



Lobo Stars: Enhancing Academic Learning through Student Engagement

Sul Ross State University
Alpine, Texas

Executive Summary

The Sul Ross State University quality enhancement plan, “**Lobo Stars: Enhancing Academic Learning through Student Engagement**,” concentrates on critical thinking as a learning goal. A broad-based committee composed of students, faculty, staff, and community representatives determined academic engagement as our most serious problem. Higher education research indicates that the opportunity to practice higher order thinking is the key to enhancing student engagement, improving their academic performance across the disciplines, and improving their chances of success in both life and career after graduation. Three strategies will encourage more critical thinking practice opportunities for students:

1) **Outdoor Learning.** Our physical and cultural location as a border-serving university in the scenic, low-population area of far West Texas provides an ideal outdoor laboratory to increase opportunities for hands-on, active learning in all academic disciplines as well as cooperative activities with student life and future employers. We will enhance our outdoor learning facilities, develop liaisons, and encourage regional connections to course work in order to increase student interest.

2) **Pilots of Engagement.** We believe our current faculty, staff, students, alumni, and community know our strengths and weaknesses best, so we encourage innovation through this broad pilot system. We will award small funding grants on a competitive basis. Promising ideas will be shared to encourage broader participation. Awards will be given on an annual basis.

3) **Faculty Support.** A new Faculty Support and Outdoor Learning Center will provide resources and incentives to inspire learning strategies, provide assistance with the logistics of hands-on outdoor activities, and monitor QEP assessment. The support center will organize interdisciplinary faculty seminars whose members will meet monthly for one-year to share success stories, help solve each others’ problems, and create a community of support leading to improved teamwork. Faculty syllabi will also be used to monitor increased awareness and incorporation of higher-order thinking in all courses.

Deans of the three academic schools (Agriculture and Natural Resource Sciences, Arts and Sciences, and Professional Studies) as well as the Dean of Student Life have pledged 10% participation each year from their respective areas. SRSU will use the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) to diagnose situations where student engagement can be improved, the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) to measure improvement in critical thinking, and in-house rubrics to measure critical thinking at course and program levels.

For more information contact: Donna Greene, Coordinator of the Center for Faculty Development and Outdoor Learning, dgreen@sulross.edu or Dr. Barbara Barney Nelson, Director, SRSU Quality Enhancement Plan bnelson@sulross.edu

Sul Ross State University Rio Grande College Quality Enhancement Plan

Sul Ross State University Rio Grande College has developed a Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP), *Putting Your Words to Work*, to enhance students' written and oral communication skills. The topic was chosen after a recursive process of analyzing assessment findings, gathering input from faculty and staff across the college, and researching best practices. The theme for the QEP evolved out of planning and assessment processes including consideration of the strategic plan, the institutional mission, and our participation in the Voluntary System of Accountability. The plan is consistent with RGC's strategy of enhancing learning and cultivating in students habits of mind and action that lead them to positions as effective leaders in their professions, valued members of their communities, and responsible citizens.

To enhance student learning through speaking and writing to learn, the RGC QEP committee designed a baseline standard in the form of rubrics for writing and oral presentations that all faculty and all students would use. The committee agreed that when faculty use the baseline rubrics, they would create a campus-wide awareness of RGC's commitment to excellence in communication. Strategies for implementing *Putting Your Words to Work* include the following:

1. having all faculty adopt the baseline rubrics for assigning and evaluating written and oral assignments,
2. providing faculty support in the form of faculty roundtable discussions, workshops and consulting by experts in the field, and a QEP website offering resources and a faculty discussion board,
3. measuring and modifying progress through multiple forms of external and internal assessment.

Assessment research and experience guide the RGC QEP Committee's plans for different kinds of assessment, both quantitative and qualitative. As the QEP is phased in, "implementation assessment" will be conducted to address how effectively the program is helping RGC students improve communication. The committee will continue to conduct needs based assessment of QEP strategies including faculty support, rubric use, and QEP intervention, assessment, and modification. The assessment plan has identified multiple means of assessment or data collection, a timeline for assessing outcomes, when in the process assessments will occur, how and when results will be analyzed, discussed, documented, and shared, how decisions or actions will be made and documented; and how and when the impact or improvements resulting from the decisions will be evaluated and monitored.

The QEP outcomes assessment plan should create an environment of concern and engagement that encourages students to commit to their own learning. Many measures are classroom based and the QEP committee is working on refining and improving how those measures are incorporated into outcomes assessment. The QEP assessment plan also aims to help increase RGC faculty members' reflective participation in the learning paradigm.

The QEP is designed to ensure that RGC achieve its mission and its strategic plan. The QEP is directed by a QEP Coordinator, an Advisory Committee, and an Assessment Committee, and RGC has committed an annual budget of 60,000 (with increases reflecting inflation) by 2018.