

Make It RREAL!

Implementing Problem-Based Learning Across the Curriculum

Palo Alto College San Antonio, Texas

Palo Alto College is a federally designated Hispanic-Serving Institution of approximately 9,000 students located on the southside of San Antonio, an area that for generations has been educationally underserved. The student population of this urban community college is economically disadvantaged, largely first generation in college, and predominantly female.

Early in the QEP journey, responses from Palo Alto College faculty, staff, students, and administrators consistently indicated an overwhelming need to enhance students' critical thinking skills and a genuine desire to create more interactive classroom environments. Through intense discussion, members of the campus community identified the institution's overarching QEP goal as *improving students' critical thinking through active learning experiences that incorporate relevance, reflection and engagement.*

The college captured this focus by adopting "**Make it RREAL!**" as its official QEP slogan. **RREAL** is an acronym for "**R**elevance + **R**election + **E**ngagement = **A**ctive **L**earning." Problem-based learning (PBL) was selected as the strategy to operationalize active learning because of its demonstrated capacity to re-energize the classroom dynamic and to provide students with the critical thinking skills needed to succeed in college and in the world beyond college.

Implementation of the QEP will occur over the next four years. Each spring, beginning in 2012, a cohort of 12-14 faculty will be selected from across the college in arts, sciences, and career and technical education. A special emphasis will be placed on recruiting faculty in STEM disciplines (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). Cohort members will attend a summer institute on problem-based learning to facilitate curriculum design and then implement PBL in courses they offer the following fall and spring. Cohort faculty will participate in monthly teaching circles, on-site and off-site professional development, and mentoring throughout the year-long experience.

Assessment of the effectiveness of the QEP to improve students' critical thinking skills will be measured both directly and indirectly. Direct measures are the Critical Thinking Assessment Test (CAT) and the college's General Education Assessment Rubric for Critical Thinking. Indirect measures are student and faculty focus groups and college-wide student success data.

The ultimate goal of the QEP is to enhance students' critical thinking skills through the implementation of PBL pedagogy across the curriculum. Palo Alto College is fortunate to be the recipient of a 2011 Title V/HSI STEM Grant that will help support the institution's QEP efforts in the critical areas of science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

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