

QEP FAQs

1. **Q: What is a QEP?**

A: QEP is an acronym for *Quality Enhancement Plan*. This plan, required by our regional accrediting body (SACSCOC) for our decennial reaffirmation or reaccreditation, must work toward enhancing the learning of Davidson students as that learning is measured by examining student learning outcomes.

2. **Q: What is Davidson’s QEP?**

A: Entitled “Opening Wide the Gateways: Enhancing Student Learning and Promoting Inclusion in the Quantitative Disciplines.” Davidson’s QEP aspires to enhance student learning in the gateway courses of the quantitative disciplines so that more students will have the confidence—as well as the preparation—to pursue further coursework in these disciplines.

3. **Q: In the QEP title, what do “gateways”, “promoting inclusion” and the “quantitative disciplines” mean?**

A: “Gateways” refers to gateway courses, which we have defined as the first course in a discipline that would count toward the major. Often, a discipline’s gateway course also serves as a prerequisite for the some or all of the other courses that count toward the major.

When we say that our QEP “promotes inclusion,” we mean that its goal is to enhance the actual learning of all students, regardless of race or ethnicity, by providing a supportive, challenging and engaging environment for learning. We also hope that the QEP will result in reduced grade differentials that we currently observe across the various categories of race and ethnicity.

“Quantitative disciplines” is our designation for those majors that require students either to make and analyze numerically based claims about reality or to develop knowledge based on mathematical proof and problem solving. Although there are many majors that might be described in this way, we have specified six that will be the focus of the QEP: Biology, Chemistry, Economics, Mathematics and Computer Science, Physics, and Psychology.

4. **Q: How will Davidson’s QEP affect students?**

A: In the short term, it will affect most directly those students who take certain sections of the gateways courses in the abovementioned departments. It will affect them by giving them a different classroom experience—one that has been shaped by instructors who have worked self-consciously to revise their gateway courses to make them more inclusive. These instructors either have participated, or are about to participate, in research, workshops and learning communities designed to equip them with a working knowledge of the best practices that will foster inclusion in their gateway courses. In the long term, we anticipate that the pedagogical innovations practiced by these gateway course instructors will spread first to other sections of the same gateways course, then to higher level courses in that discipline, and finally to other courses in other disciplines.

5. **Q: How is “underrepresented students”/“students from underrepresented groups” defined?**

A: “Underrepresented” in this context is generally used to refer to racial/ethnic groups who enroll in higher education at rates lower than their representation in the general population would suggest. For higher education overall, it is primarily used for Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino, and American/Indian/Alaskan Native students. (Note: These are the labels used by the Department of Education.) Within disciplines, some groups otherwise enrolled at rates equal to or above their representation in the general population might be considered underrepresented (e.g., there are studies on lower participation in the humanities for Asian students). For Davidson’s QEP, which focuses on the quantitative disciplines, Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino, and American/Indian/Alaskan Native are underrepresented both in those disciplines and in the student population on campus.

The assessments discussed in the QEP have concentrated on Black/African American and Hispanic/Latino students because the number of American/Indian/Alaskan Native students is far too small, even in the aggregate over multiple years, to enable analyses.

6. **Q: The analyses leading up to the QEP topic did not always include statistical analyses, control of variables, or other protocols consistent with research projects. Does that matter?**

A: There are two answers to this question. 1) No, in terms of what the Commission on Colleges expects, there is not a requirement that the assessment connected to the QEP is publication-ready research. 2) Many innovations on campus or changes to programs, of course, have happened without a strict research protocol or statistical reliability. For the QEP, the threshold was this: Does the information that is available, combined with the relevant literature and experience of the faculty, provide reasonable confidence that this is an issue that should be addressed, and addressed in this way?

7. **Q: Is it oversimplifying a complex issue to suggest differences in academic performance are solely a function of race or ethnicity?**

A: The QEP does not suggest the differences are solely a function of race or ethnicity. The QEP recognizes the interplay of a wide array of factors, only a portion of which can be addressed in the plan. Race and ethnicity co-vary with other demographic variables, for example; classroom dynamics can change from semester to semester even when the professor and course material do not; and student experiences include interactions, expectations, and exposure to presumptions in venues outside the classroom.

That the QEP has been designed around a particular factor is not a dismissal of others. But there is significant literature on the effect of race and ethnicity on the classroom environment. There is significant literature demonstrating the positive effect of pedagogical techniques on the academic performance of underrepresented students. There are myriad studies showing how that positive effect generalizes to all students in diverse classrooms.

The QEP is limited in scope in order to focus on innovations grounded in the literature, align with campus assessments to date, fall within a particular timeframe, and make reasonable use of existing campus resources.

8. **Q: Can you summarize the assessments that led to the QEP?**

A: The assessments fall roughly into two categories: 1) those that had been done for projects (then) unrelated to the QEP and 2) those that were done specifically to determine the form the QEP would take.

Prior assessments. These include research done under a Teagle grant that revealed differential use of academic support by first-generation and other students; a study by the campus task force on inclusivity that described the role of faculty in creating participatory, inclusive classroom environments; and a comparison of probable major, as reported by entering students, with their actual major that showed underrepresented students moving away from the sciences at higher rates than other groups of students.

QEP-specific assessments. These include an analysis of major choice by race/ethnicity that revealed disproportionately lower percentages of underrepresented students majoring in the sciences; a review of GPA at graduation that found the largest differences by race/ethnicity tended to be in quantitatively-oriented departments; and an analysis of introductory course grades in the QEP departments that showed both African-American and Latino students average course grades were lower than White students in all eight courses examined.

9. **Q: The QEP will include assessment of a particular set of learning outcomes. What is meant by “application learning outcomes” and why were they selected?**

A: The QEP’s focus on gateway courses in six disciplines is based in part on the way those courses serve as an introduction to concepts that build sequentially, both in the gateway course and in later courses. When all learning outcomes identified by faculty teaching the gateway courses were categorized, one category stood as 1) critical to achievement in the discipline, reverberating as they do throughout more advanced work and 2) where students struggling with the material tended to struggle the most.

10. **Q: Given that the QEP is focused on quantitatively oriented departments, isn’t it possible that differences in course grades reflect mathematical preparation?**

A: Differences in mathematical preparation are difficult to determine with accuracy. Even high school courses ostensibly covering the same material can differ in significant ways from one school to the next.

What we can say is that if the SAT Mathematics test score—a proxy for mathematical preparation—is held constant, there is still a statistically significant difference in average course grade for the eight introductory courses included in the QEP by race/ethnicity. Put another way: Even when underrepresented students and White students have the same SAT Mathematics score, the underrepresented students are likely to have received lower course grades.

This analysis is necessarily limited by the degree to which the SAT Mathematics test functions as a proxy for preparation, the small number of students included, and the relatively compressed nature of this variable at a highly selective college.

This same status, however, means students admitted to Davidson have documented preparation consistent with reasonable expectation of academic success. The QEP recognizes the complicated nature of linking this preparation with specific outcomes while focusing on pedagogical innovations that will provide all students the best opportunity for achieving that success.

11. Q: Much of the literature on inclusive pedagogy is focused on improving the academic performance of students from underrepresented groups. This is true as well of Davidson's QEP. Is that too limiting a perspective?

A: Although a primary focus of the QEP is improving academic performance for underrepresented groups, the literature has shown that diverse and inclusive classrooms benefit all students. None of the techniques or innovations employed by faculty participating in the QEP is limited to underrepresented students and, in fact, all are intended to affect every student in positive ways.

12. Q: What about departments that are not part of the QEP? What about other forms of inclusion (e.g., gender, learning differences, disabilities)?

A: The QEP is a part of Davidson's commitment to inclusivity but is not intended to represent the entirety of that commitment. The QEP takes a particular form in response to reaccreditation, but the subject matter reflects a broader issue that is important to the College. SACSCOC understands the QEP to be a signpost of institutional commitment to continual improvement in the academic program no matter the topic.

Among the criteria on which the on-site committee will judge Davidson's QEP is whether the institution has the resources that provide a reasonable expectation of achieving its stated goals. For those reasons, the formal QEP has defined and delimited populations, means, and objectives. However, SACSCOC does not interpret, nor would an institution necessarily intend, the formal QEP to preclude other aspects of learning related to a larger issue. The QEP is also judged on the degree to which structures are put in place that enable a plan to succeed without undue dependence on particular champions of an issue. In the case of Davidson's plan, concurrent or consecutive focus on issues related to inclusion should benefit from those same structures.

13. Q: Do we report on the success of the QEP to SACSCOC? What if the expected outcomes don't happen?

A: Yes, we summarize our QEP results at the end of the fifth year as part of a mid-accreditation cycle report to SACSCOC. We are not penalized in any way if we do not achieve our expected outcomes. Rather, SACSCOC expects institutions to candidly assess both what went well and what did not, and to provide some insight into the latter if applicable.

14. Q: What else do I need to know?

A: An on-site committee will be on campus from October 18-20, 2016. Members of the committee are authorized to stop any student, faculty and staff member and ask them what they know about our QEP. So, we hope you will be prepared to show them that you have some knowledge about our QEP.