

**Enhanced Student Engagement**  
University of Central Florida  
Quality Enhancement Plan Concept Paper

**Executive Summary**

When students are provided opportunities to engage in their communities, the end result is a well-rounded citizen who has the necessary soft skills and academic knowledge to succeed in life. Engagement opportunities provide students with life-changing experiences that improve their socialization, communication skills, cultural competencies, and as a result, their career preparedness. Providing students with engagement opportunities will also help to create citizens who continue to be engaged and active in their communities long after graduation. As an institution, we can succeed in both academic and civic pursuits that will enhance our students' overall university and academic experience.

UCF has established itself as America's Leading Partnership University™ and is an integral part of Central Florida, the Sunshine State, and the world beyond. Part of UCF's mission is in "broad-based and experience-based learning, [...] enriched student development and leadership growth, [and] public service initiatives that address pressing local, state, national, and international issues in support of the global community" (<http://www.ucf.edu/strategic-planning/strategic-plan-key-elements/>). Further, UCF's vision statement notes that our institution is "to become a new kind of university that provides leadership and service to the Central Florida city-state," and our values statement includes both "scholarship" and "community" among other things (<http://www.ucf.edu/strategic-planning/strategic-plan-key-elements/>). As such, the university should be committed to ensuring that each UCF graduate participates in significant engagement opportunities. It is this committee's suggestion that an engagement component for all undergraduate students be required in order to graduate.

**Student Learning Outcomes and Assessment Methods**

A report from the National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement titled *A Crucible Moment: College Learning & Democracy's Future*, confirms

that civic learning and learning in traditional academic disciplines are complementary, rather than competitive. The report points to research findings that suggest that students who participate in civic learning opportunities are more likely to persist in college and complete their degrees, obtain skills prized by employers, and develop habits of social responsibility and civic participation (Kanter & Ochoa 2012).

The report also notes current tensions between "labor market needs, [...] an increase in 'degree outputs'" (9), research efforts, and civic education. Through enhanced student engagement all of these efforts can positively affect students, faculty members, and our local, national, and global community partners.

Labor market needs would be addressed by enhancing soft skills that employers report as lacking for recent graduates. A survey developed, fielded, and analyzed by Maguire Associates, Inc., a higher-education consulting firm, on behalf of The Chronicle of Higher Education and Public Media's Marketplace invited 50,000 employers to participate in the study (<https://chronicle.com/items/biz/pdf/Employers%20Survey.pdf>). Key findings in the study discovered that "employers place more weight on experience, particularly internships and employment during

school vs. academic credentials including GPA and college major when evaluating a recent graduate for employment” (11). Also, employers identified the following skills as areas in need of improvement:

- Written and oral communication skills
- Adaptability
- Managing multiple priorities
- Making decisions and problem solving

As noted previously, degree outputs would be addressed because civic learning enhances student retention and graduation; research efforts would be enhanced through projects that require problem solving in a real-world environment, and research findings could possibly improve the overall effectiveness of the organization or issue being addressed; also, civic education would benefit students by “preparing [them to become] socially responsible citizens as graduates” (Saltmarsh & Hartley 2011).

In terms of assessment, UCF already has several methods in place. These include 1) Graduating Student Survey, 2) First Destination Survey, 3) Fraternity & Sorority Life Survey, and 4) Office of Experiential Learning Surveys for co-op, internship, and service-learning. All of these surveys contain questions that are specific to community engagement efforts made by the student. In addition, the NSSE Survey is a tremendous indicator of engagement practices on campuses across the nation by which we can gauge how UCF is doing in comparison to other higher educational institutions every few years. We also can generate and retrieve data with the assistance of Operational Excellence and Assessment Support as well as with Institutional Knowledge Management.

### **Foundation Based on Data**

Engaged learning practices with community partners can help to improve student skill sets identified in the previous section. A few curricular examples include, the Office of Experiential Learning Employer Evaluations of student intern and co-operative learning experiences for 2013-2014 reveal that over 90% of UCF students have very good to outstanding communication skills upon completion of their experiential learning opportunity. In addition, over 93% of employers surveyed reported very good to outstanding adaptability skills in students completing their internship or co-op experience. The National Association of Colleges and Employers’ current benchmarks observe that 96% of responding employers plan to hire interns and/or co-op students in 2014” (2014 Internship & Co-op Survey).

Co-curricular examples include, all UCF Fraternity & Sorority Life organizations are currently required to perform service with the community. These students are surveyed annually. In 2013-2014, 95% of student respondents believed that their involvement in Fraternity & Sorority Life led to an improvement of their personal leadership skills and/or abilities. Management of priorities, decision making, and problem solving are all components of leadership skills that employers view as currently lacking in employees.

### **Implementation and Scope**

The following programs, activities, and projects could satisfy the engagement requirement:

1. Internship (one semester paid or unpaid work experience that is tied directly to students’ major discipline)
2. Co-op (multi-semester paid work experience that is tied directly to students’ major discipline)

3. Service-Learning (teaching pedagogy that extends the classroom experience into the nonprofit sector to enhance both the learning objectives of the course and benefit the community partner)
4. International Study Abroad (students engage with various cultures)
5. Practicums (designed to give students practical experience in their field of study)
6. Senior Design (students work with industry and community partners to apply academic skills to real-world situations)
7. Capstone (in some cases-e.g., Interdisciplinary Studies-students apply course content to real-world service projects)
8. Cornerstone (in some cases-e.g., College of Business Administration-the required course involves interacting with community partners to further their ability to serve clients)
9. Clinical Rotations (both observational and hands-on experiences with care giving facilities in the health care industry)
10. Field Experience (gives students experience in their field of study in observational or assistant positions; tends to be in social sciences and teacher preparation)
11. Volunteering (students engage in service activities that benefit nonprofit and/or federal agencies)
12. Community-based Research (research projects that enhance both the students' understanding of academic concepts and the community partner providing the subject matter)
13. Guest Speakers or other sanctioned campus engagement opportunities (students would be required to attend at least four events to fulfill the engagement requirement; these would be approved venues that focus on cultural, civic, and/or democratic engagement)

In addition, a university-wide Reader could focus on texts (brief articles and the like) that investigate civic minded issues. The Reader would be relevant to each college by incorporating texts that address civic minded issues specific to their missions.

This QEP would

1. Help students to improve soft skills (e.g., communication, leadership, teamwork, cultural competencies) through engaging in real-world experiences.
2. Help students to identify possible career opportunities.
3. Help students to strengthen their workforce competency skills.
4. Help students to become civically minded and engaged citizens upon graduation.

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