

***Student Engagement in a Culture of Learning:
From the Academic Village to the Global Village***

**TEXAS SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY
QUALITY ENHANCEMENT PLAN**

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II

**Student Engagement in a Culture of Learning:
From the Academic Village to the Global Village**

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**Student Engagement in a Culture of Learning:
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Executive Summary

At Texas Southern University, there is widespread recognition that students are not intellectually engaged in the process of learning to the extent necessary for full participation in the world. Institutional research statistics show that the one-year retention rates have dropped below 50% and that the six-year graduation rates only approach 12%. Institutional analysis of first year failure rates shows that failure rates average 50% across all first year courses. Clearly, the majority of TSU students are underprepared for college. Student focus groups also indicate that students are disengaged with classroom learning and desire change in the classroom. They desire more interaction with instructors and each other, as well as instructors who are excited about teaching.

There is, however, widespread feeling that changing the “culture” at TSU is a critical first step in the success of any educational initiative. The TSU Quality Enhancement Plan will thus focus on a three-pronged approach to engaging students in an enhanced culture of learning by: (1) engaging students in campus activities designed to orient and advise from the moment of their arrival on campus; (2) engaging students in interactive classroom learning through innovative, faculty-driven methods; and (3) engaging students in learning activities designed to prepare them for community service and international experiences in the world beyond TSU in the global village.

It is expected that with change on these three important **fronts** and with administrative support that student will gradually shift their priorities from mere working to educational and professional attainment.

Multiple methods will be used to assess the effectiveness of Texas Southern’s approach to its Quality Enhancement Plan, including quantitative measures of pass rates, retention rates and graduation rates as well as more experiential measures of level of academic challenge and degree of student-faculty interaction derived from course-level and program-level assessments

Student Engagement in a Culture of Learning: From the Academic Village to the Global Village

Introduction

At Texas Southern University, there is widespread recognition that students are not intellectually engaged in the process of learning to the extent necessary for full participation in the world. Awareness of the problem of lack of student engagement in the learning process comes from a number of sources. Institutional research statistics show that the one-year retention rates have dropped below 50% and that the six-year graduation rates only approach 12%. Institutional analysis of first year failure rates shows that failure rates average 50% across all first year courses (McReynolds, 2009). Further, the highest failure rates are in the reading comprehension-intensive courses of history, political science and psychology--traditionally the most difficult courses for all college students.

The majority of TSU students are underprepared for college. They have matriculated in public high schools in Texas that operate under a system that does not encourage learning. Students have poor study skills because they do not typically have homework. They are not allowed to take books home to facilitate homework. The majority have never read a book in its entirety, and so have not developed sufficient practice in reading comprehension. Moreover the secondary school preoccupation with testing has served to devalue learning. It is this culture that they bring to Texas Southern.

While it is true that the majority of entering students at TSU is underprepared and must take one or more developmental courses, underpreparedness is not the entire problem. Indeed, there is no significant difference in the six-year graduation rates of non-developmental and developmental students, a fact that has been confirmed by a number of institutional analyses (e.g., Ferroll, 2009). The fact that a majority of TSU students are low-income and first generation means that the need to work is usually a higher priority than education. The result is that students fail to become engaged in learning and campus activities because working comes first. Yet the degree to which students are engaged in their studies directly affects the quality of student learning. Indeed, Astin's (1966) major theory of retention contends that the greater the psychological involvement in learning, the higher the retention.

There is widespread feeling that changing the "culture" at TSU is a critical first step in the success of any educational initiative. The TSU Quality Enhancement Plan will thus focus on a three-pronged approach to engaging students in an enhanced culture of learning by: (1) engaging students in campus activities designed to orient and advise; (2) engaging students in classroom learning through innovative faculty-driven methods; and (3) engaging students in activities designed to prepare them for community service and international experiences in the world beyond TSU in the global village.

The goals and objectives of this QEP are tied to the core objectives of the Texas Southern University general education core curriculum which strives to enhance student skills in communication, critical thinking and engagement. This QEP specifically addresses the engagement objectives that encourage students to: (1) Develop an appreciation for and understanding of the significant ideas and creative achievements in literature, philosophy, art, music, media, and the performance arts; and (2) Develop an understanding of the diversity of the human experience through the study of social, cultural, historical, economic, and political systems. By improving student engagement

on the proposed three levels is expected to enhance student “readiness” for the appreciation and understanding of learning activities.

I Student Engagement in the Academic Village

The effort to immerse students in a true culture of learning must begin at the beginning when students first set foot on campus. The environment must be a transformative one capable of imparting an overt message of a cultural ascension of learning, and overriding the student high school culture that places a low value on learning. To do this, students will be immersed in orientation activities, coordinated advising and support activities, and mentoring.

The Orientation Experience

The often overlooked explanation for low retention and graduation rates is the deeply rooted regressive culture that resides on campus in TSU students. This problem must be faced from the moment students first walk on campus until the last day that they leave.

Antecedents. There have been many conversations **about changing the culture**, but they always begin with the total orientation process. While many colleges and universities plan one to two week orientations, TSU has a half-day orientation that is focused on registration rather than acculturation. While orientation surveys always indicate that the working population of students wants a shorter orientation process, the acculturation process demands a more in-depth approach. Thus, all orientation activities will be required of new students with clear consequences for non-participation.

Actions. To this end, the following programs will be enhanced:

1. Orientation will be mandatory for students seeking to register, and orientation will be increased from one day to five days. The increased time will be spent on making students aware of the expectations of them as TSU students. Relevant campus partners will be brought together to design activities that engage students in the process of culture change.
2. There is no better method of social indoctrination **than** indoctrination by peers. Therefore, the extended orientation process will include student-lead programs of regular interaction with new students, including an advisor component to ensure accountability.
3. The freshman orientation course, Sociology 211, will be expanded to twice a week and will be mandatory for all new students. This course will include regular assessments to determine the extent of student skill enhancement.
4. In addition to a freshman orientation class, there will also be a required Professional Internship class for students beyond the freshman year. This course will prepare students **in** etiquette, resume development, and portfolio writing.

Outcomes. It is expected that requiring students to undergo an extensive orientation and acculturation process will set the stage for a new view of their educational expectations. The process will include regular orientation surveys for each component of the orientation activities.

Integrated Student Academic Advising and Support Center

Consistent academic advising is an important key to retention and graduation. Yet students, faculty and administrators recognize that academic advising is at best

uneven. Department faculty members are expected to serve this function along with their other duties, when a professional staff of advisors is necessary to maintain consistency and accountability.

Antecedents. Focus group data collected over the 2007-08 academic year has indicated that many TSU students have not received appropriate socialization for academic success in a university environment. Many students come from homes where parents are overly involved in challenges associated with survival, often due to a lack of education on their part, and have few human or material resources to devote to the academic success of their children. These students often need to be re-socialized regarding the expectations and requirements for successful completion of the higher education experience. Recent research indicated that when a concerted effort was made to provide entering TSU students with focused academic support, the result was increased retention rates, but that low graduation rates have remained constant over time (Fleming, 2002).

Actions. A Student Academic Advising and Support Center will be enhanced and redesigned to provide integrated services to students as a strategy to positively influence rates of student success and thereby improve the quality of the TSU experience through graduation. The proposed facility will be devoted to student success operated by staff and faculty who are specifically trained to work with students to provide continuous academic advising through graduation as well as other support services.

Support services are needed through graduation and should not be limited to first and second year students. The proposed facility will include the involvement faculty members from the academic departments who advise their major students and will be given a stipend for this activity. The Center will also provide tutoring, a computer lab, registration and enrollment services, traditional and peer mentoring, career counseling, psychological and family counseling, financial advising and other services as needed.

Outcomes. The designation of an entire facility and the commitment of resources to student support through graduation will communicate to students the importance of their success to TSU, to the State of Texas, and to the nation. Students will recognize that we are here to enter into a partnership with them to achieve their academic goals and that this is also our goal. Models for this proposed facility exist at other universities including Sam Houston State University where a similar center has shown positive results in terms of student retention and graduation rates.

Program level assessments would be appropriate for this facility, as well as yearly student surveys that include components on their experience with academic advising.

II Student Engagement in the Classroom

The classroom issues at Texas Southern University are in line with the changes in the philosophy of education taking place across the nation. According to Barr (2004), the paradigm has shifted from teaching to learning because the traditional methods of instruction are no longer producing the learning in students that we desire. Because we teach does not mean that our students are learning. Thus, a new emphasis on what works to produce learning has emerged.

According to almost 500 students who attended a yearlong process of focus groups, there is a consensus that change in the classroom is needed. Students want interactive instruction so that they can communicate with the instructors and with each

other. Active engagement is the quest of the new millennial generation and urban millennial students are of this same mold. According to focus group interviews, faculty and staff are in agreement with students that the classroom should be the locus of intervention. They advocate the re-training of instructors in teaching methods proven to be more effective with today's students (Mosley, 2009).

In consequence, a series of initiatives will be undertaken that are designed to develop the teaching effectiveness of instructors through focused innovation in the classroom.

The Faculty Development Initiative

Many faculty members are not yet aware that today's students are very different and that they require changes in the mode of instruction (Prensky, 2002). **Nor are they fully are that these differences may have little to do with under-preparation???** Today's students have difficulty learning **from lectures**, but respond to hands-on methods that are highly interactive and/or highly technological. Furthermore, they respond to attempts to establish rapport with them.

Antecedents. The Achieving the Dream initiative at TSU has supported focus groups and activities designed to encourage classroom innovation. The following activities have been undertaken and have received positive feedback.

1) Mr. Arthur Hicks, TSU graduate and HISD math consultant, provides an entertaining workshop on how to establish rapport with students and how to help students decipher the language of math. Mr. Hicks became a consultant after achieving 100% pass rates in TAKS Math with at-risk students.

2) Dr. Marcia Heiman, author of Learning to Learn, provides a workshop for student Supplemental Instruction Leaders and faculty Supplemental Instruction Coordinators on how to teach note-taking, and reading comprehension. Dr. Heiman stresses learning through the development of questions from notes and reading material in order to prime students for test taking. This approach is particularly useful for reading-intensive courses.

3) Dr. Bruce Bridges, author of Recapturing the African Mind, provides a workshop for faculty on teaching the origins of math and science from a multicultural perspective. Providing such background to students helps them embrace the mathematical and scientific concepts by showing how African cultures participated in their development.

4) Attendance at the annual Teaching Professor Conference on Teaching Effectiveness. This conference is completely devoted to teaching effectiveness and is available to a limited number of instructors each year. Such exposures were intended to make faculty members aware of possible classroom innovations and how to evaluate them.

Actions. All faculty and particularly those in first year courses will be asked to participate in the Faculty Development Initiative in which they will have opportunities for exposure to effective teaching methods, and will then develop a Faculty Action Research Proposal for classroom innovation.

Workshops, training and conferences will be provided that deal explicitly with new and effective teaching methods shown to work with today's urban students.

As a requirement of participation in these activities, faculty members will be asked to undertake a Faculty Action Research Project by implementing an innovative teaching approach deemed capable of increasing course pass rates.

Proposals are judged by a panel and the minimum evaluation criteria will be final course grades for each student so that pass rates can be determined for the target

course or section, and then compared with previous course pass rates or pass rates from a concurrent section not using the teaching innovation.

A brief proposal is available for interested faculty members and there is a \$500.00 per semester stipend for the instructor.

There are a series of additional initiatives proposed for specific subject matter available to interested instructors.

Outcomes. It is expected that classroom innovation, especially when encouraged by stipends, will become infectious. The effects of successful innovations should be evident in classroom pass rates compared to previous years or other sections of the same course, as well as student course surveys. The more significant outcome will be students more engaged in their academics and faculty members smitten with a spirit of change to meet students where they are.

Supplemental Instruction in Freshman Courses

Supplemental Instruction (SI) is a method of peer teaching/learning developed by the University of Missouri at Kansas City in which trained "Master Students" attend target classes and then conduct out of class sessions with students emphasizing methods of how to learn. A vast literature documents the effectiveness of this approach across the country (e.g., Arendale, 2004).

Antecedents. The Achieving the Dream initiative at TSU has supported this program in freshman level courses where instructors were willing to participate. While in its third semester, data from two semesters has been fully analyzed. Although less than 30% of the students who were offered SI actually participated, the final course grades and pass rates were significantly higher for participants. Further, the more students participated, the higher their grades. The effects were not due to self-selection since high participation students did not perform better than other students in the semester following SI. It thus seems that student motivation interacts with an effective program to produce significant results. A number of steps have been taken to increase participation in SI, including requiring participation and offering T-shirts and refreshments. Perhaps the most illuminating feedback came from a focus group conducted with student SI Leaders. The most successful SIs were those who attempted to gain rapport with students before trying to instruct them. They took the time to get to know their names, their problems, and to make the sessions fun. This is the kind of interaction that students request in their faculty instructors, and they respond to it from peer instructors as well.

Actions. TSU plans to continue the Supplemental Instruction program in first year courses, with a specific focus on reading-intensive courses and science courses.

Training in Supplemental Instruction is conducted by Dr. Maureen Hurley of the University of Missouri at Kansas City. The goal is to train faculty members to be SI Coordinators and to learn the SI techniques of questioning to permit the integration of how to learn with what to learn. These techniques are not only useful for SI sessions held out of class but also in class when students have questions.

Outcomes. As the previous evidence has suggested, it is expected that participating students will achieve better academic outcomes including retention than non-participating students. The effort, as before, can be assessed by course pass rates and course grades.

In sum, the proposed initiatives designed to enhance student engagement in the classroom are also designed to infect faculty with the spirit of innovation required for optimal student engagement in learning.

III Student Engagement in the Global Village

Many students now entering Texas Southern are underprepared for college. While they will be challenged by efforts to ready themselves for college level work, they must also be provided with a vision of possibilities in the global village. It is therefore important that the new culture of learning provide specific pathways from the campus academic village to the world beyond Texas Southern.

The Pulitzer Prize winning author Thomas Friedman has famously declared that the “world is flat” in an age of globalization. Not only do goods and services crisscross the planet, but capital and labor are increasingly mobile. With the rapid expansion of instant communication in the age of the internet and the rise of a global mass media, culture itself has become global. Just as everyday life increasingly involves global interactions, so have the crises and problems become global. Climate change is beginning to affect every human being, just as the financial crisis has led to global suffering. Every university owes it to its students to prepare them live and thrive in Friedman’s “hot, flat, and crowded” home.

There are three specific strategies: providing opportunities for community engagement through service learning; preparing students for international experiences by internationalizing the curriculum; and encouraging international experiences through travel and study abroad.

Service Learning

Service learning is an approach to teaching whereby learning objectives from the classroom are experienced or taught through service in the community. The learning is enhanced through the students’ reflection on how the experience relates to their didactic work and students’ documentation of their discovery of new information about themselves and the community. Service learning is a form of community engagement in which students explore or reinforce concepts of social and behavioral aspects of human behavior, communication skills and research methods. Texas Southern has embarked on a new era that will seek to diminish the borders that separate the University from the community surrounding it.

Antecedents. There are many antecedents in the literature demonstrating that school-to-work internships and programs have beneficial consequences for students. While most opportunities of this kind are designed for students at the end of their college careers to solidify their classroom learning, service learning opportunities can be made available to entering students as well. In recent years, the TSU Community Service Assistance Program (CSAP) has permitted students enrolled in the freshman orientation course four to six internship placements in on and off-campus businesses related to their career choice. In these instances, participating students achieved better academic performance on a series of measures including GPA, GPA hours completed and one-year retention (Warner, 2008).

Actions. Service learning opportunities would be open to all TSU students at any stage of their academic careers. The program would be coordinated by an academic advisor with experience in service learning. Internship placements in a variety of local businesses and professions would be provided. In addition to internship placements,

service learning opportunities would be provided for students in a series of disciplines. For example, students engaged in learning research methodology in the mathematics, the sciences and social sciences would be encouraged to go out into the community to recruit subjects. Students might administer patient satisfaction surveys at local clinics, build the resulting databases and then interpret those data. While the coordination of service learning experiences would be coordinated by the appointed academic advisor, the participating departments would determine the kinds of experiences that would be useful to their majors.

Outcomes. A number of positive outcomes are expected from the implementation of service learning opportunities. As found for students participating in CSAP, better academic performance on a series of measures would be expected relative to the non-participating population. The dialogue generated among participants regarding their community-based opportunities should substantially contribute to an enhanced culture of learning. Such opportunities are expected to accelerate students' understanding of the impact of becoming involved in civic duties and this understanding is expected to result in students who take on more leadership roles, who are more altruistic and who are better able to compete globally.

Travel and Study Abroad

Just the previous aspects of the international initiative seek to prepare TSU students for the world beyond its borders, the travel and study abroad initiative encouraged students to enter the global community. Opportunities for travel and study abroad allow a rehearsal of the internationalized knowledge that students will gain in the majors. The goal of this initiative is to provide initial international experiences for TSU students. The earlier these experiences occur, the more they shape student worldviews and permit cognitive broadening.

Antecedents. TSU students are aware of international students on campus, but typically have little meaningful interaction with them. While our international students have knowledge of their own and our cultures, this is not true of TSU urban students. Experiences in other cultures would serve to break down the barriers between these two groups of students, as well as expose our students to cultures that place a high value on education. International students often say that American students do not realize how great their educational opportunities are. Even minimal immersion in foreign cultures will certainly help to place their own opportunities in perspective. The TSU Debate Team is unique in providing frequent international exposures to its members with outstanding results. Such opportunities must be made more widely available.

Actions. The new Office of International Studies will have the responsibility for gathering student travel and study opportunities abroad. This responsibility would seek external funds to support these activities. These opportunities must be actively promoted to students from the time they enter TSU in order to shape their perceptions early on. These activities should ideally occur before the senior year so that students may bring their experiences back to the campus. These activities should not exclude the development of exchange programs with other universities.

Outcomes. It is expected that the development of significant numbers of students who have international travel and study experiences will have a positive impact on TSU's culture of learning. It is expected that the numbers of such students will increase, and that forums where they can discuss their experiences will motivate other students to do likewise.

Evaluation Plan

Multiple methods will be used to assess the effectiveness of Texas Southern's approach to its Quality Enhancement Plan, including quantitative measures of pass rates, retention rates and graduation rates as well as more experiential measures of level of academic challenge and degree of student-faculty interaction.

In the Achieving the Dream initiative, in which Texas Southern participates, institutional data is analyzed each year to assess the pass rates in individual freshman courses, the aggregated pass rates in reading-intensive courses, science courses, English and math courses. In addition, one-year retention rates and six-year graduation rates are tracked. These rates will enable TSU to determine whether the classroom-based initiatives are affecting overall rates.

Table 1 presents the comprehensive evaluation plan. It shows each of the 10 specific initiatives included in the plan and the assessments deemed most appropriate for them. In general, classroom-based initiatives such as Supplemental Instruction and Faculty Action Research projects can be assessed through course grades and pass rates. Programmatic initiatives such as Service Learning can be assessed by the overall academic achievements of students but most appropriately through a program-level assessment of program involvement and program satisfaction. First year academic support programs, such as Mentoring.Com (Johnson, 2007) and Community Service Assistance Program (CSAP) (Warner, 2008) currently use both types of program assessment. Initiatives meant to have a sustained impact such as orientation can be assessed by program-level assessments but also in terms of retention and graduation rates.

The National Study of Student Engagement, *Promoting Engagement for All Students: The Imperative to Look Within* (2008) cites the following experiential benchmarks of educational practice that will be used to assess strategies: (1) Level of Academic Challenge; (2) Active and Collaborative Learning; (3) Student-Faculty Interaction; (4) Enriching Educational Experiences; and (5) Supportive Campus Environment. Assessment questionnaires will be developed with these benchmarks in mind and administered to students involved in targeted strategies. Additional survey items will be developed to assess course-specific issues such as technology.

Assessing such benchmarks could be accomplished through yearly student surveys that include subcomponents addressing each of the recommended areas. Fleming (2000) has developed such an assessment that has been used at other historically black colleges such as LeMoyne-Owen and assesses level of academic challenge, student-faculty interaction, and supportive campus environment. Two additional subscales for active and collaborative learning and enriching education experiences would be included.

Conclusions

The convergence of a number of institutional events, changes and experiences have led Texas Southern University to the conclusion that its "culture of learning" must be enhanced and made prominent. The institutional experiences include the

administration's emphasis on teaching, TSU's involvement in the Achieving the Dream Initiative, feedback from focus groups of students, faculty, and staff -- in addition to institutional statistics revealing low retention and graduation rates. A comprehensive approach is planned that addresses the messages to students from orientation to the first year experience, the basic nature of classroom instruction that must move from traditional to learner-centered pedagogy, and the long-term vision of students capable of serving the local and global communities.

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**Table 1
Comprehensive Evaluation Plan**

	Course Pass Rates	Course-Level Assessment	Student Evaluations	Program Level Assessment	1 Year Retention Rates	Graduation Rates
I Student Engagement in the Academic Village						
The Orientation Experience				X	X	X
Integrated Student Academic Advising and Support Center				X	X	X
II Student Engagement in the Classroom						
The Faculty Development Initiative	X	X				X
Supplemental Instruction in Freshman Courses	X	X				
III Student Engagement in the Global Village						
Service Learning				X	X	
Travel and Study Abroad				X		