Wolff-Murphy introduced new student representatives to the committee, discussed the revised timeline and handouts, and noted that a QEP topic is needed for the SACS report. Presentations to be made concerning perspective of first year experience in math and reading, general learning communities, and the tutoring & learning center. Future meetings will be broken up into smaller groups to discuss specific topics.

Moreno, Director of Tutoring & Learning Center (TLC) began presentation on how TLC operates. Discussed at-risk students—“Best Practices” handout, and how TLC is working with first year students through pre-testing and students' requests for help. Majority of students are seeking help through TLC. Also, the achievement plan—THEA Agreement—provides structure for working directly with students and shows students that TLC is aware of their progress.

Future efforts will focus on enhancement and retention. Key QEP issues are enhancing student learning and how TLC will strengthen programs already in place. Emphasis on strengthening student knowledge and assisting students to engage in academic integration. TLC is research based and enhancing tutorials will be the current focus. TLC website (tlc.tamucc.edu) provides additional information on tutoring schedules in various areas, and classes providing supplemental instruction that are available for students. Goal is to increase supplemental instruction on campus, as students generally do better in those classes.

TLC offers a new web-based tutorial for students, “Smart Thinking,” which is available 24/7, and there are student tutors available. TLC’s name is going to change to “Center for Academic Student Support & Excellence” (CASSE) in order to take the lead on retention, and to enhance and better meet the needs of students. TLC’s motto is “To help the underprepared to prepare, the prepared to advance, and the advanced to excel.”

Sterba-Boatwright began presentation regarding math issues—link to his website will be on Web CT. Evidence documenting obstacles and challenges in learning discussed as to specific math courses. Success rates are holding and some are improving in first semester students as well as general population. However, testing comprehension indicates something is wrong. Step program focuses on recruitment and retention of science and math students. A lack of clear understanding of concepts and poor scores indicate a need to improve student learning outcomes. Comparative data of Texas
public institutions and a national database will be available. Evidence gathered indicates we are at or above median level.

Student deficiencies due to factors such as not being able to do more, calculator use, no habit of reflection on failure, low class attendance rates, and learning disabilities. The most negative, angry and frustrated students are in math and taking classes is postponed or avoided. Financial aid issues—not able to buy books until three weeks into course—has a negative impact. Faculty concerns—enabling through testing methods, teaching to students they wish they had, and an unfocused approach—can be improved. Staffing levels, class sizes, placement system, and lack of interaction with learning communities discussed. Inadequate staffing and interaction interferes with ability to produce a consistent educational experience. Evidence indicates class size here is adequate, but instructors are spread thin within the department. For the placement systems, i.e., pretesting, high school assessments, etc., to work better there could be more focus during orientation to aid in student placement.

Huerta question of other successful models. Sterba-Boatwright/Orser discussed that controlled studies are difficult but could pursue other systems. Connecting at-risk students’ difficulties with placement to predict where students should be and other composite measures could be implemented. TLC is working on diagnostics to create new techniques of sorting data.

Bantell question of using graduate students to aid instructors. Sterba-Boatwright indicated by the time they are adequately trained, they are ready to graduate. Grise question of any other institution putting all students in same course and placing from there—to bring lower background students up. Number of different math courses required for different majors makes it very difficult. We have most lenient and least restrictive placement system in South Texas, which gives students a better opportunity to succeed early.

Hartlaub question of why placement system is ineffective. Showing the website’s placement grid, Sterba-Boatwright indicated that predictions based on various historical rates create a more complicated system, which makes it harder for advisors to understand. This is a reason for the more simplified placement system that is in place now. Byus question of Missouri Western (MW) approach working here. Sterba-Boatwright discussed MW system breaks standard course/hour template, use of non-standard semesters, and “Alex” program as obstacles to use in our system. Also computer tutorials don’t always work. Tutoring does help, but because of stigma attached, few students utilize it.

Bantell question of student assessment through pretesting to find lack of math skills and then focus on those areas. If students do not show a basic understanding, then how do you correct the problem. There haven’t been any concrete attempts to address this concern. Benavides questioned that when a problem is found at high school level are attempts made to work with those teachers. Our graduate program does much to support improvement of teaching skills. Coordinating Board (CB) is working with TEA to align curriculum in next year. Nelsen stated the consultant, Carol Twigg, is working with CB in math, history and English. Sterba-Boatwright indicated studies of cultural issues and a change in attitude regarding learning math are needed.
Nelson began presentation of developmental reading program. Introduced Buddy McDowell, doctoral student and developmental course instructor. Course is THEA-oriented—designed to help pass THEA—with emphasis on reading. Criteria changing to passing this course, not THEA. Grades are amended with “D” or “In Progress.” Similar to other developmental courses with emphasis on note taking, time management, and use of library and includes outside written work and in-class reading. Students’ comments on course evaluations indicate improvement in capability and learning.

Enrollment pattern shows fall sections larger; spring has more ESL students. Orser stated courses studied were only first time, first year students. Discussion of grading, exemptions, and student population effects on THEA. Discussion of historical path of basic reading courses. Orser study of past transcripts indicated a 67% THEA pass rate, but 60% of students enrolled in course withdrew after one year. Other studies indicated students just below the cut off who took the course stayed a little longer but still dropped out (but may have continued education elsewhere). Nelsen discussion of use of Nelson/Denny test, a standardized reading weakness test that targets particular skills, including vocabulary and comprehension. Not used here, but College Station is using it.

Presentation by Wooster and Huerta on first year learning communities. Huerta explained that all first year, full time students and courses are linked—seminars to composition—and all working with same material. This has become a national model, and presentations have been made at conferences. They are working on interdisciplinary understanding and faculty development. The challenge has been to find what the impact is on student learning—data has indicated an improvement in GPAs, which can be a predictor to retention. Peer mentoring has been added to seminars, but hard to staff each semester. Managing large classes and classroom deficiencies are challenges to be addressed.

Wooster discussed his concerns about the crisis in student learning indicated by rapidly falling grades even though exams are easier, and the sense that the university is not doing what is necessary to show students how to succeed. Students aren’t studying enough and they have more jobs outside class. There are exceptions, but it is not the rule that students do well. Most students are average, but have too many other commitments, and they have to be convinced they are no longer in high school. One aspect that should be addressed is that students aren’t able to buy textbooks at the beginning of classes—many cannot get books until three weeks into semester. There is also a need to convey to students the importance of attending class, taking notes, and reading the books. A more costly but successful fix is to get more tenured and tenure track faculty into first year courses.

Discussion of justification to hiring permanent, full time instructors, and improvement of first year community retention through decent wages for instructors. Also need to consider that traditional means of pedagogy—I talk, you listen—doesn’t work in the 21st century. Students can’t sit still and rely on texting and internet too much—teaching methods have to change. Huerta discussion of using collaborative learning and how different methods can be improvised. Wooster: Students have to recognize that
learning is important, that we need to remove barriers so they want to get help, and emphasize that learning becomes the culture—set the tone that we are about learning. Sterba-Boatwright discussed that the State and Compass set THEA below college entrance requirements for reading.

Bantell question of attendance requirements. Discussion that there is no policy in place and requirement is left up to instructors. There is opposition to forcing students to attend and requirements and/or quizzes caused duress and not learning. Nursing and Honors require attendance as an ethical expectation, but attendance incentives have backfired in other classes.

Benavides/Orser discussion that most students are good, but just not working hard enough goes along with their unreasonable expectations of prospective salaries. Students believe they can go to school full time, work full time and still succeed. First generation students come from a culture of work that overrides the school ethic so there may be a need to show families what it takes to be a student.

Nelsen discussion of creating cultural change in the learning community. We have $150,000 a year to make that happen. Students are failing because they don’t read or because of other cultural factors. It has been found that if you do something—anything—there will be improvement. This is the chance to come up with our own innovations.

Huerta discussion of goal being student success and increasing the progress rate. Orser discussion of solving problems by addressing all dimensions that are lacking and the crucial role that seminar leaders can play. Nuckols discussion that most students do not view seminar classes seriously. Honors classes require participation, thought, and work. If students are treated as if they are still in high school, they will not improve. Discussion of the need to build a culture of learning from the start. Working with parents and employers of students to be more sensitive to facilitating learning would be a challenge, but could be a good strategy. Orser discussion of National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) given to incoming freshmen to aid understanding of student expectations. Data may indicate first term success or show where problems are coming up, and can then be incorporated into future orientation/guidelines for students and parents.

Wolff-Murphy will add handouts and websites to Web CT. Committee asked to read revised timeline and email comments to her. Next meeting: October 9, 2:30-4:30, location TBD.

Minutes submitted by: Ann Loberg
Approved by: Susan Wolff-Murphy for submission to Committee
Approved by Committee: October 9, 2008