

Student Engagement in Active Learning (SEAL) Northern Kentucky University's Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP)

The SEAL Project – The primary goal of the Northern Kentucky University quality enhancement plan – “Student Engagement in Active Learning” – is to enhance the ability of students to think critically through the use of active learning strategies. The university initially will imbed discipline-appropriate, active learning strategies in 12 courses in its new General Education program. The active learning strategies will be linked to established QEP rubrics that will assess improvement in the following critical thinking competencies:

- 1) Students effectively gather material relating to a focused topic, using a variety of tools, sources and search strategies;
- 2) Students identify, interpret, and evaluate assumptions, evidence, conclusions, and theories;
- 3) Students develop evidence-based arguments; and
- 4) Students explore the implications and consequences of their initial conclusions and use them to generate new ideas, questions or directions for further inquiry.

Northern Kentucky University is a 15,000-student metropolitan university, serving a largely local student population. SEAL is an outgrowth of a two-year self-study that involved hundreds of faculty, staff and students. The self-examination included a series of surveys and focus group interviews in addition to examination of university data on engagement and retention, standardized assessments such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), and review of research on effective strategies to foster deep learning. The findings revealed a clear need to better connect students to course content, co-curricular and extra curricular activities to help them understand the relevance to their academic, professional and personal development.

Consistent with Northern's mission as a learner-centered university with an emphasis on active learning, NKU faculty identified enhancement of critical thinking as the focal point for the QEP. Research supports the notion that higher order critical thinking skills (reflection, synthesis and application) increase retention of important concepts, and help students make intellectual connections throughout their academic careers. Also, critical thinking ability is a dimension of success in every academic discipline and is everywhere apparent in the core competencies within General Education. Active learning is one method of enhancing critical thinking skills across subject matters and fostering deeper involvement in and ownership for achieving educational goals.

Assessment Plan – University faculty developed SEAL in parallel with a new General Education program, so the critical thinking competencies in each align tightly. The active learning strategies that enhance critical thinking will be incorporated in the measurement of outcomes in General Education. The General Education Needs Assessment and Analytics Team will assess SEAL outcomes using the critical thinking rubrics created for the QEP. They also will measure improvement over time with the aid of the ACT Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP) test – the university's Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA) instrument – and NSSE results. The timing of these two measures will coincide with a schedule created by the Kentucky Council for Postsecondary Education for assessment of the commonwealth's public institutions.

SEAL will provide a model for measureable long-term improvement in critical thinking and student engagement that may be adopted by all campus units. It will encourage development of capstone experiences that will build upon the critical thinking outcomes from discipline-specific perspectives. Finally, SEAL will contribute to the revitalization of the General Education core and immerse students in learning in ways that more aptly prepare them for work and life after college, and better prepare them to become productive citizens and lifelong learners.

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