

## Improving Academic Quality - The Role of Department-level Focus

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### Abstract

Implementation of department-level focus areas can contribute to academic quality improvement. "Focusing" provides cohesiveness, a common agenda for planning, direction for collegial governance, and support for administrative decisions. Appropriate processes, constraints, opportunities, and implementation steps affect success. A case history describes how a focus area was pursued in staffing, resource allocation, and curriculum reform. After six years, assessment indices (e.g., extramural funding, SCH, majors, publications) were all up markedly. "Focusing" allowed quality improvements across many of the department's areas of responsibility.

### Introduction

Academic quality improvement seldom happens by chance. More assuredly it occurs after deliberate decisions are followed by deliberate action aimed at accomplishing predefined goals. Such goal setting is an integral part of recent trends in academic organizational functioning: Management by Objectives, Strategic Planning, and Continuous Quality Improvement all involve goal setting. In the contemporary academic setting, a hierarchy of goal defining pronouncements, developed through a formal planning process, are meant to guide decision-making, resource allocation, and other actions at various levels of the organization. Most goal hierarchies involve a coherent step-down from the institutional mission statement, with lower-level unit missions, goals, and assessment tools being in consonance with those of higher levels.

A somewhat under-appreciated aspect of academic goal setting is that the entire mission-goal-assessment hierarchy of an institution must also incorporate goals set by individual faculty members. If there is great inconsonance, higher level goals can seldom be accomplished. Faculty set their professional goals based on their interests, career plans, career stage, and voluntary concurrence with the goals and ethos of the institution. An academic department's mission should somehow capture the desired consonance between institutional missions and goals and the middle ground of faculty consensus.

How that faculty consensus is identified and codified will vary among departments based on the faculty's character and history, the institution's character and planning process, and the expectations of the academic leadership. One approach, discussed in the present paper, is to settle on one or more "focus areas" that encapsulate a significant portion of the faculty's aspirations.

A fundamental driving force in setting a departmental focus is the premise that a department cannot be all things to all people. The best of plans and goals can be undermined by limits of resources such as money, space, personnel, expertise, faculty time, and faculty energy. Rather than dispersing its energies among numerous academic goals, a department can concentrate its energies on one or a few themes that encompass a significant portion of its mission and goals. In this way a department can be good at something rather than ordinary in everything.

#### Departmental Focus

A departmental focus may be defined as a statement of the over-arching interests of the faculty taken collectively and encompassing aspirations for advancement of the department and its faculty. Some examples: In a liberal arts college, a departmental focus might be experiential learning in science. In a regional university, a focus might be innovative approaches to teacher education in the department's discipline. In a research university, a focus might be high energy physics. A large department might adopt more than one foci. A comprehensive department might adopt a scholarly focus and a teaching focus.

Focusing has benefits. Inherent in concentrating on a focus is setting appropriate quality improvement goals. By focusing, the department finds cohesiveness and a common world view, the faculty find themselves able to arrive at philosophically consistent collegial decisions, and a department chair is free to make administrative decisions that will be understood and accepted by the faculty. By focusing, resources can be optimized and efficiencies gained. By focusing, the rest of the academic community will come to appreciate better a department's aspirations

But focusing also has risks, for example the risk of exclusion. Elements of the unit's responsibility that do not fall within a focus may suffer benign neglect. Care must be taken that faculty whose activities do not fall within the focus do not become disenfranchised. In practice, many faculty will support a departmental focus, despite their activities not being a part of it, so long as their interests are not unduly threatened.

Focusing risks over-specialization. Specialization is efficient in marshalling available resources toward making directed advances. But, if institutional priorities change or the discipline passes it by, an over-specialized focus could risk marginalization. A focus should be academically and disciplinarily robust and accomplishable within anticipated resources and expected future conditions.

### **Implementing a Focus**

The process of selecting and implementing a department focus can determine its eventual success. Appropriate processes may differ among situations but should allow emergence of faculty consensus. The process of focus setting may take months or even years and can be rushed only with great care. Leadership of the chair and acquiescence of higher level administrators are crucial to success, but department focus must emerge from faculty consensus.

Nonetheless, focus selection must consider factors beyond the faculty. Integrity within the discipline is a primary concern. Special opportunities might encourage adopting a specific focus whereas intense competition from other units or other institutions might discourage a specific focus. Accreditation and assessment criteria provide both constraints and opportunities. Fiscal resources are always constraints, although focusing generally places a department at an advantage in accessing institutional resources.

Administrative support is essential. The focus needs to be coherent with the history of the institution, its stated or actual mission, and the interests of its leadership. Coherence with the interests of the Trustees, the legislature, or community leaders also engender support.

Once set, the department focus must be vigorously pursued by the chair. By focusing, otherwise contentious decisions can be made without continually revisiting questions of direction. Obvious movement toward increasing quality, which results from focus, counterbalances persistent erosive forces. As quality increases, arguments to alter direction become less compelling.

Opportunities regarding faculty recruitment can make or break a focus. Although senior faculty may not have professional interests that are part of the focus, when new faculty are recruited, they should be selected for their expertise in and commitment to the focus area. Such new faculty play several roles. Their activities help meet goals of the focus area. Their support for the focus increases its stability. They bring a depth of understanding of the focus area and are able to direct student research. The success of their activities takes pressure off faculty whose interests may not be so compatible with the focus area.

## A Case History

The case history is of a Biology Department, having a history similar to many departments. Growth in teaching-oriented faculty occurred in the 1960's. It has been a primary provider of medical school students. Health-microbiology vied with field biology as faculty emphases. Several strong faculty dominated at various times over the decades. One aquatic biologist for a time sponsored many of the graduate students. He was succeeded by one of his students. Expansion brought other faculty with similar interests. In the 1970's, research orientation increased.

In the mid 1980's, some faculty sponsored the University's acquisition of a nearby field station. Also political pressure was building to distinguish among biology programs in the state. These events coincided with the faculty's re-accreditation self study in which a committee proposed to focus in "Freshwater Biology," later confirmed by faculty vote. The report specifically stated that faculty hires should be made with an eye to this focus.

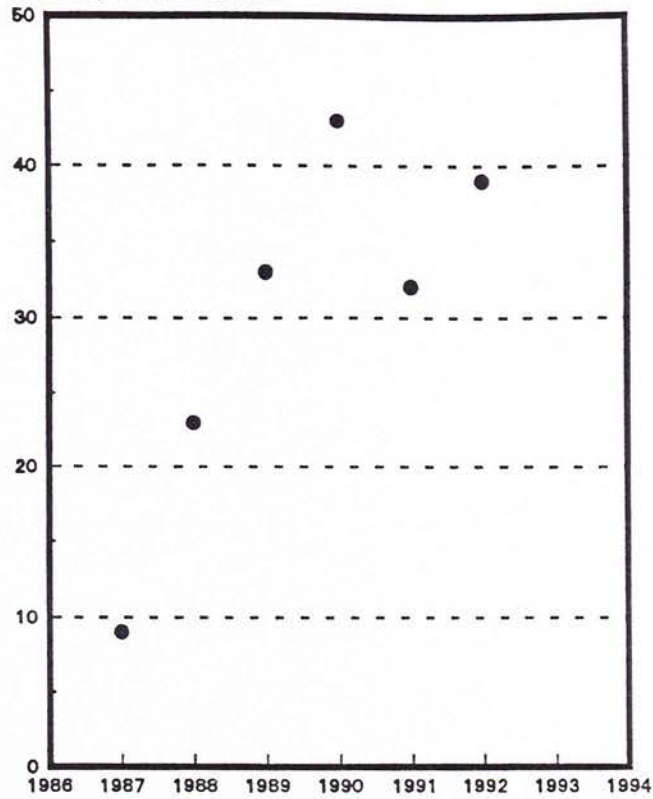
In the late 1980's, a chair with expertise in the field was recruited. The administration supported the focus. The President adopted the Field Station as a priority and elevated its stature within the political constituency of the institution. A university-wide interest group was founded. Contacts were established with alumni, political supporters and potentially collaborating agencies.

Faculty positions were filled in specific areas of expertise within the focus field. Recruited faculty had interests complementary to other faculty, and evidence of collaborative orientation in their work was a selection criteria. Developing graduate student based research programs in the focus area was another criteria. One after another, disciplinary holes were filled in the breadth of the department's focus.

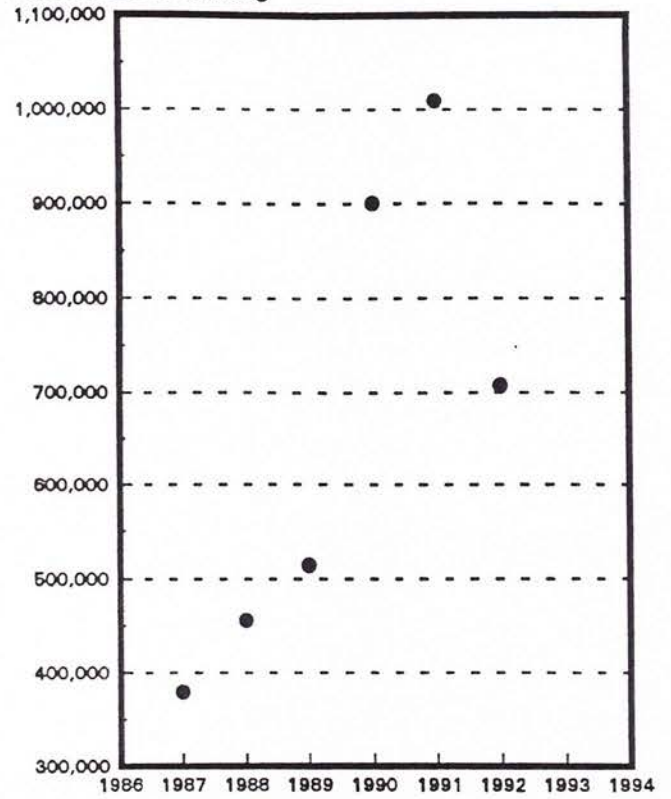
The atmosphere for change inspired by focus-related activities allowed peripheral issues to be brought to the table. Many of the most fundamental issues of academic life were dealt with during the ensuing several years, including curriculum and teaching issues. The undergraduate curriculum was strengthened. A graduate curriculum was installed that could be argued was the most complete in the field in the country. General education courses were redesigned. Core-wide scope and sequencing was approved. A senior level assessment tool and national content norms were adopted.

With the passage of approximately six years since the adoption of the focus, 1987-93, it is possible to examine the results. Trends in various indices are shown in the following figures. All trends suggest quality improvements.

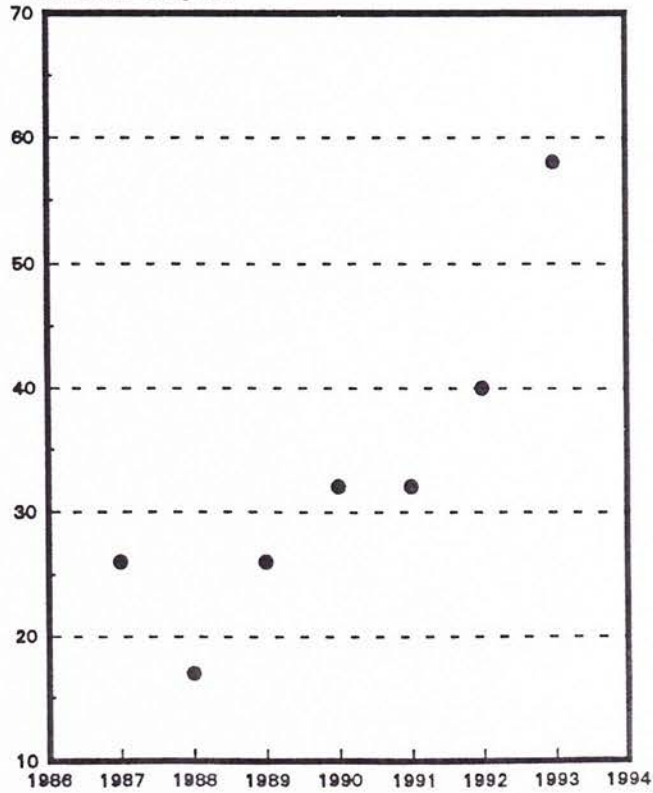
Faculty Publications



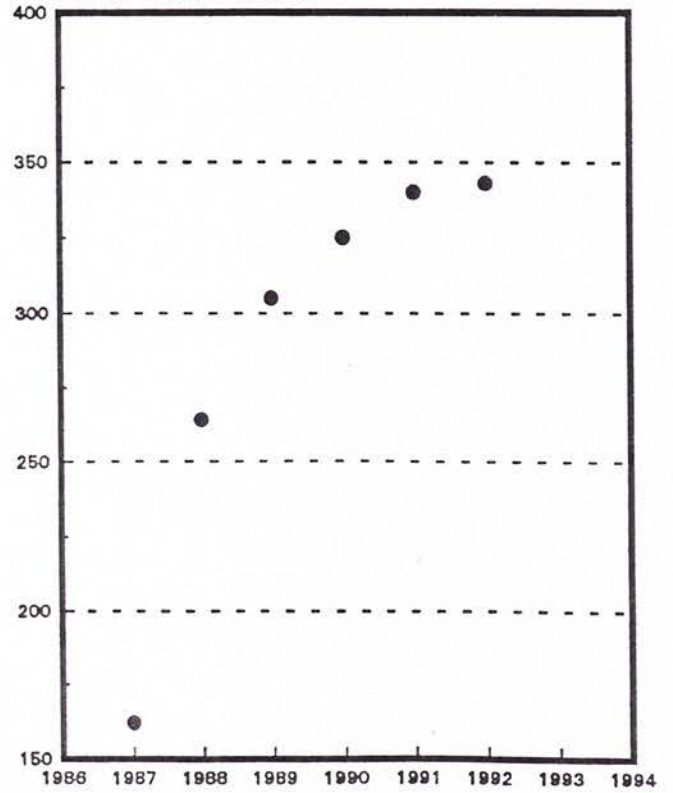
Extramural Funding



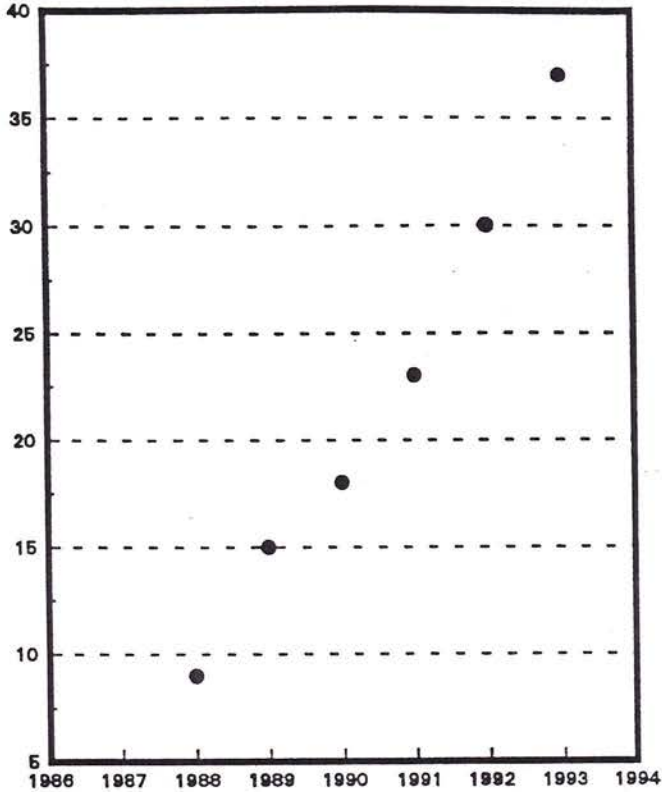
Graduate Majors



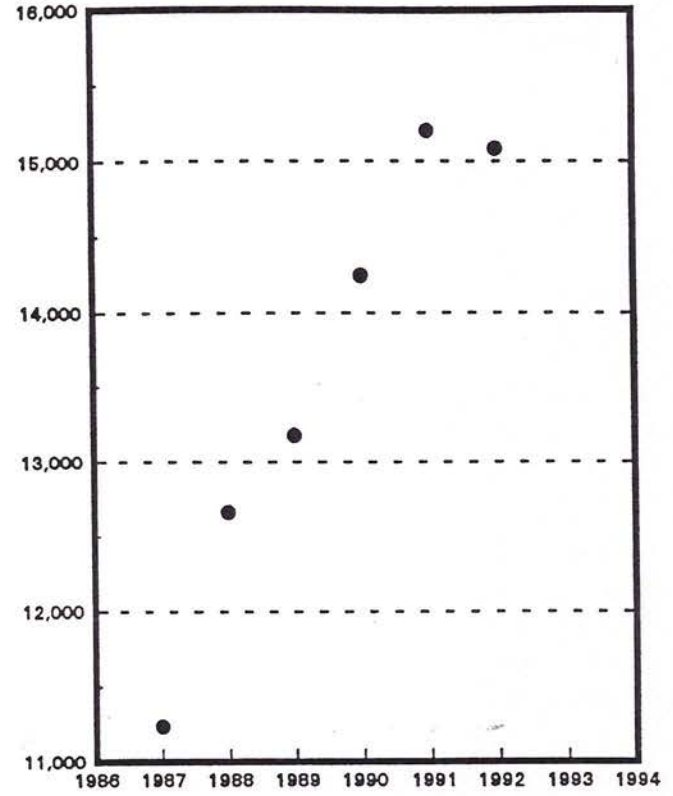
Graduate Credit Hours



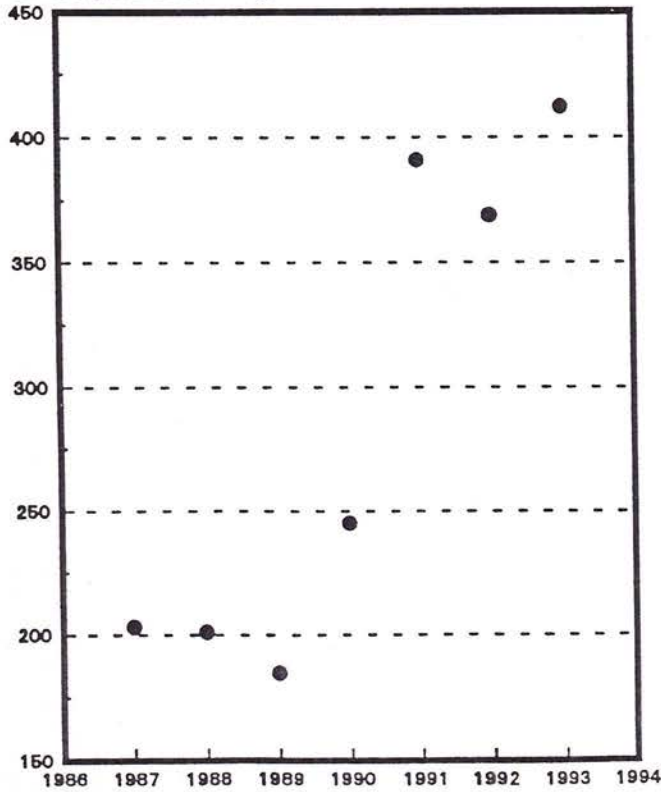
Previous Institutions of Graduate Majors



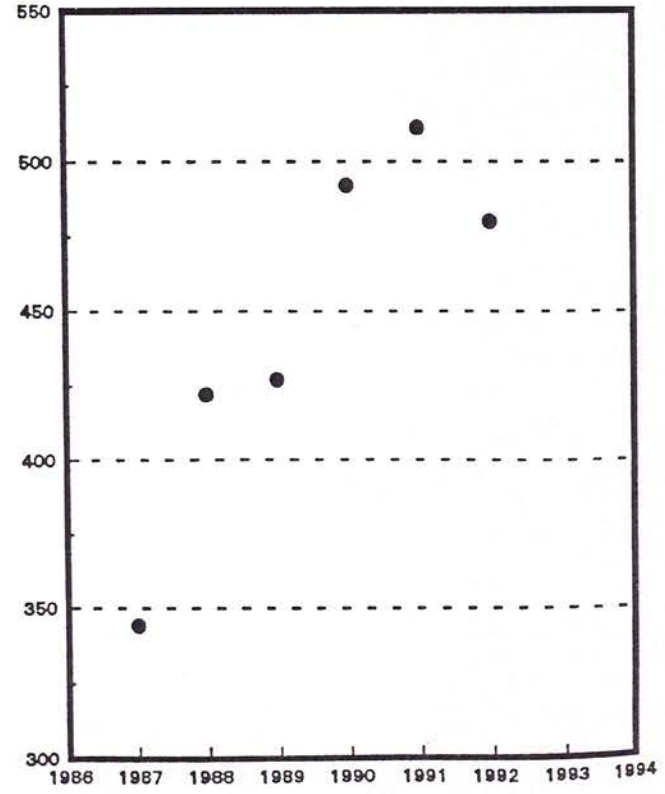
Student Credit Hour Production



Undergraduate Majors



SCH/FTE



The Freshwater Biology focus was principally aimed at enhancing research productivity and the quality of the graduate program, critical aspects of a graduate department's national reputation. Faculty publications and extramural support approximately tripled. At its peak, extramural support approximated the core budget of the department, providing significant additional resources to be marshalled toward continual quality improvement.

In response to quality improvement and increased financial resources, the graduate program became reinvigorated. The number of graduate majors about tripled, as did graduate student credit hour production. It is yet too early to assess quality of graduates, but progress is encouraging. There is no doubt about increasing quality of matriculating students. In 1988, the previous degrees of half the students were local. By 1993-94, a national pool of applicants produced students holding degrees from 36 institutions. These students were specifically attracted by the reputation of the department or of individual faculty members.

These data suggest that the primary goals of quality increase in graduate studies and research have been achieved. However, improvements also occurred in other academic areas. The number of biology majors increased. Student credit hour production rose 43%, contrasted with a 16% increase for the University as a whole, indicating that students were actively selecting biology courses. Student credit hour production per faculty member increased to 480, representing a tremendous advance in the efficiency of course delivery. The peak SCH/FTE ratio became the highest in the University, 86% above the university-wide mean and doubling the ratio expected by bench-mark comparisons and governing board expectations. By this point all comparisons indicated a substantial deficiency in the number of faculty positions, which was acknowledged by the administration.

The focus was initially inspired by opportunities presented by acquisition of a field station. The initiative of the faculty in focusing their resources has not gone unrecognized by the administration or by potential collaborators. After the initial commitment from the institution to purchase the station, the administration itself took the initiative to increase the station's size by half again. Support was received from University patrons. Support of the local community, state officials, and federal officials resulted in donations, facility leases, and construction of additional facilities. Private-public partnerships resulted in long-term research funding. The national guard donated over one million dollars of site improvements during summer training encampments. Presently a research center is under development at the station supported by facilities grants from the Federal government.

## Revisiting the Focus

In the sixth year, the University undertook a strategic planning exercise. This was a top-down exercise, starting with a new institutional mission statement and long-term goals. Although individual programs were not identified, the success of the focus area and field station were fully compatible with the new institutional mission and goals.

As part of its response to the planning initiative, faculty approved a new department mission statement and established appropriate goals and assessment tools. In the process, while acknowledging the success of the focus, they addressed apparent slippage in other parts of the department's mission. These included an increased attention to undergraduate teaching and recognition of the strength of several faculty research groups that had developed under the freshwater biology aegis. While not abandoning the focus, the new mission statement and goals expanded the department foci to include teaching quality, enhancing the undergraduate experience for future scientists, and expanding research emphasis to encompass three subfields.

The ability to refocus is a tribute to the success of the initial focus area. Having achieved much of what was possible in this area, the faculty moved on to address other areas of its mission and thereby to reinvigorate the process of continuous quality improvement. The elevation of subdisciplines reinstalled a greater diversity of emphases valuable in meeting changing opportunities. After six years of focused development, nothing was lost in the redefinition and much was gained by expanding the number of mission areas to which attention will be given. Experience in focused development should allow the faculty to be able to deal with several foci simultaneously.

## Lessons from the Case History

Substantial quality improvements were achieved in a relatively short time, in large part attributable to having selected a focus by faculty consensus and acting vigorously upon that focus. Within six years, the department has gained a national reputation in its focus area, in fact surpassing its regional competitors in reputation for the first time.

Quality improvements occurred outside the focus area, especially in teaching and curriculum, engendered by an atmosphere of faculty engagement with academic and development issues initiated by adopting a focus. Improvements were made possible because discussion among faculty and the administration evolved from what the direction should be to how it should be achieved.



The department's constituencies responded enthusiastically to the faculty focus. Within the institution, the administration quickly adopted the focus area. Partnerships with federal, state, and local agencies and support of government and civic officials brought significant resources and positive reinforcement. Partnerships with private enterprise on research and development led to long term collaboration.

The focus was achieved through steadfast devotion. Decisions, administrative and faculty, were made with an eye to the focus. The need for steadfastness was essential to compensate for an inevitable erosion of will and a tendency to want to disperse resources among many worthwhile activities.

It may be important to know when to refocus. If a focus is not succeeding, it may be time to refocus. Or when a focus has succeeded or quality improvement is on track, it may be time to devote resources to other elements of the mission. In any case, revisiting the focus periodically, even if it is reaffirmed, keeps the process of ongoing quality improvement fresh.

#### Conclusion

To the extent that an academic department cannot be all things to all people, it can benefit from focusing its attention, activities, and resources on doing a few things very well. In the present example, a single focus was developed but in larger departments several compatible foci can be assembled. The important point is to achieve a statement of the overarching aspirations of the faculty and department that can guide institutional development. Success breeds success, support, and resources that eventually can allow the department to do more things well. But initially, it is better to do one or a very few things very well than many things poorly. By focusing resources and energy, significant quality improvements can be achieved.