

Engaged Communities: **Engaging Entering Students through Learning Communities**

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Executive Summary

Students often are unaware of the heightened expectations at the university level, especially at a technologically focused university such as Southern Polytechnic State University. We hypothesize that this is one factor causing retention and graduation rates to be lower than might be predicted.

Our hypothesis is that participation with a cohort in a general orientation course, a major-specific orientation course, and a selected general education course will improve the success of students during their time at SPSU. This hypothesis is supported by the research of others, as described in the full proposal. We present, as our Quality Enhancement Plan, “*Engaged Communities: Engaging Entering Students through Learning Communities.*”

The goal of the Quality Enhancement Plan is to improve student outcomes and provide a stronger safety net to ensure student success. We propose to accomplish this by forming cohorts of students with like interests, as indicated by the students’ choices of majors. We hypothesize that these students will form learning communities, with the result that their success in college will be enhanced as measured by specific learning outcomes.

We propose to form cohorts by scheduling students in blocks consisting of a discipline-specific orientation course, a general orientation course, and one general education course. Thus, students in the experimental group will be in contact with each other in three classes over a 16-week semester.

The Quality Enhancement Plan focuses specifically on the courses directed toward entering and transfer students. Each student will register for a general orientation course and a department or school orientation in their expected major. They will also be encouraged to register for one of a few general education courses at the appropriate level, for example, ENGL 1101 for entering first-year students. Transfer students will be encouraged to register for specific sections of STS 2400: Science, Technology, and Society. This course was chosen because few transfer students will have fulfilled this requirement, which is unique to SPSU.

Measurements of specific learning outcomes will be embedded in all three courses. Measurement results will be fed back to advisors during the term to provide for early intervention in case of problems. Measurements of learning outcomes will be embedded in selected general education courses prior to the roll-out of the *Engaged Communities* program to provide baseline data through the use of existing course assessment mechanisms.

Engaged Communities is supported by a project director who is also a member of the teaching faculty and a five-year budget of \$868,700.