



2002 Quality Assurance and Experimental Sites Conference

A Journey Toward Excellence:  
United by Common Goals Baltimore, MD  
March 4-5, 2002



# postconference highlights

April 2002

## A Note of Thanks

On behalf of the QA and X Sites staff, I am pleased to present these notes from our conference along with my thanks to all who participated. Please continue the collaboration by making use of the verification and management tools we have developed together. They're online at <http://qaprogram.air.org>.

Barbara Mroz, Director  
Quality Assurance and  
Experimental Sites Programs

## **Greg Woods, Financial Aid Experts Sharpen the focus on Quality**

**G**reg Woods, Chief Operating Officer for Federal Student Aid, capped off the 2002 Quality Assurance and Experimental Sites Conference March 5 by examining strategies for innovation.

Woods noted that while "reasonable people" see how the world is and accommodate themselves to it, "Unreasonable people see how the world should be and try to change the world to accommodate their vision."

### **A Pentchant for Stimulating Change**

In that vein, he told the conferees from QA and Experimental Sites schools, "You just keep coming up with new ways to help put America through school — and then you go and prove that they are better ways."

To pursue the discussion of innovation, Woods said he had assembled a panel of "unreasonable people to tell some stories about their efforts to change the world."

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## Kay Jacks

### ***It's an Important Story: Tell it!***

*Kay Jacks:*

*Using  
"degrees of  
freedom,"  
QA and  
X Sites  
Schools  
discover  
efficiency*



**F**inancial aid management professionals engaged in Quality Assurance and Experimental Sites activities are gifted problem solvers – and they're teaching their Department of Education colleagues about innovation, Kay Jacks, General Manager of the Schools Channel for FSA, told conferees March 4.

"You got into this program because you could control it," Jacks said.

"Instead of looking at six or eight data elements, you'd scrutinize students and learn from them; learn from their patterns. The Department of Education has learned that we can learn from you."

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## Greg Woods' Panel: Building Staff Commitment through Initiative

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For its part, Federal Student Aid, too, has been implementing major changes, Woods said, describing three strategic directions:

- ★ **Putting Customers First**
- ★ **Using Technology Like the Best in Business**
- ★ **Becoming Uncompromising on Integrity**

On that latter point, Woods elaborated, “We can’t do our mission if people can’t trust us. That means doing what we said we’d do – getting things right or, when we don’t, *setting* things right.”

Woods pointed out that the Federal Student Aid program faced a daunting challenge in its effort to use technology like the best in business. “We inherited a lot of paper and a ‘hairball’ of computer systems – a different system for each different aid program,” he said. “Each system contained bits and pieces of students and schools – and the different systems spoke different languages. So each customer and each employee had to cope with two or three or more different systems. We had to integrate them.”

One indicator of the difficulty of transitions, Woods recalled, came from a longtime expert on organizational change who advises Fortune 500 companies. Woods told him about plans to transform FSA from an inward looking, upward focused government agency into an efficient – even obsessed – engine of top-flight customer service, acknowledging that “We would have to change everything – from the culture to the org chart to the building we worked in. I knew he had been in several corporate turnarounds and I expected him to give me some tips – what levers to pull first, or maybe which big company to emulate.

“Instead, he said, ‘Wow! As far as I know, that kind of transformation-in-place in a large organization has never been done.’ He said the only way he knew to really get to something basically different was to start from scratch.”

Even Thomas Edison had more than a few obstacles. It was Edison, Woods noted, who said, “I haven’t failed. I’ve just found 10,000 ways that won’t work.” *(continued on page 3)*

## Kay Jacks Emphasizes the Collegial Value of Innovative Thinking

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Jacks pointed out Doug Irvine of Holy Cross College, noting that he conducts 100 percent verification and is the sole staff member doing that work. Without the flexibility of the Experimental Sites Initiative, said Jacks, he would need more staff members and a very different operation.

Jacks also recognized QA and X Sites professionals for their natural appreciation of partnerships, noting that their “holistic view” takes into account interactive problem solving efforts across campus administrative teams.

The “degrees of freedom” used by QA and X Sites schools lead to “more bang for their buck” by identifying data elements that are related to the most error.

“We’ve learned from you that there are lots of ways of doing business,” she said. “Think about what you have accomplished – being able to be in charge of your own destiny,” Jacks told the general session attendees. “You have a great story to tell and I hope you tell it.”

Jacks also offered an update on FSA’s movement from a proprietary network to the Internet last fall, candidly describing some improvements that had to be made during the transition. The good news is that FSA via the Internet is “faster, more facile, and in the long run will save money” that can be better used, she said.

## WOODS PANEL *(continued)*

Woods' expert panel included:

**Mark Evans, Director of Financial Aid since 1989 at Kent State University** (last year's QA Program Model of Quality award winner), which faced findings of compliance, staffing, systems, and customer service deficiencies a decade ago. Today, however, it has a culture of quality equal to the best in any business, Woods said, with participation in Experimental Sites augmenting its service excellence.

**Anna Griswold, a practicing aid professional for 32 years, is Assistant Vice Provost for Enrollment Management and Student Aid from at Penn State**, a member of the QA program since 1987. Five years ago, Griswold became an Experimental Sites partner, focusing on customers and student-relevant procedures.

**Paul Combe is CEO of American Student Assistance**, the FFEL guarantor for Massachusetts and Washington, D.C. He has decades of experience in student aid, including experience as a financial aid administrator at both public and private colleges.

In a discussion of program integrity, smart use of technology, and getting staff to buy in to change, Evans, Griswold, and Combe joined Woods in reflecting on the strategies that resulted in improved quality.



**Anna Griswold of Penn State; Mark Evans of Kent State**

For example, to become uncompromising on integrity, FSA became the first government department to install a fully integrated Oracle Federal Financial System for tracking funds, Woods said. Last year, he added, FSA set new records for low default rates and high collections.

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## New Resources. Basic Requirements Online

The Quality Analysis Tool now available for all schools can be a time-saving device for financial aid staff, QA and X Sites Director Barbara Mroz told conferees March 4.

“By eliminating reverification and data entry, administrators have more time to analyze data, target future verification accordingly, and work with students to prevent problems,” Mroz said. To enhance the effectiveness of the software, QA schools will be **required to submit their verification profiles to the American Institutes for Research by April 30** to help with aggregate analysis, Mroz pointed out.

The SFA Assessments, meanwhile, are available on the QA website at <http://qaprogram.air.org>. Schools will be **required to complete at least two of the assessment modules each award year**, Mroz said. Details include:

« **The specific time frame for completing the assessments**, which will be the award year, from July 1 through June 30 of the following year. Assessments can be completed at any time during that time frame.

« **More guidance:** Schools will be given a suggested list of reasons for using each SFA Assessment module, with clear explanations of the benefits that will accrue to the school.

« **Schools also will receive information about options** for using the SFA Assessments in particular circumstances, as for example, when recertification is an issue or when an audit shows certain deficiencies.

## WOODS PANEL *(continued)*

Keeping technology in perspective was an important consideration to Combe. “We didn’t want the system to be the thing – it’s a tool to deliver the process of customer service,” he said, advising schools not to “name” their computer systems because that sometimes leads to people believing they work for “it.”

### Gaining Staff Buy-in to Change

Whatever advances Financial Aid administrators are promoting, it is critical that staff be on board, the panelists agreed. “People have to have a chance to work through the normal fears of change; it is important to tell people about change and to help them embrace change,” Penn State’s Griswold said.

“It really is important how you define what your job is,” Combe offered. “The question we asked ourselves, was, ‘What do we do for a living?’ We called our training program ‘The Life of the Loan’ and we placed our focus on the final payment – we described our work as ‘Payment Advisory Services,’ with a goal of helping students complete the financing of their higher education.”

### The Experimental Sites Advantage

Asked by Woods to summarize what the Experimental Sites Initiative has meant to her institution, Griswold replied, “I have a dynamite group of employees who can do a whole lot better in achieving the intent than the regulations.”

At Kent State, Evans said, “I value the opportunity to have the experience to do something different, having come through a very heavily regulated period. We have saved time, money, and eliminated a lot of barriers.”



**Barbara Mroz, Director of QA and X Sites, tells conferees that, in the journey toward excellence, schools have the flexibility to choose the route – and the vehicles – that make the most sense.**

## X Sites Reporting Templates Available – and To Be Developed Further

For the 2000-2001 reporting year, the Experimental Sites initiatives established reporting templates to begin capturing quantitative data to more accurately convey experimental results.

The new reporting template is a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet with a data sheet for each of nine major experiments. Each data sheet contains reporting items for an experiment.

The future plan for reporting in the Experimental Sites initiative is to make it web-based, which will further enhance and simplify the activity.

For additional information on these enhanced reporting templates, contact [Jackie.Bannister@ed.gov](mailto:Jackie.Bannister@ed.gov).

## Nine New QA Members

Bowling Green State University

Central Connecticut State University

Eastern Michigan University

James Madison University

National University of Health  
Sciences

University of Toledo

University of Wisconsin – Oshkosh

West Virginia University

Youngstown State University