

QEP Title: Academic Achievement through Community Engagement (A⁺CE): Prepare students to think critically about community issues

Institution: University of Houston-Downtown

QEP Director: Poonam Gulati Salhotra, PhD; gulatip@uhd.edu

The University of Houston-Downtown's Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP), Academic Achievement through Community Engagement, A⁺CE, was implemented in fall 2016. A⁺CE is a curricular initiative to develop critical thinkers by embedding strategies for improving critical thinking through community engagement within selected lower-division courses, including online classes and many Core Curriculum courses. With its focus on critical thinking, the initiative responds to internal UHD data on areas of student academic performance needing improvement, an internal faculty survey on general education competencies, national surveys on employer needs, and the Texas Core Curriculum learning outcomes. The initiative also allows UHD to capitalize on its strength in Community Engagement in order to help students develop crucial academic skills.

A⁺CE highlights UHD's mission to provide students with "strong academic and career preparation" and to "address the needs and advance the development of the region." The community-engagement context demonstrates to students that the University honors the communities of which they are a part and provides them with educational skills to improve their own lives as well as those of others in their communities. The A⁺CE Quality Enhancement Plan articulates the commitment to prepare UHD students with the critical analysis tools required not only for their academic success, but also for their meaningful participation as citizens of their home communities and of the larger global society.

The A⁺CE initiative includes the following components:

- **A⁺CE-designated courses.** Select 1000- and 2000- level courses are open to students in their first or second year. These courses feature one of two A⁺CE Student Learning Outcomes, and a corresponding Signature Assignment.
 - **A⁺CE SLO 1.** Students will be able to analyze community issues with respect to different perspectives, theories, or solutions.
 - **A⁺CE SLO 2.** Students will be able to identify or design creative strategies to address an aspect of a community issue.
- **Faculty Development and Support.** A number of faculty development activities and resources are being provided to help faculty integrate effective strategies for teaching critical thinking and to design effective Signature Assignments.
- **Assessment and Evaluation.** Direct assessment measurement strategies will include assessment of the embedded Signature Assignments as well as results from the Collegiate Learning Assessment Plus (CLA+). Indirect assessment measurement strategies include student responses to select questions on the IDEA Student Ratings Instrument for each A⁺CE-designated course and data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE).

Engaged Scholar Digital Badge. At the end of two years, any student who has completed four A⁺CE-designated courses with high grades while maintaining the required GPA will get the "Engaged Scholar" digital badge on her Comprehensive Student Record expanded transcript.

The program is being administered out of the Provost's Office by the A⁺CE Faculty Director, with the assistance of the A⁺CE Assistant Director, the A⁺CE Faculty Champions in all colleges, the A⁺CE Advisory Committee, and the A⁺CE Implementation Committee. These two committees are comprised of the appropriate stakeholders, including faculty, staff, students, and community members. In addition, various aspects of the initiative are supported by the Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning (CCESL) and the Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence (CTLE).