Part 5: The Impact Report of the Quality Enhancement Plan

Judgment of compliance: Compliance

Narrative:

The University of Alabama's Quality Enhancement Plan for 2015-2020 was entitled, **Learning in Action: Developing Real-World Problem Solvers through High Quality Experiential Learning**. As stated in the original Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) report, the purpose of UA's QEP was:

To improve students' real-world problem-solving skills and their ability to connect academic knowledge to real-world contexts and situations through high quality Experiential Learning Opportunities in every college.

This purpose and the QEP topic were the product of a broad-based process involving UA faculty, staff, and students, as well as parents, employers, and alumni. The process began with the solicitation of topics via the 2013 "Great Ideas" campaign, from which proposals were submitted to the Provost and President. The proposals were also presented to the Council of Deans, a body that includes the dean of each UA college. Council members rated each proposal and, in conjunction with input from the Provost and President, determined the best theme for the University's QEP: providing more on- and off-campus experiential learning opportunities to undergraduate students in every college. That theme was consistent with UA's published vision to become "...the university of choice for the best and brightest students in Alabama and a university of choice for all students who seek exceptional educational opportunities."

The remainder of this narrative discusses:

1. Initial Goals and Intended Outcomes
2. Changes and Rationale
3. Impact
4. Reflection

1. Initial Goals and Intended Outcomes

The Learning in Action QEP had the following goals:

1. Increase the number of experiential learning opportunities (ELOs) offered in each college that are certified as incorporating all six ELO best practices (intentionality; preparedness; regular monitoring and feedback; reflection; evaluation; and assessment).
2. Improve students' ability to apply knowledge and skills in real-world problem solving through best-practice ELOs.
3. Increase the proportion of graduating seniors who report their educational preparation at UA to be excellent/optimal.

Through Learning in Action, the institution sought to engage faculty and staff in professional development opportunities that delineate the practices of exemplary experiential learning opportunities (ELOs) and demonstrate how to effectively incorporate these practices into existing or new ELOs. The QEP also involved a pilot ELO certification process based on the

implementation of identified best practices. Additionally, the original UA QEP plan sought to assess both reflections and work products generated through ELOs to determine what impact the six best practices have on students' abilities to apply knowledge and skills in real-world problem solving, one of three goals of the QEP. This outcome is of continued importance to the University, given its centrality to supporting High Impact Practices (HIPs) known to enhance student success.

2. Changes and Rationale

The changes made to the Learning in Action QEP fell into three main areas: 1) refining the scope of the project; 2) streamlining the assessment of students' work in ELO courses; and 3) making final adjustments that served to further centralize the activities and administration of the QEP.

Scope

In order to address the goals of (1) increasing high-quality ELOs in each college, and (2) improving undergraduate problem-solving and integrative learning skills, initial plans for the Learning in Action QEP were broad in scope. These plans included enrolling half of the undergraduate student population in high-quality ELOs by the conclusion of the project and involving half of all instructors (tenured, tenure-track, clinical, and other instructors) in Learning in Action. The plan began with a pilot that was multi-layered in its approach. Efforts were made to provide professional development (via two one-hour workshops) to instructors who had not previously incorporated experiential learning into their courses. Additionally, the pilot was designed to set a foundation for creating institution-wide certification of existing high-quality ELOs via a workshop and an application process. Within the pilot, six different types of mini-grants were proposed to support faculty at different points in the process of developing, offering, and refining high-quality experiential learning opportunities. The evaluation plan was similarly complex and involved the collection and scoring of student reflections as well as work artifacts specific to each course-based ELO.

After review of the trajectory of the project, the context of the institution at the time, and best practices associated with sustaining professional development through faculty learning communities, two main factors led to the modification of Learning in Action. The analysis of available resources for maintaining and sustaining Learning in Action beyond the fifth year was a primary consideration. A second consideration was the feasibility of implementing the QEP within a decentralized institutional context that did not include an organizational structure for supporting broad-based pedagogical professional development. Prior to the Learning in Action QEP, faculty development was addressed primarily through niche programs taking place within the span of a single academic year. In evaluating the experiences of faculty who were the first to be selected as Learning in Action fellows, the QEP leadership team recognized that faculty needed additional/extended opportunities to explore and apply best practices of course design (beyond a one-year or two-semester model).

Based on these factors, the decision was made to pivot from breadth to depth in regard to the overall project, and to frame the Learning in Action QEP as an institution-wide pilot of instructor professional development that built on and extended existing programs in important ways. This overall change drove additional modifications in three main areas: faculty development; intentionality in establishing high-quality experiential learning opportunities; and a streamlined and rigorous approach to the assessment of QEP outcomes.

Faculty Development

In order to unify efforts to support faculty and provide students with ELOs that were consistent across colleges and divisions, the diverse and wide-ranging series of workshops and seminars initially planned was replaced by the Learning in Action fellowship program, which was focused on instructors employed in tenure-track, clinical instructor, part-time instructor, and full-time instructor positions. Similarly, the diverse grants that were originally proposed were replaced by (conditional) funding for course resources and further professional development. These changes provided a coherent, cohesive structure that was carried through the remainder of the Learning in Action QEP.

The Learning in Action fellowship began with a two-day workshop which focused on how to integrate elements of strong course design into the development and implementation of ELO-based courses. Based on participant observation and feedback from the first cohort of fellows, it was clear that not all participating faculty were experienced in fundamental aspects of course design; thus the workshop served as a common starting point. The workshop also included an overview of the six best practices of experiential learning and covered key information regarding responsibilities and activities associated with the fellowship.

The second component of the fellowship was the inclusion and refinement of professional learning communities (PLCs) for each Learning in Action cohort. Through the PLCs, the QEP sought to:

- connect fellows with experts within the area of experiential learning;
- establish connections and collaborative opportunities with others on campus who had expertise in designing and offering ELOs; and
- foster connections within and across fellowship cohorts in order to support continued learning and engagement within and beyond the time frame of the QEP.

After the initial course design workshop, Learning in Action fellows met in small cohorts over the span of two semesters. These meetings were initially facilitated by UA faculty with recognized expertise in experiential learning, and were also aligned with research on best practices of faculty learning communities. Each semester, PLC meetings were further supported by the inclusion of one-on-one consultation meetings with a nationally recognized consultant in experiential learning. The consultant was able to provide valuable feedback, suggestions, and resources tailored to the discipline and pedagogical knowledge of each fellowship participant. PLC meetings built on these consultations, addressed challenges and issues faced by fellows, and offered opportunities for further resource sharing, collaboration, and “deep dives” into specific issues of interest to each cohort. The PLC meetings also provided opportunities to reinforce information about the links between experiential learning, problem-solving, and integrative learning, and about the means by which student data would be collected.

Finally, the fellowship experience included fall and spring presentations by multiple QEP cohorts. In their presentations, fellows reported on either their in-progress work and/or lessons learned upon completion of their ELO-based course implementations. These presentations provided new Learning in Action fellows with opportunities to learn from those at other stages of the fellowship process. Consequently, each fellowship cohort was—at a minimum—connected with on-campus faculty experts, a national expert in experiential learning, and the cohorts preceding and following theirs.

Certification for ELOs

Although experiential learning had long been a hallmark of many professional degree programs on campus, and a service learning designation had been established for some courses, data had not been collected on the extent to which these experiential learning opportunities had integrated the identified ELO best practices, and no mechanism existed for ensuring that designated courses continued to include those best practices. As described in the original QEP, an experiential learning (EL) certification was piloted over several semesters of the project. The courses of initial QEP fellows who had completed the fellowship were awarded the pilot certification. Additionally, other faculty already teaching existing ELO-based courses applied for and could be awarded the certification by a team of their peers.

As a result of the pilot, important lessons were learned at the institutional level. First, there was a need to develop a comprehensive understanding of the range of experiential learning opportunities that were currently being offered. Second, the institution required a structure for certifying ELO-based courses that was a) faculty-led, b) scalable, c) inclusive of existing designations, and d) integrated with current student records systems. Lastly, the institution needed to be able to embed the EL certification in ways that were valuable to both students and faculty. Given these identified needs and the inability to address them in a timely manner, the decision was made to postpone further implementation of a campus wide EL certification.

Streamlined and Rigorous Approach to Assessment

In the initial QEP plan, the assessment blueprint involved the evaluation of multiple student reflections and diverse artifacts specific to each ELO-based course, as well as comparisons of students' problem solving and integrative learning skills across ELO courses and non-ELO courses. Although this quasi-experimental design had the potential to provide compelling evidence of the QEP's impact, members of the university community ultimately decided against the full model. In order to support a straightforward, research-based approach to the assessment of the QEP, the decision was made to eliminate the collection and evaluation of diverse student artifacts and to focus specifically on standardized pre- and post-reflection data collected from students enrolled in ELO-based courses associated with Learning in Action.

Pre- and post-reflection questions were created by drawing on the AAC&U VALUE rubrics for problem-solving and integrative learning. Staff members from the Office of Institutional Effectiveness worked to map elements from those rubrics onto original goals and outcomes described in the QEP proposal. A scoring rubric was created, and a portfolio-based tool was integrated within UA's learning management system (Blackboard) to facilitate collection and scoring of student work. In conjunction with the creation of pre- and post-reflection questions, an associated scoring rubric, and a data collection/analysis process, additional resources were compiled to assist faculty fellows in using a shared problem-solving model to support student work and thinking.

Following the creation of this streamlined assessment process, a QEP Assessment Team of faculty and staff with prior involvement in the QEP and direct knowledge of experiential learning reviewed student pre- and post-reflections on a semester-by-semester basis. A stratified random sampling process was used to select student reflections from each semester to be scored (blindly) by the assessment team.

Final Adjustments – Centralizing the Work of the QEP

In the final two years of the QEP project, the decision was made to focus the faculty fellowship on those types of experiential learning that also had institutional support via recognized units on campus; these included service learning, study abroad, undergraduate research, and work-integrated experiences (internships, clinical placements, etc.). Additionally, the responsibility for the course design workshop and PLC facilitation was shifted to the QEP director. This provided a greater level of access and continuity for faculty fellows. Finally, a fidelity survey was developed to accompany students' post-reflections; this survey served as an indirect assessment, based on students' perceptions, of the extent to which ELO courses had included the best practices of experiential learning emphasized by the institution, and the extent to which the courses had enhanced students' problem-solving skills and ability to apply learning to real-world contexts.

3. Impact

From 2015 to 2020, a total of 1,701 students enrolled in the ELO-based courses of Learning in Action fellows. Students from each UA college participated in the ELO courses, thus achieving the goal of creating best-practice based ELO courses in every undergraduate degree-granting college (See Table A below). The Culverhouse College of Business had the highest level of student participation (589). The colleges with the next highest levels of student participation were Arts & Sciences (294), Nursing (278), and Education (153).

Of the ELO courses offered during the Learning in Action QEP, 33% were service-learning courses, 40% were undergraduate research courses, and 27% were courses with integrated work experiences. Beyond the pilot year, there were no study abroad courses proposed by faculty fellows. This may have been due to logistics, given the complexity of timelines associated with proposing study abroad courses and timelines associated with applying to and participating in the Learning in Action Fellowship program.

Table A: Student Participation in Learning in Action ELOs by College

COLLEGE/DIVISION	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	Fall 2020	Total
Arts & Sciences	89	160	26	16	3	294
Communication & Information Sci.	20	0	18	0	18	56
Business	0	0	361	143	85	589
Education	13	95	0	45	0	153
Engineering	0	0	4	123	0	127
Honors	15	0	14	0	0	29
Human Environmental Sciences	0	74	0	0	33	107
Nursing	0	0	139	108	31	278
Social Work	0	0	26	0	0	26
Community Affairs	9	0	0	0	0	9
Student Life	33	0	0	0	0	33
TOTAL	**179**	**329**	**588**	**435**	**170**	**1,701**

Impact on the Environment Supporting Student Learning

Faculty participation remained relatively constant over the course of the Learning in Action QEP. Each semester's cohort was comprised of around 7-10 instructors. As summarized in Table B below, the College of Arts & Sciences had the highest level of instructor participation, followed by the colleges of Education, Communication & Information Sciences, and Human Environmental Sciences. It should be noted that the Learning in Action QEP Advisory Board was comprised of faculty from all colleges, as well as staff from the Division of Student Life and offices related to undergraduate research, study abroad, service learning, and work-integrated experiences.

Table B: Faculty Participation in Learning in Action by College

COLLEGE/DIVISION	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	Fall 2020	TOTAL
Arts & Sciences	4	5	2	2	1	14
Business	0	0	1	1	1	3
Communication & Information Sciences	2	1	1	1	1	6
Community Health Sciences	0	1	0	1	0	2
Continuing Studies	1	1	2	0	0	4
Education	3	1	1	2	0	7
Engineering	0	0	2	2	0	4
Honors College	1	0	1	0	0	2
Human Environmental Sciences	2	1	0	1	1	5
Nursing	0	0	3	1	1	5
Social Work	0	2	1	0	0	3
TOTAL	**13**	**12**	**14**	**11**	**5**	**55**

Impact on Student Learning

The pre- and post-reflections collected from students enrolled in Learning in Action ELO courses yielded both qualitative and quantitative data. Students drew on their lived experiences in UA college courses (generally) and on the ELO-based courses specifically. These sources of direct evidence were supplemented by indirect assessment data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (administered in 2013 and 2019) and surveys of students' interest in and knowledge about specific topics (experiential learning; best practices associated with experiential learning; the extent to which the identified best practices were included in ELO courses; and the extent to which those courses strengthened their problem-solving skills and ability to apply their learning to real-world contexts).

Direct Student Learning Outcomes: Problem-Solving and Integrative Learning

A central goal of the Learning in Action QEP was to improve undergraduate students' ability to apply knowledge and skills in real-world problem-solving through ELOs that utilize best practices. Student pre- and post-reflections were used to assess discrete aspects of problem-solving skills on a 1-4 scale. The assessment results by semester (through Spring 2020) are provided in Table C below, with statistically significant results highlighted.

Table C: Student Learning Outcomes by Semester

Semester	Spring 2017		Fall 2017		Spring 2018		Fall 2018		Spring 2019		Fall 2019		Spring 2020	
Problem-Solving	**Pre**	**Post**	**Pre**	**Post**	**Pre**	**Post**	**Pre**	**Post**	**Pre**	**Post**	**Pre**	**Post**	**Pre**	**Post**
A. Defines problem with situational awareness	2.57	2.46	2.28	2.23	2.18	2.11	2.52	2.60	2.69	2.74	2.76	2.81	2.13	2.22
B. Identifies and derives solutions	2.54	2.43	2.2	2.45 P<.045	2.12	2.16	2.45	2.64 P=.06	2.79	2.81	2.82	2.74	2.19	2.24
Applies knowledge to Real-World Contexts	**Pre**	**Post**	**Pre**	**Post**	**Pre**	**Post**	**Pre**	**Post**	**Pre**	**Post**	**Pre**	**Post**	**Pre**	**Post**
C. Uses academic knowledge in real-world contexts	2.26	2.33	2.05	2.25	1.91	2.05	2.34	2.53	2.57	2.62	2.59	2.64	2.10	2.33 P<.0231
D. Analyzes and evaluates solution	2.41	2.41	2.02	2.17	1.89	1.95	2.34	2.46	2.76	2.76	2.66	2.70	2.0	2.32 P<.0094
E. Connects academics to real-world contexts	1.84	2.34 P<0.05	1.8	2.02	1.55	1.85 P<0043	2.11	2.45 P<.0024	2.62	2.62	2.22	2.49	1.5	2.22 P<.0001

Although the aggregated results do not indicate the achievement of "advanced" levels of performance (greater than 3) based on post-reflection scores, the majority of scores in the area of application/integration (QEP outcomes 2.1.1 and 2.1.2) increased from pre- to post-reflection. Further, statistically significant results were found across multiple semesters in students' ability to "connect academics to real-world contexts."

Of particular interest are the scores attained in the Spring 2020 semester of the QEP. Despite the challenges presented by transitioning to emergency remote instruction due to COVID-19, statistically significant growth was observed in each area related to outcomes 2.1.1 and 2.1.2 (rows C, D, and E in Table C). It is hypothesized that these results could be due to several factors. First, increased attention was given to those elements of the QEP during the 2019-20 year of implementation. Additionally, two of the four ELO courses were taught by the same instructor, who is actively engaged in disciplinary research related to problem-solving and the impact of socio-emotional learning skills on student learning outcomes. Although the number of students sampled was relatively small, it should be noted that reflections from the students of one other Spring 2020 instructor also demonstrated statistically significant differences in two of the three "application" dimensions.

Indirect Student Learning Outcomes

In the Learning in Action QEP proposal, data related to senior students' problem-solving skills was drawn from the 2013 administration of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). In 2019, the NSSE was administered again. No demonstrable differences were found between students' (aggregated) perceptions of their problem-solving skills between 2013 and 2019. No demonstrable differences were found in senior students' participation in the types of ELOs highlighted in Learning in Action courses, with one exception: work-integrated experiences (internships, clinical experiences, etc.). In 2013, 52% of seniors indicated they were in the process of completing or had completed a work-integrated experience. In 2019, that percentage increased to 63%.

In Spring 2018, data was collected to determine the extent to which undergraduate students understood what is meant by "experiential learning" and how familiar they perceived themselves as being with it. Efforts were made to obtain a sample reflecting all academic divisions serving undergraduate students. A total of 855 students completed the survey, with representation from all academic colleges. Over 50% of students surveyed were either very familiar or somewhat familiar with experiential learning, while 36.3% perceived themselves as not being familiar with it at all. This data suggested the need for greater emphasis within the colleges on student awareness of what experiential learning is and what forms it takes, with a focus on those areas of experiential learning highlighted within the undergraduate curriculum and co-curriculum at UA.

In Fall 2018, Spring 2019, Fall 2019, and Spring 2020, a fidelity survey was administered to students who had participated in ELOs associated with the Learning in Action QEP. The survey was designed to gather student perceptions about learning outcomes as well as the extent to which the best practices of experiential learning were operationalized in the courses in which they had been enrolled. In the aggregate, this data did not provide findings that allowed the institution to determine possible connections between student perceptions and pre- and post-reflection data. If further data is collected beyond the QEP, it may be useful to explore trends associated with individual courses taught by specific instructors.

Achievement of Outcomes

The primary outcomes of the Learning in Action QEP are addressed below:

- 1. Increase the number of experiential learning opportunities (ELOs) offered in each college that are certified as incorporating all six ELO best practices (intentionality, preparedness, regular monitoring & feedback, reflection, evaluation, and assessment).

Prior to the Learning in Action QEP, the institution had not undergone a process of determining the extent to which experiential learning courses exemplified the six best practices described above. Given that each Learning in Action fellow was provided with (a) professional development opportunities to use best practices in course design as they created or modified their courses, and (b) professional development that focused specifically on the six best practices and the use of a problem-solving model, the goal of increasing best-practice based ELOs in each college was achieved.

- 2. Improve students' ability to apply knowledge and skills in real-world problem solving through best-practice ELOs.

As discussed above, across most semesters of the Learning in Action QEP, the goal of improving students' ability to apply knowledge and skills in real-world problem solving through best-practice based ELOs was not achieved. However, students' high levels of interest in experiential learning, their self-perceptions of increased ability to address real-world problems and apply their learning to settings outside the classroom, and the Spring 2020 results in the area of application/integration growth provide the institution with generative places to continue working on this goal beyond the QEP.

- 3. Increase the proportion of graduating seniors who report their educational preparation at UA to be excellent/optimal.

Based on the results of the National Survey of Student Engagement administered in 2013 and 2019, there was no demonstrable difference in students' self-reports of their educational

preparation. Therefore, this goal was not achieved. For context, only a percentage of the 1,701 students who participated in the QEP between 2015 and 2020 were likely asked to complete the 2019 NSSE, which was administered to samples of freshman and senior students.

Unanticipated Outcomes

An important unanticipated outcome stemmed from the realization early on that most instructors did not have focused opportunities to learn about and implement practices associated with high-quality course design. The fact that the QEP was able to address this need for the participating fellows has yielded benefits extending beyond the QEP, as former fellows can now serve as resources for others within their departments, including faculty who are new to the institution.

Based on the narrowed scope of the QEP, it became possible to provide Learning in Action fellows with a professional development experience characterized by depth and a layering of opportunities through which to reflect on the experiential learning opportunities within their courses. Fellows participating in Learning in Action were able to contribute to the larger environment supporting student learning in several ways:

- Leadership in the area of adapting online and hybrid courses for experiential learning, through Learning in Action and through collaborative partnerships with other faculty development programs such as the Online Learning Innovation Scholars (College of Arts & Sciences, School of Social Work);
- Academic program modification to reflect an increased emphasis on both experiential and active learning (Capstone College of Nursing);
- New and sustained partnerships between academic programs, student support units, and community organizations (College of Arts & Sciences, College of Communication & Information Sciences, Career Center, Crossroads Cultural Center, Academic Integrity Initiatives, Capstone International Center, Teaching Hub in the College of Arts & Sciences);
- Iterative connections between instructional practices and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (College of Arts & Sciences, College of Education, College of Engineering, Capstone College of Nursing, UA System Scholars Institute); and
- Establishment of a pilot initiative extending the idea of Faculty Learning Communities into other areas of interest over a three-to-five-year period (beyond the Learning in Action QEP).

In addition, the Learning in Action QEP provided direct experiential learning opportunities for dozens of students in the College of Communication and Information Sciences through their involvement in The Capstone Agency, a student-run public relations firm serving local businesses and community partners. Over the lifespan of the QEP, The Capstone Agency facilitated communication and outreach about Learning in Action via social and digital media. These outreach activities included the creation of a blog highlighting the experiences of students who had completed ELO-based courses. In addition, Capstone Agency students provided videography services that allowed the work of Learning in Action fellows to be shared broadly with the campus community.

Even as a pilot, the Learning in Action QEP was an ambitious and multilayered project undertaken to positively impact the problem-solving skills of undergraduates and their ability to apply course-based learning to real-world contexts. The incorporation of pre- and post-reflections provided the opportunity to assess the extent to which the QEP achieved this goal. However, the use of these reflections also pointed to the unexpected realization that many

undergraduates were unfamiliar with the process of critically reflecting on their learning. Thus, the Learning in Action QEP has provided insight into a key area (student reflection) that has the potential to impact not only problem-solving skills and integrative learning, but areas such as writing, critical thinking, and ethical problem solving as well.

4. Reflection

The Learning in Action QEP has assisted the institution in highlighting or unearthing several important areas that impact student learning and the environment supporting student learning. These are articulated below.

1. There is a need to provide centralized support for instructors seeking professional development in the area of teaching and learning.
2. A focus on the ability of undergraduate students to critically reflect on their learning may yield multiple benefits.
3. Efforts to recruit demographically and disciplinarily diverse cohorts of faculty fellows must address a variety of factors in order to be successful.
4. Efforts to engage diverse students in experiential learning opportunities require intentionality at the course, program, department, and college level.
5. Experiential learning opportunities are greatly enhanced when they involve both academic and student support units.
6. The standardization of definitions of experiential learning across academic and student support units is a necessary precursor to the establishment of processes to "scale up" and recognize faculty and student participation in ELOs.
7. There are many untapped opportunities to develop further experiential learning courses; however, centralized resources to support logistical aspects of such courses would greatly decrease barriers to participation for instructors, regardless of their classification (tenure-track, clinical, full-time temporary instructor, etc.).
8. There is a high level of interest in providing graduate students with opportunities to develop experiential learning opportunities within courses for which they serve as graduate teaching assistants.