http://www.usm.edu/institutional-effectiveness/sssc). Student success, then, is being even more firmly woven into our university culture.

Impact on Student Learning
The Success Matters at Southern Miss – Eagles Engaged (SMSE-EE) QEP aims at providing students with enhanced academic support services and learning environments, especially in those courses in the General Education Curriculum that
have historically been barriers to student success. The combined elements of the plan are designed to improve success rates in those courses, with the expected effect of increasing student persistence rates through to graduation. The faculty development aspect of the plan targets the development of high impact pedagogical approaches to student learning, while the classroom redesign aspect aims to provide learning environments that complement effective teaching practices and encourage active, engaged learning by students.

**Strategies**
The SMSM-EE project entails a multi-pronged approach to improved student success:

- **Supplemental Instruction.** Supplemental instruction (SI) is a proven academic support concept utilized by many universities across the country. As described by the International Center for Supplemental Instruction at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, SI “is an academic assistance program that utilizes peer-assisted study sessions. SI sessions are regularly-scheduled, informal review sessions in which students compare notes, discuss readings, develop organizational tools, and predict test items. Students learn how to integrate course content and study skills while working together. The sessions are facilitated by “SI leaders”, students who have previously done well in the course and who attend all class lectures, take notes, and act as model students.” ([http://www.umkc.edu/asm/si/overview.shtml](http://www.umkc.edu/asm/si/overview.shtml))

In addition to providing an effective academic support service for courses with the potential of involving students more actively in their studies, SI can also constitute two other high impact initiatives that contribute to student persistence toward degrees: peer mentoring, which builds connections among students, promoting a greater sense of community; and support for the SI leaders, both in terms of financial support for their own studies and of greater engagement themselves in academic subject matter (Kuh et al, 2005, pp. 195ff).

- **Faculty Development.** Providing faculty, especially those teaching in General Education Curriculum 01-05 courses, with expanded knowledge, skills and resources to promote and implement active, engaged learning environments is an important pillar of the SMSM-EE plan, which would includes eight- to ten-week seminars along the lines of those so successfully incorporated within the first QEP at Southern Miss and by the Service Learning Project and would draw on the USM Teaching Forum sessions of 2013-14 for amplified opportunities for faculty to enhance their teaching repertoires.

Among the topics to be addressed in these seminars would be approaches to active, collaborative, and engaged learning; alternatives to standard lecture formats; the utilization of peer learning, including the use of supplemental instruction resources; exploiting technology for improved in- and out-of class
learning; and using redesigned – and traditional – learning spaces for maximum effect.

The SMSM-EE seminars would provide faculty participants and their departments with similar incentives to those of the faculty development seminars incorporated in the Finding a Voice QEP.

[There is a distinct value in including graduate teaching assistants in this dimension of the project as well. One possibility would be the promotion of the University Graduate Teaching Certificate, for which seminar content could be adapted. While the seminar content would assist TAs in their instructional responsibilities, having such a certificate could also improve their job prospects upon graduation.]

- **Curricular Innovation.** Departments, especially those delivering GEC 01-05 courses, will be invited to propose innovative curricular development projects aimed at improving student success and engagement. Such project proposals would require pilot studies of the innovation, documented reports on project impact and the sharing of project success with the university community. Proposals would be reviewed by a university committee for recommendation to the Provost for acceptance.

- **Enhanced Learning Environments.** The SMSM-EE project includes a physical dimension that targets redesigned learning spaces that will resonate with new approaches to teaching, promote student collaboration, and encourage active learning.

  The project envisions several initiatives for classroom redesign:
  - The transformation of several large lecture halls to incorporate (1.) improved, up-to-date technological tools, such as larger projection screens, more powerful computer capabilities, and greater potential for iClicker use to promote student engagement, (2.) new, more collaboration-encouraging student seating and work areas, and (3.) multiple fixed and/or portable whiteboards for student group work.
  - The redesign of at least one smaller classroom in each college to include similar, but appropriately adjusted components.

**Student Cohort**

Given that the primary (but not exclusive) focus of the project is on courses within the GEC 01-05 categories, first year students would certainly constitute the most readily identifiable group impacted by the project.

However, all undergraduate students could potentially benefit from the dimensions of the project, since many transfer students still need to finish their general education requirements. Furthermore, a greater range of students would benefit from the expanded teaching repertoire of faculty, the promotion of engaged learning, the improved success of their classmates, and the opportunities presented by classroom space redesigned for active and collaborative learning. The creation of
a more collaborative, engaged student community should also benefit first
generation students, who tend to be more adrift on a university campus. The
dimensions of the plan would have a particular impact on at-risk students by
providing them with more extensive resources and inviting learning environments.
Finally, students serving as supplemental instruction leaders will be engaged in an
effort that will benefit them academically (as well as providing financial support for
their studies).

Measurement/Assessment
Baseline data for the SMSM-EE project already exist in the persistence and
graduation rates listed above and in student satisfaction data, such as National
Survey of Student Engagement and Noel-Levitz Student Satisfaction Inventory
results. In addition, plan success can be tracked at the course level, utilizing course
completion data available on the IR website
(http://www.usmir.org/campus/course_completion.html) and factoring in the plan
elements of availability and participation in SI opportunities, participation of
instructors in the faculty development opportunities, and course enrollments in
redesigned learning space. If the plan is successful, these data needles will be
moved in positive, student success directions. Indeed, impact of the plan should be
almost immediately evident, at least partially, in the first semester of
implementation.

Resources
The initial focus of the plan is on GEC 01-05 courses. As such, supplemental
instruction resources would be directed towards those courses, faculty serving as
instructors of record would receive priority consideration for the seminars, and
those classrooms utilized for GEC 01-05 courses would be targeted for inclusion in
the redesign dimensions of the plan.

Among the resources needed to implement the plan fully are the following:

- **Supplemental Instruction**
  - A coordinator for Supplemental Instruction on a university-wide basis
    - Training for the SI coordinator, as needed
  - Funds for SI leaders (undergraduate students)
  - Support resources for SI delivery

- **Faculty Development Seminars**
  - Stipends and/or course releases for participants
  - Stipend and/or course release for seminar leaders
  - Support resources for the seminars (e.g., materials, books, etc.)

- **Incentives for Curricular Innovation**
  - Funds to incentivize the projects (e.g., six awards for $5000 per year
    for two or three years)

- **Enhanced Learning Environments**
  - Lecture hall redesigns, including room remodels, technological
    enhancements, collaborative student furniture, etc.
    - Note: the redesign of the two large lecture halls in Joseph Green
      Hall (JGH 155 & 116) could be part of the upcoming building
      upgrades
Classroom redesigns in each college, including room remodels, technological enhancements, collaborative student furniture, etc.

- Note: the College of Business is moving into a new building, which should include at least one such classroom; the College of Health is to move into Joseph Green Hall, with such a room as part of its upgrade.

A notable advantage of a QEP focused on student success is that, when successful, the project will generate its own resources. Improved student success in general, and certainly in gatekeeper courses that can impede student progress, means that more students will be at the University of Southern Mississippi, which means that more student credit hours are being generated and more tuition is being paid, providing fiscal resources to the university for its mission to educate and promote student success. The new formula from the Institutions of Higher Learning will base state allocations of funding on those same student credit hours, as well as on student progression towards degrees and on degrees awarded, with student success potentially providing greater state support to the University and its students.

Reference cited: