At first glance, there appears to be nothing glamorous about SACS, the once every 10 years reaccreditation process.

Maybe that’s because the side of it people first see is that cumbersome, time-consuming process known as compliance review — the side of reaccreditation most people associate with the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS).

Preparation for the SACS reaccreditation began nearly two-and-a-half years ago. This work has involved several hundred faculty and staff, touching every academic and administrative unit on campus.

The compliance review alone called for detailed responses to 80 assorted standards of good practice across nine different areas of the University’s operations.

Committees representing each of these areas toiled untold hours to gather detailed, comprehensive information on every facet of the University enterprise, from finance and administration to legal and policy issues to an exhaustive evaluation led by Faculty Chair Judith Wegner of the credentials of 4,000 instructors who taught nearly 7,500 sections of courses during the 2004-05 academic year.

In addition, the compliance review called for explanations for how the University measured effectiveness at both institutional and unit levels.

The process required that the University not only detail every academic program, every administrative function, every educational support service, but also describe what was being done in all of these areas to ensure expected outcomes were being met.

In November, an off-site SACS team evaluated the nearly 450-page document with 1,500 attachments that was amassed to show how those 80 compliance standards were being met.

As expected, the SACS team found few problems and posed only a few questions for which it has called on the University to supply answers.

Upcoming SACS visit

But there is another dimension to the SACS process that a growing number of people on campus have gotten excited about — the side of
the SACS process that people like Bobbi Owen have embraced as an opportunity to advance the University in much the same way that the last SACS review a decade ago helped improve Carolina’s intellectual climate.

Owen, a professor of dramatic art and the senior associate dean for undergraduate education in the College of Arts and Sciences, joined Lynn Williford, assistant provost and director of the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, in telling University trustees about the work on SACS that has been completed, and the opportunities that lie ahead.

It’s the part of the process that moves beyond proving you are good to showing what you plan to do to become even better, Owen said. It involves the creation of a Quality Enhancement Plan, or QEP.

April 11-13, a SACS team, led by University of Georgia President Michael Adams, will be on campus to talk with faculty, students and staff to review all aspects of the University.

While the compliance review is an inspection of past practices, the QEP, titled “Making Critical Connections,” is a forward-looking document intended to open doors to new possibilities, Owen said.

A plan that looks ahead

The elements in the QEP were identified in the spring semester of 2004 by the SACS leadership team, in consultation with the Chancellor’s Advisory Committee, the Executive Committee of the Faculty Council, the Faculty Council, the Employee Forum, the Council of Chairs, deans, vice chancellors and with various groups of faculty members, undergraduate students and graduate students.

“Preparations for the SACS reaccreditation have amounted to a massive undertaking for the University, and one that has been nearly two-and-a-half years in the making and involved probably 200 faculty and staff in its preparation, and every academic and administrative unit on campus in terms of responding to what might have seemed to them to be an endless series of requests for data and information,” Williford said.

Owen said the QEP had to capture the complexities of a major research university like Carolina and to do this the QEP was developed in three broad areas. They are curriculum, research and the international arena.

In the curriculum, for instance, the QEP calls for establishing an innovative scheduling alternative such as a “Maymester,” Owen said. A Maymester would take place between the end of the spring semester before the summer semester starts and allow faculty members to join with undergraduates for three weeks of concentrated study either on or off campus.

Another proposal is to create a connections center on campus to foster the ability of faculty and students to find opportunities for learning that occur not only campus but throughout the state, nation and world.

In the research area, the QEP calls for establishing a series of linked courses across disciplines to introduce students to unsolved problems and help them to understand multiple modes of inquiry. At the same time, the plan calls for increasing the number of course
offerings in which students can carry out original projects, along with the number of qualified mentors who could assist them. The plan also envisions creating four new term-based undergraduate research professorships, or one in each division of the College of Arts and Sciences.

In the international arena, the QEP calls for increasing support for international research and for embedding internationalization as deeply as possible into the curriculum as a means of extending globally based opportunities to members of the Carolina community.

Owen said Making Critical Connections is designed to address critical and strategic issues. When approved, it will be integrated with the University’s ongoing assessment processes, including the “Measures of Excellence,” developed by the administration and trustees, and the Academic Plan.

The University will commit to the plan for a minimum of five years, with the expectation that many facets will continue to be important long into the future.

The enhancement plan focuses on raising the quality of undergraduate education in three broad areas: curriculum, research and internationalization.

“The QEP is a reflection of what the University stands for and values — from its support of public service to its push for increasing interdisciplinary work and deepening commitment to diversity,” Owen said. “Making Critical Connections will help the University implement the new curriculum in such a way that research and internationalization become critical connections for the entire campus community.”