

BUILDING GATEWAYS: DISCIPLINARY DISCOVERY AND CROSS-DISCIPLINARY INSIGHTS

Duke University

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Executive Summary

Duke students pursue their educational goals within a university focused on scholarship. Our institutional vision – as demonstrated throughout our history as a research-intensive university and as articulated in our most recent strategic plan – is that scholarship and education should be mutually reinforcing. Our academic disciplines should shape the intellectual paths taken by our students, while our educational mission should improve the clarity of our scholarship. At Duke, there have been major strides in engaging students in scholarship through co-curricular activities like mentored research and short courses; indeed, such programs were the primary focus of our previous quality enhancement plan (QEP). Yet, Duke can do much more. In examining the breadth of the undergraduate experience, we recognized an opportunity for embedding disciplinary scholarship/thinking into students' early classroom experiences, not simply something pursued independently of classes and only late in their Duke careers.

This QEP describes an institution-wide commitment toward improving the Duke undergraduate experience by investing in our gateway courses. We use "gateway" to describe courses that provide students with their first introduction to an academic discipline, traditionally by providing a survey of its intellectual theory, an introduction to its terminology and methods, and/or training in skills relevant to its practice. Often, a gateway course is one of the largest courses offered by a department, attracting not only students who will pursue further courses in that major but also students who will only take that one course within the discipline. Gateway courses thus present an extraordinarily high-leverage opportunity for shaping educational outcomes for large and diverse sets of students relatively early in their Duke careers – while also providing fertile ground for faculty-driven experimentation in pedagogical methods. Simply put, an outstanding gateway course has spillover effects for an entire academic major. The importance of these courses for our educational goals has shaped much of Duke's curricular discussions over the past several years, and now sparks the programs outlined in this QEP.

In the following sections, we describe the outcome of an extended, faculty-led process for systematic improvement of gateway courses within our undergraduate programs. That process did not begin with the drafting of this QEP. Instead, it follows from recent curricular discussions and pilot programs within both Arts and Sciences and Engineering (Section II). Pervading those discussions – and the more focused work that generated this QEP – has been a sense that our gateway courses should shift from the traditional model of requiring knowledge acquisition to a new model that encourages knowledge construction, an idea at the core of influential theories of learning (Section III). We codify our expectations for gateway courses within three overarching goals (Section IV) that will guide the development and revision of these courses over the coming years. Importantly, while responsibility for the content and structure of our gateway courses will remain at the department/program level (and thus stay within the province of our faculty), this QEP will support school- and institution-wide efforts for assessment and dissemination, so that best practices can be implemented flexibly and broadly (Sections V-VII). To this end, Duke has committed substantial resources specifically toward these gateway courses – both to spark faculty experimentation and to ensure we learn from those experiments (Section VIII).

Through this QEP, we seek to develop an institutional culture around improving our gateway courses, assessing the effects of any changes upon student and program outcomes, and disseminating successful practices throughout Duke. Successful pursuit of these goals would be transformative for the Duke undergraduate experience.