Engaged Learning Beyond the Classroom

Executive Summary

Southern Methodist University
Quality Enhancement Plan
February 22, 2011

The focus of the SMU Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) is on Engaged Learning experiences beyond or outside of the classroom, locally and globally. All SMU undergraduate students will be encouraged to participate in at least one extensive experiential learning activity prior to graduation.

Vision: SMU undergraduate students will build on their (formal) classroom education through participation in (structured) experiential learning beyond the classroom, which will help them to develop a significant and sophisticated understanding of the ways in which the context of the world community intersects with disciplinary knowledge.

Mission: SMU’s QEP will provide opportunities for undergraduate students to complement their formal classroom education by designing and providing an institutional framework to foster structured experiential learning opportunities with the people and organizations of the Dallas-Fort Worth community and beyond.

Engaged Learning requires that students take an active role in their learning. At SMU, Engaged Learning experiences will require all students involved to participate in an out-of-classroom experiential learning activity in the community focus area (research, creative, civic, or professional) of their choice. The development of the SMU QEP topic was accomplished through an extensive study of what SMU students, faculty, and staff members consider crucial in regards to helping to achieve the goals of the SMU strategic plan. The QEP changes are part of a university-wide effort which includes improvements to the undergraduate University Curriculum, Residential Housing, and Study Abroad programs. SMU students of the future will see a significantly transformed learning experience which emphasizes the increasingly interdependent, reciprocal, and experiential nature of higher learning.

Approved QEP engaged learning experiences will require SMU students to be ‘hands-on’ involved in learning activities with a community outside the classroom and the campus. QEP engaged learning experiences will be overseen by a collaboration of SMU faculty as well as other qualified internal and external mentors, who together will ensure that participating students begin to cultivate a pattern of meaningful lifelong engagement within a variety of communities.

A unique aspect of the implementation of SMU’s QEP is the ability for any qualified SMU community member to propose a new QEP engaged learning experience. Although the activity
proposal may be initiated by any SMU community member, the actual detail description of work to be performed must be completed by the student himself. Thus the projects are to be student centered, student driven, and student defined. Such experiences can be undertaken anywhere, but must include extensive involvement with a community that includes members from outside SMU. In addition, a new grants program will provide funds to support the development of the best SMU QEP engaged learning experiences each year. All QEP participants will be required to write a reflective article, detailing their experiences, which will be published in a new SMU online journal. In addition, new Undergraduate Engaged Learning Conferences will be held annually to showcase student QEP experiences.

Community of Practice

If you reference a dictionary, you will find many different definitions of community. Within the scope of our QEP, a community of practice (or simply community) is a group of individuals with common interests. The interests could be defined by location, political interests, common historical background, similar social interests, etc. The four subject areas of the QEP are research, creative, civic, and professional. Thus there are four types of communities. A student involved in a civic inquiry engaged learning activity would have to be involved with persons in a traditional community defined by location (such as Dallas/Fort Worth). A student participating in a creative activity (such as dance) could be involved with a creative community (such as a dance company). An undergraduate researcher would need to work with a research community in his/her area of research (such as IEEE for an Electrical Engineering). A professional engaged learner would participate in activities within a business/commercial or nonprofit community. These communities are not disjoint. The crucial component of community for an Engaged Learning activity beyond the classroom is that the learning community must consist of individuals primarily outside the confines of the SMU community (faculty, staff, and students). We will use the term “learning community” to refer to the subset of the complete community of practice in which a student will be involved when he is performing his engaged learning activity. The crucial component of community for an Engaged Learning Activity beyond the classroom is that the learning activity must involve issues which involve communities outside SMU.

QEP Engaged Learning Activities

The new QEP Engaged Learning Grants Program and the new Engaged Learning activities consist of the following requirements: proposal of the activity by the student, extensive time involvement in the activity itself, involvement with individuals in a community of practice outside the SMU classroom, completion of a reflective component, and presentation of the results of the experience at a symposium either within the SMU community or the learning community. These QEP Engaged Learning projects will be overseen by a collaboration of SMU faculty/staff and external mentors.

When a student participates in an approved Engaged Learning Activity, to ensure that it satisfies minimum requirements, an Activity Proposal must be completed and approved (by the Advisory Committee of the Director of Engaged Learning). Note that activities may be approved individually
or in groups. A group activity could be for a course or for a type of activity (such as Departmental Distinction). In addition to the activity approval, each student participating in an approved Engaged Learning Activity may request funds to support that activity via the Engaged Learning Grants program.

**What is New?**

As will be seen below, many students at SMU are already involved in experiential activities beyond the classroom. However there currently is no support, or commitment by the SMU Administration to encourage participation in extensive experiential learning activities by all undergraduates. In preparation of this report, and that produced by the earlier Topic Selection Committee, it was found that many students wanted to participate in engaged learning activities, but were confused about how to go about doing this. The infrastructure, support, and other recommendations made by this implementation document are aimed at addressing these problems. We summarize the new features provided by this QEP program below:

- Engaged Learning Grants Program
- Engaged Learning Symposium
- Engaged Learning Online Publication
- SMU institutional support:
  - Monetary support
  - Hiring Engaged Learning Director
  - Hiring Undergraduate Research Director
- SMU programmatic oversight infrastructure:
  - Engaged Learning Advisory Committee
  - Engaged Learning Community Partners
  - Engaged Learning Mentors
- Well defined procedures to facilitate a flexible, adaptable Engaged Learning experience tailored to each individual student.
- Centralized source, including Web site, for opportunities regarding any experiential learning activities for SMU students.

QEP Engaged Learning activities have specific requirements that may not be satisfied by existing SMU experiential learning activities. A crucial feature is that the student is in charge! This means that he identifies the activity, defines it based on previous courses and experiences, performs the activity, and then reports (written and oral) on the activity, its results, and what he has learned. This student driven approach is usually missing from internship projects. While we do not rule out internships completely, QEP internships would be special, student driven learning experiences within a professional workplace.

Another new addition of the QEP is that it builds on and augments important elements of the new curriculum. Starting in 2012, students will be required to participate in modest engagements with local and global communities. The QEP offers students the opportunity to dramatically enhance these small scale experiences. QEP projects require more depth and serious commitments of both time and effort.
A third benefit of the QEP is to increase faculty awareness of the importance of and participation in undergraduate experiential learning outside the classroom. Faculty is also often unaware of current opportunities for our students. Through the QEP their knowledge of these programs will improve leading them to encourage student participation and to serve as faculty mentors.

Each of these is discussed in much detail in the complete report. This is a volunteer program. The ultimate hope is that the desire by students to participate in the QEP Engaged Learning activities will become contagious. The students and faculty have said they want a program of this type. The faculty and staff are excited about it. The administration is willing to support it.