

What is Radford's new QEP (Quality Enhancement Plan) and what does it mean to faculty, staff and students? Those were questions posed to a varied audience during the groundwork being laid for the QEP's development and implementation.

This new QEP, adopted by Radford University and consistent with its 2018-2023 Strategic Plan, is included in our 10-year Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) reaccreditation. The new QEP is called RISE: Realizing Inclusive Student Excellence- Highlanders RISE Together!

The targeted population for this QEP is students in 100- and 200-level required courses, and especially students from historically underrepresented groups. Data shows that there are equity gaps in student performance in these foundational courses. The RISE QEP will enhance student learning and success through faculty development and fostering student-faculty relationships.

Biology student Jynna Harrell, when asked about this initiative, responded positively. "It is important that all members of the RU community celebrate diversity, encourage equity, and engage in inclusion. Let our differences not divide us, but teach us. It is time for us to expand our minds, to be accepting of all social classes, all economical classes, all mental health disorders, all ethnicities, all sexualities, all regions, and all races. Any student, no matter their identity, should feel engaged both in the classroom and in the RU community."

Marketing professor Jane Machin's said of this QEP, "It's crucial to include the broadest range of perspectives you can. Whether you're putting a creative team together, trying to come up with new products, or looking to understand your customers better, it's imperative to draw from the multiple viewpoints that come from different life experiences. The same holds for education: The more inclusive a program, the better the experience for students and faculty."

Through the RISE Faculty Institute, instructors will learn inclusive pedagogy strategies to reach all of their students. Additionally, each academic college and RUC will have a RISE Community Action Team (R-CATs) consisting of students, faculty, and staff who will examine college-level data and create outreach events to build community and belonging within their units.

Mary Catherine Santoro, Radford University Carilion outreach librarian, echoed Machin's support of a written QEP. "It's a roadmap of where you want to go and what milestones you're looking to pass along the way. But equally important, it's a record of why you started the journey – of what inspired and informed the idea [of this QEP]."

That journey began by proposing the QEP idea based on the success of the \$1M-funded Howard Hughes Medical Institute Inclusive Excellence grant that has targeted the Artis College of Science and Technology in this kind of work since 2017. This grant, REALISE: Realizing Inclusive Science Excellence has components of faculty development and student peer mentorship and is catalyzing change throughout the university.

Several teams were formed to get this QEP started, including Data and Assessment, Marketing and Outreach, Program, and Steering.

The timeline is set to have the QEP ready to present to SACSCOC in March 2023. Equity, inclusion, retention, and college belonging studies have been the focus of the research supporting this work.

Associate professor in the Department of Management Tal Zarankin feels this plan is “absolutely necessary and I wholeheartedly agree with the goals which deal with increasing students’ sense of belonging.” He feels that barriers to retention include diminished school spirit and sense of belonging, and those factors are related.

“Let’s not focus on what students are lacking or what RU is lacking but rather on what we can and should provide,” Zarankin continued. He further said that, “we need to realize that and strengthen their affiliation and school spirit. When we all focus on this, progress can be made. It seems that part of the QEP is geared towards that.”

Agida Manizade, professor in the Department of Mathematics/Statistics, feels similarly. She says she and her colleagues need to “understand and connect” with students. The students’ wide variety of backgrounds and experiences should be taken into consideration. “That’s my personal take on it, based on the 13 years of working at RU, with very few women of color in the College and very few in our department.”

Manizade said it is important for faculty to be able to relate to students and go the extra step to help them. The reality, she said, is that some of the students arrive at college not knowledgeable enough to navigate the academic environment. Not recognizing the emotional and mental health of students from historically marginalized groups can cause unnecessary distress, said Manizade.

Justine McLaughlin, biology major, sees the benefit to this QEP is that it shows students and faculty will actively work to create inclusion for our diverse community. She said, “Students will appreciate feeling like someone worked to make them belong in all of Radford’s spaces.”

Harrell weighed in, saying “I think students will benefit from the QEP plan by reading, listening, and watching other students and faculty discuss the positive aspects diversity, equity and inclusion can have on our campus.”

As Professor Zarankin urges, this QEP looks at relevant research, is based on current statistics, and addresses equity and inclusion in and outside of the classroom, making Radford University an even more welcoming place to learn.