Collaborative Learning
The Quality Enhancement Plan for UAH

Our Quality Enhancement Plan aims to transform the educational and cultural landscape of The University of Alabama in Huntsville (UAH) by placing Collaborative Learning at the center of instruction. This change will increase student engagement in the classroom; provide valuable enhancements in creativity, cooperation, and inquiry-based learning; and meet the needs of future employers. Equally important, Collaborative Learning will connect students to each other and to UAH by means of academics, changing isolated students to collaborative learners, a change that we firmly believe will increase the chance of success for all UAH students.

We selected Collaborative Learning after a thorough process to understand why students do not succeed and leave UAH. Our research involved surveys, focus groups, and collaborative problem solving sessions from all relevant university constituencies. Our process has been a long and involved one. The result, based on feedback from faculty, staff, and students, and further reinforced by our baseline surveys, is a QEP that fits with UAH’s current aims and goals.

During a focus group with students, one student captured the essence of the problem by saying, “You can’t do UAH alone.” Through additional discussions with students, faculty, and academic support and student affairs professionals, the QEP committee affirmed that students frequently feel isolated and find it difficult to succeed in their classes where they do not know anyone. Being isolated often results in poor student learning and overall performance as well as poor persistence. The students told us, in essence, that we as a university need to help our students find ways to connect with each other and with faculty.

Our QEP on collaborative learning will help students make these connections. Collaborative learning at UAH entails UAH students and faculty working together to explore options and create solutions in pursuit of knowledge. Collaborative learning works because it
- Increases student engagement in the classroom.
- Enhances creativity, cooperation, inquiry-based learning, and understanding.
- Connects students to each other and to UAH through academics, changing isolated students to collaborative learners.

Indeed, Collaborative Learning, as defined in this document, entails student learning outcomes that tie directly to UAH’s mission to “educate individuals in leadership, innovation, critical thinking, civic responsibility and inspiring a passion for learning.” Collaborative Learning meets these high-level institutional goals because it will lead students to value perspectives and approaches that differ from their own; to grasp the critical role communication plays in sharing and understanding diverse perspectives; and to know the benefits of probing deeply into challenging issues and problems. Learning itself will improve as students learn from their peers in ways that augment traditional teaching, and they will develop the ability to collaborate, which is a skill valued by employers and society at large.

The Principles of Collaborative Learning are
1. **Egalitarian:** everyone contributes bringing different knowledge, perspectives, and skills to the collaboration.
2. **Discursive:** requires interaction and communication, exposing students to new ideas and creating connections.
3. **Inquiry:** encourages students to ask questions and to consider multiple approaches to problem solving.
Our plan for quality enhancement includes detailed definitions and principles of Collaborative Learning and a fully developed path to implement Collaborative Learning in the classroom. This plan includes the creation of an oversight committee Collaborative Learning Advisory Council (CLAC), a Collaborative Learning Center (CLC), and two positions, the CLC Director and CLC Coordinator, that will have responsibility for ensuring that our proposed implementation deadlines are met. This institutional structure will also ensure that we carefully assess our students' knowledge of Collaborative Learning principles, the extent to which Collaborative Learning improves learning across the campus, and the degree to which Collaborative Learning principles have been put into place across the curriculum and the University. Furthermore, the aims and goals of the QEP are reflected in specific Organizational Outcomes, which will ensure that we can assess the overall effectiveness of our 2016 Quality Enhancement Plan.

The Goals of the QEP are
1. Instruct students on the principles of Collaborative Learning.
2. Teach students how to collaborate through applications in their classes.
3. Encourage students to value and appreciate collaboration.
4. Improve student learning through Collaborative Learning.
5. Make Collaborative Learning a central feature of UAH’s educational aims and academic culture.

To monitor the achievement of the overarching goals of the QEP, we have defined several student learning outcomes and learning environment outcomes that must be achieved. A student learning outcome (SLO) in the context of the QEP is described as “a statement that describes what students will be able to do as a result of the implementation of the QEP” (SACSCOC Handbook, p. 44). In our Collaborative Learning initiative, we identify four dimensions to our SLOs: the knowledge, skills, abilities, and perspectives that students acquire and can demonstrate after they have completed Collaborative Learning courses. The SLOs expected to improve over the five year implementation of the QEP are:

- **SLO #1: Recognize**: UAH students know and can differentiate the principles of Collaborative Learning.
- **SLO #2: Apply**: UAH students collaborate effectively.
- **SLO #3: Value**: UAH students recognize the merit of Collaborative Learning.
- **SLO #4: Enhance**: UAH students having had Collaborative Learning courses will demonstrate evidence of better generalized learning.

The QEP also contains learning environment outcomes (LEOs) that indicate the degree to which the institution is allocating sufficient energy and resources to the QEP to meet the SLOs, and whether the CLC (Collaborative Learning Center) is implementing the QEP as planned. In other words, when combined with the assessment of the SLOs, assessment of these LEOs will ensure that the QEP is meeting its goals. The LEOs to be pursued are:

- **LEO #1**: The number of faculty and staff who complete the Collaborative Learning development program will increase annually.
- **LEO #2**: The number of courses across the curriculum at all levels of instruction that engage students in Collaborative Learning activities will increase annually.
- **LEO #3**: The number of student PASS leaders, student mentors, and tutors completing the Collaborative Learning development program will increase annually.
Collaborative Learning has already begun to generate excitement among faculty interested in learning the best practices of this exciting approach to teaching. Many faculty already utilize collaborative learning approaches in their classrooms and wish to enhance what they already do, while others are eager to learn new techniques for student engagement. We take this as a great sign that we have found a QEP topic that fits well with our University’s culture and needs and that will continue to grow with the University as it grows. We firmly believe that we have outlined a process that has sufficient assessment and feedback to achieve these goals. This assessment and feedback process is critical, since our success will depend upon a continuous analysis of the data that distinguishes what works well from what needs improvement.

The University of Alabama in Huntsville is optimistic that the implementation of Collaborative Learning will transform our educational culture, improve our students’ ability to think critically and work cooperatively, and create an academically centered community. If we are truly successful, Collaborative Learning will become a distinguishing feature of the UAH educational experience.