

Panther STEPS: Students in Transition Engaged and Preparing for Success

Clafin University

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Clafin University's Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP), Panther STEPS (Students in Transition Engaged and Preparing for Success) stems from its mission and its Strategic Plan. The plan was developed through a broad-based collaborative process undergirded by a thorough analysis of institutional data aligned with issues germane to higher education. In congruence with the institution's historic philosophy of assuring access and success to all students with potential, the mission promises to "...develop the skills and character needed for engaged citizenship and visionary and effective leadership" by providing students "with the essential foundation of a liberal arts education" that emphasizes "critical and analytic thinking" ...and "oral and written communication skills..." while the Strategic Plan establishes the mandate to enhance the first-year experience by "coordinating and integrating college wide activities."

A salient feature of the current higher education research landscape is the average first-time freshman's inability to undertake college-level work. This fact is corroborated by the University's institutional data, which found that the student's lack of preparation in the areas of English, Mathematics and Reading impacting their ability to master higher-level skills. This was negatively affecting the learning process and eroding retention and graduation rates. Thus, in order to address these issues, Clafin University has developed Panther STEPS, a comprehensive plan with the following learning outcomes: 1) to improve student higher level thinking skills via enhancement of gatekeeper courses; 2) to increase student preparedness via soft skills training and focus on Freshman Year experience; 3) to increase student engagement in service and community learning activities via the Freshman Year experience.

Specifically, Panther STEPS will create a learning community through a placement- assessment that will gauge the fundamental skills of first-time freshmen which will determine their individual educational plan. These students will be placed in regular or extended English 101 or Math 111 courses as warranted. The instruction in these courses will be supplemented with integrated activities in the Literacy Center, the Math Lab, and the Freshman College. The study cohort will also be placed in designated sections of Education (EDUC) 101 and 102, which are designed to engage students in co-curricular, service, and leadership development activities. These students will be supported by peer-mentors who have undergone appropriate training and will also be taught by instructors who have undergone professional development in relevant pedagogy. Year one of the plan will involve additional planning, recruitment of key personnel, and the implementation of pilot activities which will be evaluated and adjusted as necessary. Full implementation of Panther STEPS will begin in Year two.