

UofL's 2017 Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP): Focus on Second-year Student Success

Faculty who are interested in learning more about how to participate in the development of the QEP, including teaching one of the QEP-related second-year seminars, are invited to send an email to QEP2017@louisville.edu

QEP Context

Developing a quality enhancement plan, or QEP, is part of our institution's commitment to the reaffirmation process for SACS-COC to be completed in early 2017. The QEP is a component of accreditation focused on "learning outcomes and/or the environment supporting student learning and accomplishing the mission of the institution." SACS requires that each institution develop a QEP "through a broad-based institutional process identifying key issues emerging from institutional assessment" (SACS COC, 2011).

The 2017 QEP Development Committee, composed of faculty, staff and student members from units across campus, is co-chaired by Riaan van Zyl, associate dean for research in the Kent School of Social Work, and Patty Payette, director of i2a and senior associate director of the Delphi Center for Teaching and Learning. In early 2015, the committee began meeting to examine and analyze university data with a focus on the specific hurdles faced by many undergraduate students: navigating the challenges of the second year and successfully transitioning into the third year, which appears to be a moment of critical weakness in the university's persistence plans. Although improved retention is one of the expected outcomes of the new QEP, the project will center upon enhancing the learning and the learning environment, and its subjects will be pre-unit and undecided students whose struggles are evident in second-year performance data.

Research suggests that the second year is a crossroads at which many students struggle with indecision around their academic major and career choice, lack of connectedness, and intensified academic standards; these struggles can lead to general dissatisfaction with and disengagement from academic life (Kennedy and Upcraft, 2009, Tobolowski, 2008, Tough, 2014). Scholars posit that students' ability to manage second-year decisions is related to their capacity to take ongoing, active ownership of their academic experiences and decisions. (Schaller, 2005, Schreiner, 2013, Cooper, et al, 2011).

The QEP Development Committee identified a significant persistence pattern in our second-year undergraduate students: our exploratory students are retained at a significantly lower rate than students with declared majors. At UofL, we use the term "exploratory" to identify students who have not declared a major ("undecided") or who have not earned admittance to the academic unit that shelters the program of their choice ("pre-unit"). These pre-unit students are admitted to the College of Arts and Sciences and advised in our Exploratory Division alongside undecided students. Research on this subset of students demonstrates that the typical challenges around "academic fit" and satisfaction in the second year can be exacerbated for students like our exploratory students who have not yet clarified a meaningful academic course of action, including declaring a suitable major (Cuseo, 2012). Emerging recent findings in higher education, including research projects with students on our own campus, point to the educational importance of a strong sense of *belonging* for students at risk, marginalized or vulnerable in other ways. The concept of belonging, in these contexts, refers to both affiliation with and integration in academic and social contexts: it has been shown to contribute to student success and retention (Strayhorn, 2012).

One of the revealing data sets about the student experience at UofL comes from a 2012 internal study conducted by Institutional Effectiveness that examined the progression of the University's 2011 Graduation Rate Survey (GRS) cohort (that is, entering first-time college students whose persistence to graduation is tracked over six years as the university's published "graduation rate"; for GRS 2011, the persistence window closes in August 2017). This study profiled and tracked the entire GRS 2011 cohort in three subgroups--declared students, undecided students, and pre-unit students--to reveal significant differences between the three subgroups in their admissions credentials¹ as related to their academic performance² at the institution, generally indicating that pre-unit students had a higher attrition rate than the other two subgroups, made a lower grade point average and accumulated fewer hours earned after each of the first two years at the institution. Concerning attrition at the third year, 1,450 GRS students entered the College of Arts and Sciences in the fall of 2011, 846 (58%) as declared majors, 377 (26%) students as undecided, and 227 (16%) students as pre-unit. After two years, 561 (66%) of the entering declared majors, 238 (63%) of the undecided students, and 125 (55%) of the pre-unit students enrolled for a third fall term: going into their third year, pre-unit students' attrition rate was more than 11% higher than declared majors' and 8% higher than undecided students'.

More recent Arts and Sciences entering GRS pre-unit students appear to have similar incoming profiles, and the distribution of the three subsets (declared, undecided and pre-unit) appears to be roughly the same, perhaps with an increasing trend toward fewer declared students on admission. In the GRS 2014 class, for example, the College of Arts and Sciences admitted 1,493 students, 776 (54%) as declared, 363 (24%) as undecided and 348 (23%) as pre-unit—or 47% exploratory. As soon as registration ends after the first week of the fall 2016 term, academic performance trends and third-year attrition rates for the three subsets will be calculated to determine any similarities with the parallel GRS 2011 results.

These data suggest that a large number (nearly 50%) of Arts and Sciences students enter our institution each year standing to benefit from a structured learning opportunity in order to enhance their ability to thrive academically, to discover an appropriate disciplinary home at the University, and to persist through critical transition points and challenges of the second year and beyond.

Our Proposed QEP Plan

The QEP initiative is a project with a 5-year span to design, implement and assess a 3-credit seminar course focused on academic and personal development of exploratory students. While the roots of the QEP proposal are grounded in the institutional data related to second-to-third-year persistence for a subset of our student body, the QEP Development Committee acknowledges this gap in student success as an opportunity to foster a campus-wide conversation about student learning and student success in the crucial second year that can have long-term implications for our support of our undergraduate population inside and outside the classroom. Therefore, exploratory students will be recruited for and advised into the seminar, but the course will be open to other students who seek to deepen their academic skills and explore the alignment of their majors, career plans, and personal strengths.

¹ Examples of admission credentials/metrics include HS GPA, ACT composite score, and credits earned prior to their first semester at UofL.

² Examples of academic performance indicators include 1st semester GPA, 1st semester hours earned, 1st year GPA, 1st year hours earned, retention at the institution, retention within the unit.

A central goal of the seminar is to help students sharpen their intellectual skills. The course will guide students to develop habits of critical thinking, to identify and practice methods of intellectual inquiry, and to find and evaluate information in reading and research in order to use it effectively in academic contexts and to transfer these skills into other domains of their lives, including personal decision-making.

Through the intellectual activities of *inquiry*, *information gathering* and *decision making*, these students will apply and gain confidence in their personal exploration and decision-making as they learn to align their personal, academic and career goals and strive for an “engaged fit” as they approach their third year at UofL. Seminar activities will center on students’ engagement in intellectual inquiry, evidence-based thinking, and critical reflection for decision-making. Metrics for these activities will demonstrate student learning outcomes in the following research-based domains of student success:

- 1) **Intellectual Independence** – Students will gain practice and confidence in their reasoning abilities and are more aware of their practices and habits of thinking that are essential to their academic success.
- 2) **Academic self-efficacy**– Students will strengthen their belief that they can successfully achieve at a designated level on an academic task or attain a specific academic goal (Bandura, 1997).
- 3) **Major and Career Clarity** – Students will gain a greater sense of meaning and purpose through the exploration of their own major and career choices.
- 4) **Sense of Belonging** - Students will demonstrate an increased feeling of acceptance and membership in a group and exhibit increased self-efficacy for learning and social integration

The QEP course will be offered as an elective seminar, tentatively scheduled to be offered through the Department of Counseling and Human Development, enrolling 20 students per section. Each semester, 11 sections of the course will be offered, with 6-11 instructors teaching 1 or 2 sections per semester for 440 second-year students annually. This number will enable evaluation by means of a randomized wait-list control design and meet statistical power requirements.³ The number of 440 students allows for a 9% attrition rate and is feasible in terms of recruitment with an expected penetration rate of about 30%, given the target student population. Effective impact on 440 second-year learners per year is sufficiently large to have practical significance. Given all three considerations--sample size that will enable rigorous evaluation, a not too aggressive recruitment penetration rate for a voluntary seminar and practical significance--the target of 440 students seems reasonable. The first 4-5 sections of the course will be offered during the spring 2018 semester, allowing for refinement and scaling-up over time. We expect to offer 11 sections in both fall and spring semesters from 2018 through 2021, with relevant assessment and revision of the seminar occurring each year, leading to the conclusion of our initiative and reporting our findings in a Fifth Year Impact report to SACS in 2023. In line with SACS expectations, a demonstration of effective impact should lead to the eventual creation of a permanent course offering to enhance student learning.

Recruitment of faculty to develop and teach the new seminars will begin in fall 2016, one goal being to include broad representation of the university’s undergraduate units. Faculty committing to the project will be paid at x-pay rates outside their annual workload plan. Integrated into the seminar activities and assessments will be individualized academic and career advising delivered by relevant staff on campus. The seminar curriculum and QEP assessment plan are under development to be submitted in the SACS proposal in early 2017.

³ The computed sample size for multivariate Hotelling T² analysis to compare the intervention and control group based on four outcome variables with an effect size $\Delta=.35$, $\alpha=.05$ and power=.8 is 198 per group.

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