

Flagler College Quality Enhancement Plan
Ignite: Building a Culture of Engaged Higher Learning Through First-Year Learning Communities

Executive Summary

Flagler College is a four year comprehensive liberal arts college that is currently undergoing significant change. The size of the student body, faculty, and staff has grown rapidly in recent years as the campus has expanded. As a consequence of this growth and the ongoing retirement of the founding generation of faculty and staff, Flagler is now at a turning point in its development. The College faces new challenges associated with sustaining a strong community and the continued improvement of student learning.

After a thorough consideration of possible topics and discussions with a wide range of campus constituencies, the QEP Topic Selection Committee selected student engagement in learning as the subject of Flagler's QEP. A broad array of data show that significant discrepancies exist between Flagler's stated mission of providing a supportive and challenging learning environment and the mission which Flagler actually enacts. Data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), institutional surveys, and retention studies demonstrate that the College is not providing a sufficiently challenging and supportive environment for students. Consequently, the overarching objective of Flagler's QEP is to bring the practiced mission into closer alignment with the mission Flagler proclaims.

Flagler's QEP proposes to focus on building a campus ethos that not only fosters student engagement but that is also clearly focused on the goals of cultivating the value of academic challenge, improving written and oral communication skills, promoting an integrated, interdisciplinary approach to learning, and fostering deep learning. We believe that the single most effective means of accomplishing these goals is through the establishment of first-year interdisciplinary learning communities based upon best practices. Such learning communities constitute what George Kuh calls a "high impact experience" that would have an immediate and lasting effect on student learning.

Flagler's QEP defines student learning as significant changes in students' knowledge, skills, values, and behaviors. The Flagler QEP stipulates seven learning outcomes for engagement and academic goals, and three institutional outcomes for faculty, staff, and administrators. Students are expected to demonstrate academic engagement with faculty, active and collaborative learning skills, and campus and community participation, in addition to providing evidence of valuing academic challenge, improving communication skills, employing an integrated approach to learning, and developing deep thinking skills. With respect to institutional outcomes, verifiable institutional changes are required, such as the growth of "communities of practice" among members of the faculty.

The learning communities' initiative was implemented in the fall of 2008 with two pilot learning communities of three "linked" courses each. They were followed in the spring of 2009 with two additional learning communities of two "linked" courses each for the same group of students. In the second, third, fourth, and fifth years, two to four new learning communities will be added for first-year students for each semester of each academic year. By the fifth year, most first-year students will be enrolled in learning communities, and learning communities will have become integral to Flagler culture.

Contact: Rachel Cremona, Assistant Professor of Political Science and Director of Learning Communities, rcremona@flagler.edu