

AQIP officials assess Prin academics

Representatives ad-
minister semi-annual
accreditation check-up
for Prin campus

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During an accreditation check-up last weekend, Principia College was deemed to be at a "very critical stage" in their efforts to-

wards the Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP).

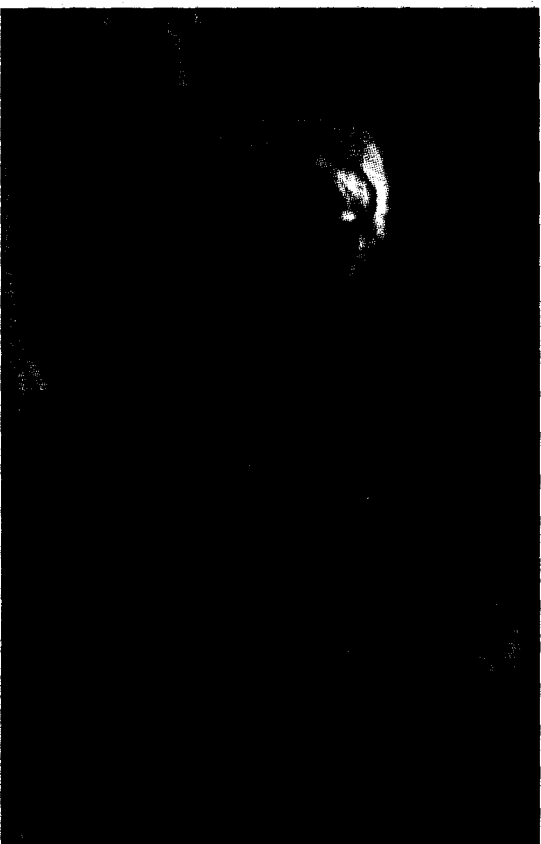
Two AQIP representatives, Lynn Onken and John Brock, spent Wednesday through Friday evaluating the school's current status, its commitment

to progress, and its plans for the future. After a brief visit packed with interviews and discussions, they deemed the school capable of attaining AQIP's requirements, but said it will take commitment and hard work from the whole community.

"You are an AQIP institution because you met the minimum standard for accreditation, so you're safe that way, but as an AQIP institution, you're trying to exceed expectations with your activities," said Onken. "You are, I believe...at a critical junction because you need to make progress to be a 'quality improvement' organization, or frankly, maybe abandon the effort."

Merlin Lewis, Principia's Director of Institutional Effectiveness and Planning, conducts these same peer review check ups at other schools and was pleased with the weekend's proceedings.

"The appraisers essentially said that given the time you have been in here, you should have more done, but we see "Accreditation" on Page 3



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The two AQIP representatives maintain that Principia still has work to do in order to become a "quality improvement" organization.

"Accreditation" from page 1

sense energy and excitement," said Lewis. "And we just had to decide that we were going to go for it. And we've turned that corner."

The AQIP program that Principia joined in 2002 is based on a System Portfolio where an institution answers a series of questions that assess its strengths and weaknesses. Then the program insures improvement of these shortcomings by requiring its members to have three Quality Action Projects (QAP) in continual operation.

In the summary drafted by Onken and Brock, Principia's low progress was attributed to administrative changes over the last year. During the debrief meeting on Friday, the incoming College President, Dr. Jonathan Palmer, voiced his appreciation for the check-up, and confirmed both his personal and Principia's commitment to AQIP. Palmer, who attended AQIP's strategy forum in Chicago last January, is expected to play a pivotal role in the school's increased efforts in the near future.

Brock, who is Vice President of Academic Affairs at Maranatha Baptist Bible College, suggested that Principia establish a Quality Steering Committee to control Principia's integration of AQIP. Lewis said that Palmer plans to be heavily involved in creating this committee by next fall.

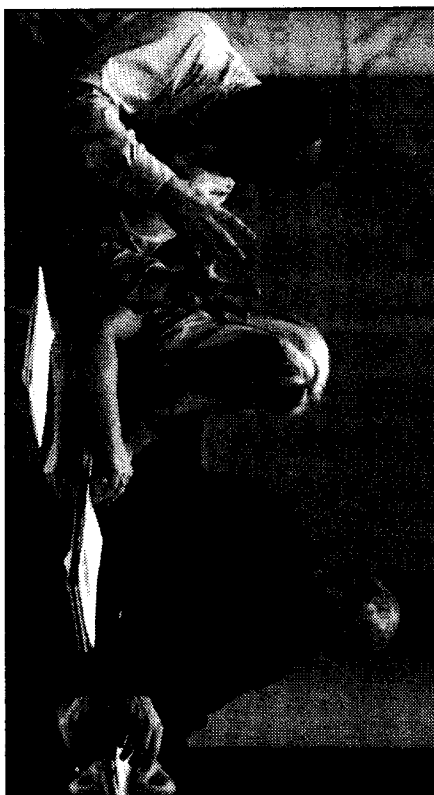
"This is an institutional effort, not an individual effort," said Onken, an organizational development consultant. So while Palmer will take charge of the process when he officially takes office in July, many other members of the school are already involved in nurturing this program.

Dr. Tom Fuller, Interim Dean of the College, and Prin's assessment office are converting the current AQIP System Profile document from a PDF to a more interactive format for the Web. Other AQIP institutions have such "efolio" websites where everyone can access all of the school's progress. As a requirement for AQIP, the online option also allows

timely feedback and networking with other schools involved in the same "quality improvement" program.

The online interaction within the community will keep the System Portfolio a living document. The current copy, submitted in June 2006 has received minor adjustments, but it is far from the ideal quarterly revisions. Brock likened the regular portfolio updates to the Mississippi River that is never outdated due to the constant flow of water.

The website will also provide more transparency and interaction within the community. Although 71 people were



Samantha Howard / photo
Interim College President Dr. Tom Fuller and AQIP representatives Lynn Onken and John Brock spoke in Wanamaker last Wednesday.

involved in creating the AQIP System Portfolio and about 20 people attended formal training. Onken and Brock sensed a disconnect with the faculty during a small discussion on Friday.

Foreign Languages Professor Duncan Charters attributes this disconnect to several factors. He said one is the entire community's heavy involvement in students' education. Because this program stresses academic improvement, an area most directly related to the teachers, the process usually re-

quires a lot of participation from the faculty. However, Principia's unique focus on the whole-man education requires the participation of many different stakeholders, and all of these people are contributing to the QAPs.

Principia's current QAPs include: improving staff evaluations, improving the Freshman Year Experience (FYE), and auditing and minimizing committees and initiatives. These projects originated from Human Resources, Office of Student Life/FYE faculty, and the College Executive Committee respectively.

While AQIP requires projects geared toward improving academics, Principia has a broader understanding of student learning. Brock faces the same issues at Maranatha due to their focus on character education, but they have found a balance between general learning and classroom learning.

"I don't think that we are doing badly," said Charters. "I think that we are on the right path, but we have to zone in on academics."

According to Charters, the faculty is making considerable progress, but it has not been documented by QAPs. There are currently 60 people working on learning themes, and Palmer has established a committee to improve general education over the summer.

In an email, Fuller said, "Some of that work will be systematizing and documenting the great good that is already active at the college." So while these QAPs need to be more academic, the academic progress being made needs to become QAPs.

"It appears as if the faculty and the administration need to communicate fully in this process so that assessment can become a community-wide effort," said Mass Communication professor Dave McFarland.

The feedback from the check-up visit is a clear reminder for the school, and it will serve as one of the elements in Principia's next accreditation process in 2010.