In the last two columns, I have attempted to explicate the nettlesome standards for which the university received SACSCOC “recommendations.” Thus far, I have explicated CS 3.3.1.5 [Institutional Effectiveness: community/public service within its educational mission] and CS 3.7.1 [Faculty competence] - in combination with CR 2.8 [Faculty]. With this column, I attempt to explicate the last of these standards, i.e., CS 3.3.2, which deals with the all-important Quality Enhancement Plan [QEP]. CS 3.3.2 reads:

3.3.2 The institution has developed a Quality Enhancement Plan that (1) demonstrates institutional capability for the initiation, implementation, and completion of the QEP; (2) includes broad-based involvement of institutional constituencies in the development and proposed implementation of the QEP; and (3) identifies goals and a plan to assess their achievement. (Quality Enhancement Plan)

Additionally, complementarity between some “Core Requirement” [CR] standards and some “Comprehensive Standards” [CS] require the CS 3.3.2-tandem examination of CR 2.12, which reads:

Sometimes, CR 2.12 is summarized as “QEP Focus,” and, likewise, CS 3.3.2 is summarized as “QEP Capacity.”

2.12 The institution has developed an acceptable Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) that includes an institutional process for identifying key issues emerging from institutional assessment and focuses on learning outcomes and/or the environment supporting student learning and accomplishing the mission of the institution. (Quality Enhancement Plan)

NOTE: read more about complementary standards in the next SACSCOC (STILL) MATTERS column.
Next, a little ancient history:


The 1997-2003 Edition of the *Criteria for Accreditation* listed the standards that were in effect until the implementation of the superseding *Principles of Accreditation* in January 2004 (adopted December 1984 and effective 1987 through 2003). Coincidentally, I first participated as a SACSCOC reviewer on a visit 12+ years ago at which time the *Criteria* were being used. Under what may have been perceived as the *Criteria’s* hyper-objective (I often use Procrus-
an to describe them) “must” mandates, no criterion for a QEP was yet mandated. First introduced with the 2002-2006 Edition of the Principles of Accreditation: Foundations for Quality Enhancement (adopted December 2001 and effective January 1, 2004), the QEP standards, i.e.: CR 2.12 and CS 3.3.2, are mainstays of current SACSCOC accreditation practice. They first affected SU with our prior 2005 decennial review, which was originally scheduled for 2004 but delayed a year due to SACSCOC QEP rollout issues. Subsequently, Sullivan University’s most recent (2015) decennial review also involved those two now-more-mainstreamed QEP standards.

Also, in addition to the SACSCOC Principles and the SACSCOC Resource Manual, the SACSCOC Handbook for Institutions Seeking Reaffirmation comprises significant information on the QEP. This info includes the following critical steps:

- Step One: Selecting a Topic
- Step Two: Defining the Student Learning Outcomes
- Step Three: Researching the Topic
- Step Four: Identifying the Actions to be Implemented
- Step Five: Establishing the Timeline for Implementation
- Step Six: Organizing for Success
- Step Seven: Identifying Necessary Resources
- Step Eight: Assessing the Success of the QEP
- Step Nine: Preparing the QEP for Submission

I should also note that the QEP, per se, is not submitted as part of a university’s regularly scheduled Compliance Certification. Instead, it is submitted six weeks prior to the actual On-Site Reaffirmation Committee (OSRC) visit. Remarkably, those On-Site Reaffirmation committees on average cite a whopping 59% of all institutions surveyed for noncompliance for standard CR 3.3.2, which makes it the most frequently cited of all OSRC-reviewed standards. Coincidentally, one SACSCOC VP with whom I have worked on various committees is fond of asserting, “Don’t assume that reviewers will reach the same conclusion that you reached about your data. Tell your story by explaining in your narrative; don’t leave it up to reviewers to reach the same conclusion that you reached – they probably won’t.”

In a 2014 SACSCOC meeting, the following QEP assessment bullet points were discussed in a larger program entitled “CONSIDERATIONS FOR AN EFFECTIVE AND MEANINGFUL QEP (http://www.sacscoc.org/institute/2014/2014SIHANDOUTS/Tuesday/HoffmanBairdTues.pdf):”
3.3.2 Assessment

- Clear statements of goals and outcomes; learning outcomes should be measurable, directly related to the topic, and reasonable;
- Enhanced student learning, not enhanced assessment of student learning;
- Clear and understandable assessment “flow;”
- Important “audience” for assessment is Impact Report;
- Assess progress of plan, as well sound practices;
- Goals and outcomes aren’t clear;
- Assessment measures are too limited/too complex/missing.

Of the myriad of critically important elements formally amalgamated into any institution’s QEP, the three most critically important are development of the QEP’s student learning outcomes (SLO’s), structuring of a strong assessment plan, and solidifying a realistic budget. Knowing that these elements would warrant special scrutiny, SU diligently addressed these three issues in chapters 5, 7 and 8, respectively, of its QEP. Yet — true to the SACSCOC VP’s assertion, the On-Site Reaffirmation Committee did not reach the same conclusion we reached regarding our QEP’s compliance: right on cue, the committee expressed concern for SU’s proposed student learning outcomes, which they found to be too broadly written, combining multiple outcomes in some cases, indistinct outcomes in others, and in several cases, mixing learning outcomes, statements of process or general accomplishments, and unmeasurable aspirational goals. And, to heap Pelion on Ossa, the committee also found that the QEP’s proposed assessment plan relied disproportionately on indirect outcome and process measures. More specifically, the committee observed that, “with respect to the statement of student learning outcomes, a lack of identification of specific direct assessment tools, and a failure to set target measures of success, Sullivan has a comprehensive ‘Plan to Plan’ for its assessment portion of the QEP…. Providing all of this information should result in a comprehensive Assessment Plan rather than a ‘Plan to Plan’.” Fortunately, the committee’s objections fell within the purview of Comprehensive Standard 3.3.2’s less astringent criteria, rather than within those of the more-penalty-fraught Core Requirement 2.12. Regardless, SU dutifully heeded the analytical comments provided by the committee for strengthening the QEP, including retooling its SLO’s and establishing third-party direct (versus indirect) assessment measures. With the aforementioned modifications made, the university submitted its RESPONSE TO THE VISITING COMMITTEE and anticipates reaffirmation in December 2015.

Postscript: as everyone knows by now: in the aftermath of the 2015 Annual SACSCOC Conference - and fortuitously culminating a process that started with a SACSCOC compliance kick-off in August 2013, the university has been granted a full ten-year reaffirmation with no follow up or monitoring reports. Obviously, SACSCOC still matters.