



University of Houston-Downtown QUALITY ENHANCEMENT PLAN (QEP) IMPACT REPORT

SECTION 1: INITIAL GOALS AND INTENDED OUTCOMES OF THE QEP

Entitled “A+CE: Academic Achievement through Community Engagement,” the University of Houston-Downtown's (UHD) Quality Enhancement Plan began in Fall 2016 and continued through AY2021. The A+CE program was designed to enhance undergraduate students’ critical thinking skills by encouraging them to understand and propose solutions to real-world social issues. A+CE capitalized on UHD’s strength in Community Engagement and was aligned with the UHD mission to provide students with “strong academic and career preparation” and to “address the needs and advance the development of the region.”

Implemented in Freshman Seminars, selected Core Curriculum courses, and outer courses at the 1000- and 2000-level, A+CE-designated courses included at least one of the two A+CE student learning outcomes (SLOs) and a signature assignment which focused on critical thinking. To ensure that students had adequate exposure to targeted critical thinking instruction, some courses such as the Freshman Seminar, Composition II, Psychology, and Communication Studies courses, were mandated to include the A+CE designation. In other courses, the inclusion of A+CE curriculum was at the discretion of the faculty.

The plan had two initial goals and two student learning outcomes:

Initial QEP Goal 1: A+CE course sections will enhance students’ ability to apply academic skills and knowledge to address regional, national, or global community issues. This focus enables the university to build on its strengths in community engagement to provide experiences in which students can develop and apply critical thinking skills to social issues.

Initial QEP Goal 2: A+CE course sections will foster students’ learning and scholarship through critical analysis of community issues. This approach will deepen student learning in intentional ways, increase persistence, and provide students with the tools and skills to be more engaged in the university and the community.

Student Learning Outcome 1: Students will be able to analyze community issues with respect to different perspectives, theories, or solutions.

Student Learning Outcome 2: Students will be able to identify or design creative strategies to address an aspect of a community issue.

Faculty were able to choose among three modes when teaching in the A+CE program:

- Awareness: Students read articles to learn about an issue.
- Integration: Students learned about the issue from a class visit by a community leader or by visiting a community organization.
- Involvement: Students learned by working in the community for a minimum of two hours.

SECTION 2: CHANGES MADE TO THE QEP AND THE REASONS FOR THEM

With its focus on critical thinking, the QEP aimed to respond to internal data on areas of student academic performance requiring improvement, to national surveys on employer needs, and to the Texas Core Curriculum learning outcomes. The intention driving the A⁺CE QEP was to prepare students with the critical tools required not only for their academic success, but also for their meaningful participation as citizens of their home communities, their city, state, nation, and the larger global society.

UHD has been intentional in ensuring the successful execution of its QEP. The A⁺CE program has been administered out of the Provost's Office under the scope of the Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs (AVPAA). Day-to-day oversight of the program has been provided by an A⁺CE Faculty Director, an Assistant Director, an Advisory Committee composed of faculty, staff, students, and community members, and an Implementation Committee composed of faculty and staff. The University also committed a budget of nearly \$2 million to execute this plan. As the program continued, refinements and shifts were initiated in response to faculty involvement in the program, findings from an assessment of student learning, and the impact of the pandemic on the program.

A⁺CE Faculty Champions and Professional Development

A key element of faculty support was provided by the A⁺CE faculty champions. Selected through a rigorous application process, the primary purpose of the A⁺CE champions was to increase faculty engagement and the number of A⁺CE-designated sections by providing collegial professional development and support. During the first two years of the program, faculty, from across four of the five colleges, who were designated as A⁺CE champions worked with the QEP staff to promote the development of A⁺CE courses in their colleges and assisted colleagues who were preparing to teach an A⁺CE course. Surveys of faculty participating in the program were positive and indicated that faculty were provided with the support needed to prepare and teach their courses.

In addition to providing the faculty champions for guidance to faculty new to A⁺CE, the program also offered faculty development through two full-day workshops with professional speakers who focused on how to promote critical thinking and develop signature assignments. Despite the “if you build it, they will come” approach to and promotion of the events, attendance was low. In response to that lower than anticipated turn-out, the QEP Director and Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs (AVPAA) suspended the in-person workshops and instead opted to provide interested faculty with videos of the workshop presentations and with program guides focused on the pedagogies of community engagement and critical thinking.

Over the first two years when the A⁺CE champions were active, there was not an increase in the number of A⁺CE-designation. There was also waning interest among faculty to serve as A⁺CE champions. The QEP Director and AVPAA decided through consultation with the Advisory and Implementation Committees to discontinue faculty champions while still making professional development resources available to interested faculty.

Emphasis on Critical Analysis vs. Identifying/Designing Creative Solutions

Faculty were allowed to choose between the two student learning outcomes (1. critical analysis or 2. identifying or designing creative strategies to address a community issue) when teaching A⁺CE courses. While both outcomes focused on critical thinking, faculty tended to gravitate toward the first outcome when designing their courses. A⁺CE was implemented into lower-division courses where “perspectives” and “theories” have been more commonly presented in most disciplines rather than a focus on outcomes which would have placed greater emphasis on the development of “creative” solutions. The faculty opting to focus on creative thinking came from the fine arts disciplines, but there were fewer of these faculty than those opting to focus on critical analysis. The result was that overall, the focus of the A⁺CE Signature Assignments and the supporting curriculum was shifted to LO1- critical analysis.

Impact of COVID-19

The pivot in Spring 2020 to online learning did not significantly impair instruction in the A+CE courses since most of those courses were taught in the “Awareness” mode in which students read about and discussed social issues along with undertaking writing assignments that critically analyzed those issues. These facets of learning were easily translated into the online environment.

Courses with an emphasis on the “Integration” mode in which students learn about an issue from a class visit by a community leader were also less affected by the pandemic since these visits could take place via Zoom.

The pandemic and the shift to online learning had the greatest impact on those courses that adopted the “Involvement” mode in which students learn by working in the community. Like UHD, many organizations shifted to working virtually, eliminating many of the opportunities to work in the community that had been available in the past. Fear of contracting COVID-19 also made students and faculty reluctant to be out in the community. Even as the Houston community has reopened, it has been difficult to return to pre-COVID-19 involvement levels as COVID-19 infection rates have spiked numerous times over the last year.

Although several former A+CE champions recruited faculty who desired either to create new Integration courses or transform existing Awareness courses into Integration courses, with the onset of the pandemic and its continuation in academic year 2021-22, this increased interest dissipated, and it was more difficult as UHD adjusted to the pandemic to spur additional interest

The overall number of sections where faculty opted voluntarily into the A+CE program also declined because of the pandemic. The rapid pivot to online forced faculty to rapidly transition courses that had always been taught in-person to the online environment with little time for professional development in online pedagogy or time to adapt in-class activities to the virtual learning environment. Students and faculty struggled personally with “Zoom fatigue,” illness, balancing school responsibilities while homeschooling and caring for children, financial problems, and mental health issues. Faculty struggled to lead students through the required content of courses and extras such as A+CE were beyond what faculty and students were able to manage.

Assessment

UHD had originally proposed a rubric assessment of student artifacts as a direct measure of both LO 1-critical analysis and LO2-recognizing/identifying creative solutions. The CLA+, an assessment of critical thinking based on analysis and problem solving, was also proposed as a second measure of LO1. Indirect measures included the NSSE and the IDEA instrument, an end-of-course survey of students’ perceptions of instruction and learning.

This natural gravitation toward the critical analysis outcome discussed above resulted in almost all direct assessment of student learning being focused on LO1-critical analysis and little to no data available for the second.

The shift to online learning also impacted assessment data collected through the CLA+. While the CLA+ was available online, it was difficult to get students to take the CLA+ given other difficulties created by the pandemic. Despite efforts to increase participation by facilitating online testing through the UHD Testing Center and increasing the value of gift card incentives, participation was very low, making it difficult to extrapolate results and determine the impact on freshmen cohorts or the overall impact of the A+CE program.

Student participation in the IDEA end-of-class survey also declined. As it became clear that UHD would need to continue teaching most classes online beyond the Spring 2020 semester, the IDEA

survey was replaced for the Spring 2020 semester by an in-house survey to identify solutions to the difficulties students were experiencing in online classes. The NSSE which was originally planned for Spring 2020 was shifted to Spring 2022 due to the pandemic.

SECTION 3: IMPACT ON STUDENT LEARNING AND/OR THE ENVIRONMENT

Participation Despite the difficulties noted above, since the inception of A+CE in 2016, about 70 faculty have participated in critical thinking and A+CE-related professional development activities and 940 course sections have been A+CE designated, with enrollments of around 28,000 students.

Direct Assessment of LO1-Critical Analysis

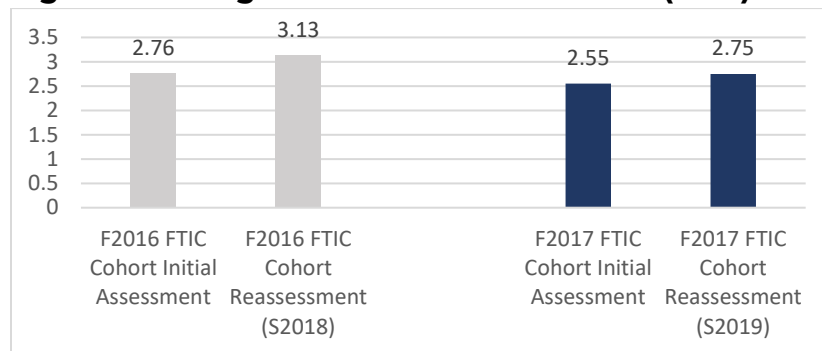
Rubric Analysis of Signature Assignments: LO1, receiving more faculty attention than LO2, was assessed each year by a team of faculty using the AAC&U “Inquiry & Analysis” rubric to examine signature assignments. The success criterion set for this outcome was that 75% of evaluated signature assignment artifacts produced by second-year FTICs would meet 2.5 out of 4 possible points on the AAC&U rubric.

In the first year (Fall 2016 full-time FT FTIC cohort), faculty evaluated 100 first-year artifacts. In subsequent years, 50 artifacts from first-year FTIC students and 100 second-year FTIC artifacts were assessed. Between Fall 2016 and Fall 2019, artifacts from 250 FT first-year FTIC and 400 second-year FTIC students were evaluated. Although first-year students consistently met the success criterion of 1.5, which was set as an intermediate criterion, second-year students fell short of the 2.5 success marker. Of the 400 second-year FTICs evaluated across all four cohorts, only 27% (108) met the success criterion of 2.5+.

CLA+: The CLA+, an assessment of critical thinking based on analysis and problem solving was the second strategy UHD has used to track the impact of the QEP. Students from the F2016 and F2017 cohorts took the CLA+ in their first fall at UHD. Members of each cohort were asked to retest in spring with the assumption that students would have two years (four long semesters) of exposure to the A+CE curriculum. The expectation was that we would see a 5% increase in the number of students scoring at least a level 4 out of 6 between their first and second years in the areas of Analysis and Problems Solving.

UHD has complete data sets for the Fall 2016 and Fall 2017 cohorts. While moderate improvements were shown between the initial assessment and the reassessment four semesters later, several limitations need to be noted. First, due to the difficulty in getting students to complete the CLA+, the assessment, and reassessment while drawn from the same cohort, are not matched sets. Second, the number of students taking the CLA+ was low, particularly during the reassessment. Cohorts 3 (entering Fall 2018) and 4 (entering F2019) are not shown as the numbers of students taking the reassessment (time 2) tests were very small.

Figure 1: Average CLA+ scores for Cohort 1 (2016) and Cohort 2 (2017)



Scale: 1-6; n for the four test scores: Fall 2016 = 160, Spring 2018 = 50; Fall 2017 = 151, Spring 2019 = 33

Indirect Assessment

NSSE In developing the assessment plan for the QEP, we had also proposed the NSSE as an indirect measure of the type of engagement and learning that would be demonstrated as students' critical thinking skills improve. The success criterion for this measure was that we would observe a statistically significant positive difference between UHD's freshmen responses on the target NSSE items and that of their peers at similar Carnegie Class institutions.

Baseline NSSE data were available for 2013. Data were also available for 2016 (Year 0 of the A+CE) and 2019 (Year 3). The NSSE is administered in the Spring semester and all responding first-year students had been enrolled in both the preceding fall as well as the spring ensuring that each had at least two long semesters of exposure to A+CE programming in multiple classes.

Table 1 summarizes NSSE results from 2013, 2016, and 2019. While no change or a significant difference was seen in students' responses between 2013 (baseline) and 2016 and 2019 at the institutional level, UHD students were significantly more likely than their peers at both Southwest intuitions and institutions in UHD's Carnegie Class to include diverse perspectives in course discussions and assignments and to report learning something that changed the way they understood an issue or concept. The rate that UHD students reported examining the strengths and weaknesses of their views on a topic or issues was also significantly higher than their peers at other institutions in UHD's Carnegie classification.

Differences between UHD students' responses and those of their peers at other institutions may be the result of the A+CE program, the fact that UHD is an extremely diverse institution with a long history of engaging students in the community or a combination of the programming and the inherent student demographics and unique personality of the University.

Table 1: NSSE Responses from First-Year Students on A+CE-related Items (2013, 2016, and 2019)

Survey Item (Scale: 1 = Never, 2 = Sometimes, 3 = Often, 4 = Very Often)	2013 (Baseline) n = 204-207	2016 (Year 0) n = 106-109	Statistically Significant Difference Between 2013 and 2016	2019 n = 221-235	Statistically Significant Difference Between 2016 and 2019	Statistically Significant Difference Between 2019 UHD & Other SW Public Institutions	Statistically Significant Difference Between 2019 UHD & Other Institutions in UHD's Carnegie Classification
Connect your learning to societal problems	2.6	2.6	NC	2.6	NC		
Included diverse perspectives in course discussions or assignments	2.6	2.6	NC	2.6	NC	▲	▲
Examined the strengths & weaknesses of your own views on a topic or issue	2.8	2.8	NC	2.8	NC		▲
Tried to better understand someone else's views by imagining how an	2.9	2.9	NC	2.9	NC		

issue looks from his/her perspective.							
Learned something that changed the way you understood an issue or concept	2.8	3.0	No significant difference	2.9	No significant difference	△	△

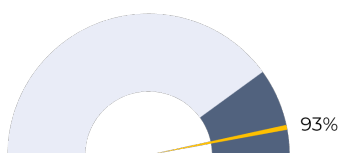
△ UHD students' average was significantly higher ($p < .05$) with an effect size less than .3 in magnitude.

Idea: Data from the second indirect measure, the IDEA survey, can be found in Figure 2. IDEA is a national survey of students' perception of instruction and learning which UHD uses as an end-of-course feedback instrument. Results were analyzed using seven semesters of student responses (there was no IDEA evaluation administered in the Spring 2020 semester as noted above). We determined that successful A+CE implementation would see that at least 80% of students responding to the survey would report making at least moderate progress in the various areas. Students routinely far exceeded the success criterion for each item.

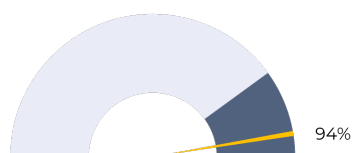
Figure 2: IDEA Assessment Results

Describe the amount of progress you made on each of the following items:

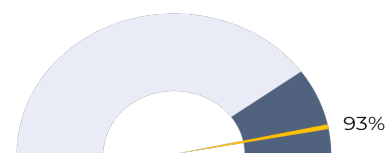
Developing knowledge and understanding of diverse perspectives, global awareness, or other cultures.



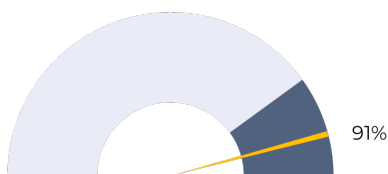
Learning to apply course material (to improve thinking, problem-solving, and decisions).



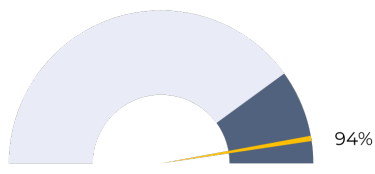
Developing specific skills, competencies, and points of view needed by professionals in the field most closely related to this course.



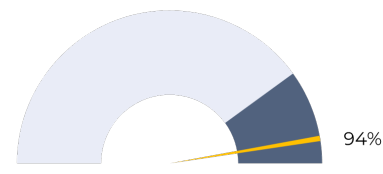
Developing skill in expressing myself orally or in writing.



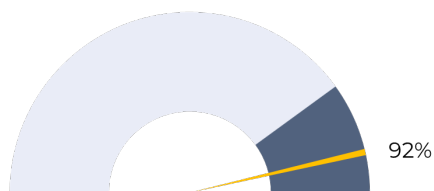
Learning to find, evaluate and use resources to explore a topic in depth.



Learning to analyze and critically evaluate ideas, arguments, and points of view.



Learning to apply knowledge and skills to benefit others or serve the public good.



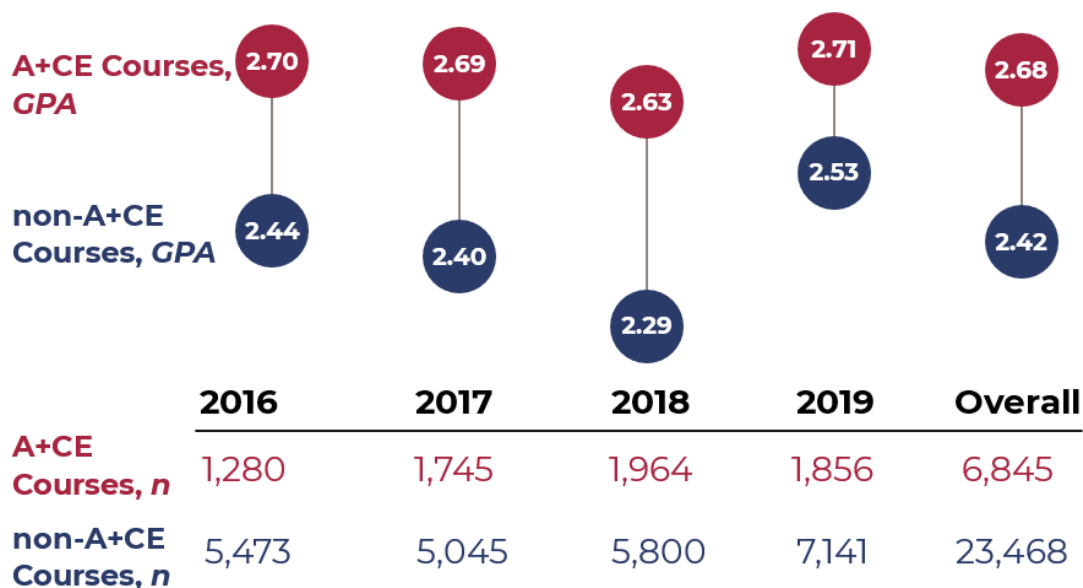
IDEA Assessment: All students are invited to complete the IDEA each semester.
 AY 2017: 1024; AY 2018: 1348;
 AY 2019: 2008; AY 2020: 820

Student Success and Retention Research gathered during the development of UHD's QEP showed that helping students connect critical thinking and community engagement can influence cognitive advancement and increase persistence, and student success was the unstated goal of the QEP. We hypothesized that students who took A+CE designated courses would maintain a course GPA of at least 2.25 in those courses. Not only did students in A+CE courses maintain a GPA of at least 2.25 in those courses (average GPA was 2.63 in A+CE-designated courses across Fall 2016, Fall 2017, Fall 2018, and Fall 2019 FT FTIC cohorts), students in A+CE courses also received statistically significantly higher grades in those courses than in non-A+CE courses in their first year. See Figure 3.

We see these significant differences between A+CE and non-A+CE courses disappear after the first year, suggesting A+CE may be most beneficial to first-year students.

Figure 3. Average Course Grades for FT FTIC Students

In their first year, FT FTIC students received statistically significantly better grades in their **A+CE courses** than in **non-A+CE courses**.

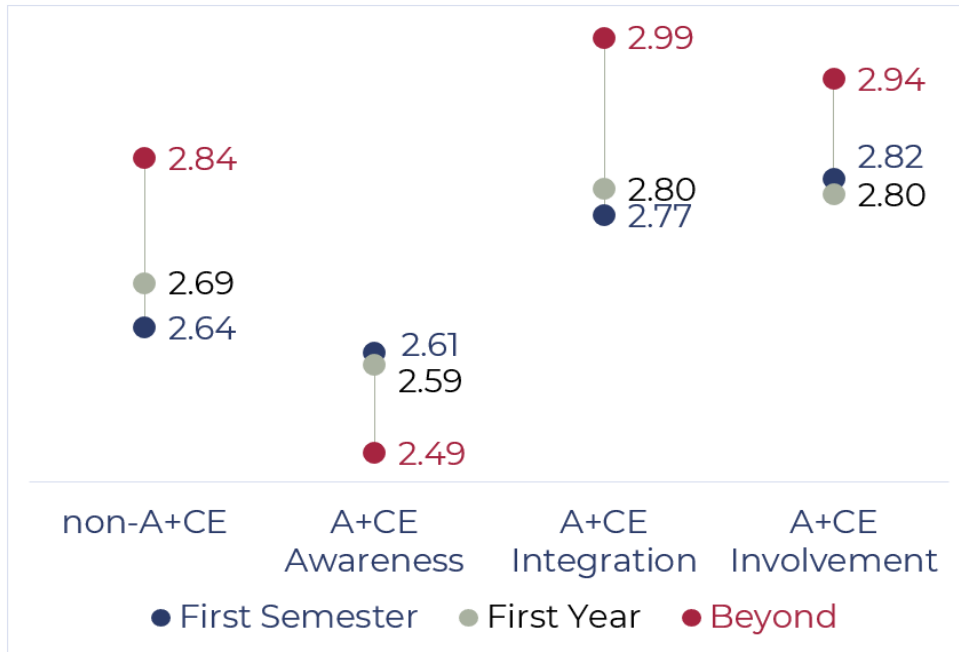


Examining course grades by mode of A+CE course delivery offers some insight into implementation practices. Students taking courses in the A+CE Awareness mode consistently earn lower grades than students' grades in non-A+CE courses. Conversely, students in A+CE Integration and A+CE Involvement courses consistently score higher than students in non-A+CE courses. See Figure 4.

There are several plausible accounts for the observed trend. One reason that students score lower on the Awareness mode is that reading about a topic is less impactful than hearing from experts or doing hands-on work in the communities. Another reason may be that some of the largest first-year courses (namely, Freshman Seminar and Composition II) had compulsory A+CE designations that were assigned by the university requiring all faculty and all students in all sections to participate. In other courses, faculty participation in the A+CE was voluntary. Faculty who chose to participate in the A+CE program and were not part of multi-section groups may have been able to engage the A+CE content in more course-

specific ways. Another observation regarding A+CE Awareness courses is that course grades in this mode decline over time. A+CE Awareness courses are typically offered at the introductory level. Any student beyond their first year at the institution who is still taking introductory-level courses may be struggling academically. Low A+CE course grades may simply be the evidence of this struggle.

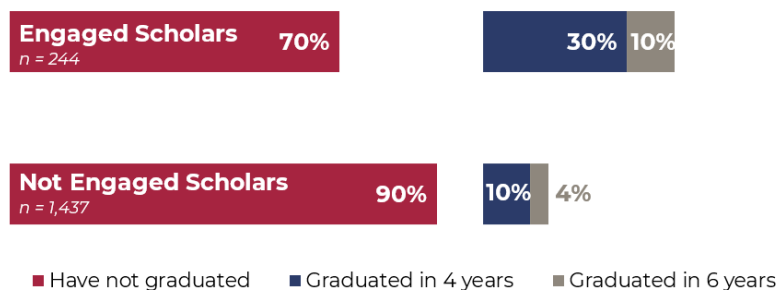
Figure 4. Course Grades by Student Progression and A+CE Mode



Number of course grades analyzed in each mode at each period			
A+CE Mode	First Semester	First Year	Beyond
Non-A+CE	66,122	45,539	259,295
A+CE Awareness	6,588	3,566	5,129
A+CE Integration	950	468	1,638
A+CE Involvement	699	166	512

While understanding that there are many explanations possible, we do see consistent positive student outcomes that are correlated with the A+CE program. For example, through logistic regression, we saw a correlation that students who earn the Engaged Scholar badge are 1.91 times more likely to graduate within four years as compared to students who do not earn the Engaged Scholar badge. The Engaged Scholar badge is earned by students who take at least four A+CE courses within their first two years at UHD and earn no more than one C grade in those courses. Additionally, Engaged Scholars must maintain a cumulative GPA of at least 2.5 to earn the designation. Figure 5 provides an overview of graduation rates for Engaged Scholars compared to students who did not earn that distinction.

Figure 5. Graduation Rates for Engaged Scholars in FT FTIC F16 & F17 Cohorts



SECTION 4: Lessons Learned and Next Steps

Even though there is mixed evidence about the overall effectiveness of the A+CE program, there are lessons to be learned regarding the path forward for the program and how the institution might approach future QEPs.

We were expectant that the plan would achieve its aims because it was to be built upon the university's existing infrastructure for experiential learning (including faculty development) and for student and faculty engagement in the community as a way of honing students' critical thinking skills. It is still our belief that the University's QEP was well-designed, and that A+CE courses provided a perfect opportunity to capitalize on the University's strength in community engagement while developing students' critical thinking skills and improving their academic achievement and persistence.

There is also continued support for the A+CE QEP and faculty who integrated A+CE into their courses wish to continue doing so. A Spring 2021 survey found that 64% of responding A+CE faculty wished to continue the A+CE activities in their courses and 77% of faculty were interested in expanding the A+CE into upper-division courses. Extending the program beyond the lower division courses would give students continued opportunities to use community issues as a foundation for building critical thinking.

In Fall 2021, the Faculty Senate reviewed a report on the QEP and endorsed the following next steps for A+CE as well as recommendations for future QEP efforts:

1. Encourage those faculty who wish to continue integrating community issues and A+CE-related assignments to do so voluntarily. This may also include integrating A+CE-related assignments in upper-division classes if faculty wish.
2. Recommend that the Impact Learning Office should provide a venue for faculty who are interested in continuing community engagement-focused work to discuss their efforts, including the following:
 - a. Integrating community issues as discussion items as they relate to class content,
 - b. Encouraging students to engage in communities or increase awareness via readings, guest speakers, class discussions, etc.
 - c. Discussing/developing shared syllabus language around the presence of specific attention to community engagement in their classes; they may also develop additional materials to help students in those classes to identify and leverage their experiences for job market and graduate school potential (e.g., I just took 3 courses that had a community engagement focus—how can I use that in job apps?)

3. Ask the General Education Committee to take up the conversation on critical thinking, as that is one of the two outcomes shared across the core curriculum, and faculty in the core could consider more explicit instantiations of critical thinking in their disciplines to make it more visible to students. Such work could be done in the context of community engagement if relevant.
4. Highlight and encourage all types of impact practices, including community engagement by looking at curricular proposals; forms would ask faculty if they are designing their courses with impact practices. This might allow a better tracking mechanism for institutional tracking, PR, and reporting.
5. Ensure that future QEP proposals are planful and allow sufficient time for widespread faculty engagement. Also, ensure that the QEP as well as other pilot projects include plans for how successes from any program can be institutionalized, including where it could be housed and a commitment to a funding and leadership/oversight structure.

The Office of the Provost supports these recommendations and implementation will begin in Spring 2022.