Call for Quality Enhancement Plan Concept Papers

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Topic or Theme:
Building Major and Career Confidence (BMAC)

QEP Proposal Summary: Focus Area: Exploration Leading to Major and Career Choice Confidence
The components of this QEP would be targeted to all students, but particularly those identified as having low confidence in their major or career choice, to navigate a purposeful academic course of action leading to certain outcomes related to student success. Specifically, the components would increase the levels of confidence that ECU students (from admission to graduation) have in their major and career path choices. Additionally, students would develop the ability to translate their educational experiences to multiple work and civic situations such that they are perceived to be among the most prepared to succeed as graduate students, excel as capable and adaptable workers, and enrich society as engaged, productive citizens.

It is envisioned that new and existing curriculum opportunities, innovative co-curricular and interdivisional programs, and existing personnel/offices would be increasingly coordinated and united in vision. Through delivery of consistent, coherent messaging and programming related to the concept of major and career confidence we can deliver the preparation described above and a sense of belonging and purpose critical to student persistence (O’Keeffe, 2013, Strayhorn, 2012).

The components of this QEP will provide student learning experiences consistent with those characteristics identified in the literature as effective (e.g. “involve encounters with challenging ideas or people; require students’ active engagement with the challenge; occur in supportive environments; encourage active, real-world learning; involve other people; and invite or promote reflection.” (Terenzini, 2020)), but the greater focus is on improving student success. It is widely accepted that measures of student success include job placement and graduate program acceptance rates and that one expectation of higher education is to prepare students for career entry, transition, and advancement. To excel in these measures of student success and meet constituent expectations, the components of this QEP would be likely to include:

- Establishing means for increased collaboration between Career Services and Academic Advising
- A new partnership with Admissions to reach students as early in the processes as possible
- A module(s) in COAD, courses specific to colleges/units/programs, and/or a new course(s). The Office of Student Transitions would need to be involved in training instructors. Faculty will learn how to guide
students in exploring majors and career options through the ECU Career Services Career Advocate Network training and/or Association of College and University Educators Career Guidance and Readiness course.

All components would be aimed at providing students with the most current information regarding career planning and facilitating responsible choices about their academic and career options. The importance of this QEP topic and benefit of implementation at ECU is supported by the data and evidence described below.

Bridging gaps across academic content, disciplinary knowledge, and career demands beginning in introductory courses encourage student planning throughout their careers. A guided exploration period exposes students to tools for preparing for a lifelong career or multiple careers. For example, a 2016 report “suggests students who change their major as late as senior year are more likely to graduate from college than students who settle on one the second they set foot on campus.” (Straumsheim, 2016).

A survey of students found that “college students, especially those in Generation Z, struggle to pick a major, which increases the time and cost associated with obtaining a degree. Many incoming students are not confident in their career path and almost two-thirds of students feel overwhelmed by the process of selecting a major. The result can be that students change their majors without understanding the ramifications, take unnecessary courses and delay their expected graduation, sometimes by multiple semesters.” (Ellucian, 2019)

In addition to the long-term need for workforce readiness skills development previously identified by McClenney and Dare (2013), Ehiyazaryan and Barraclough (2009), the National Association of Colleges and Employers found significant differences in how employers and graduating seniors rated graduates’ competencies such as professionalism/work ethic, oral/written communications, and leadership as students considered themselves much more proficient than did employers. Additionally, phenomena such as the COVID19 pandemic and rapid pivots in technology implementation in the workplace are producing dramatic changes in career options for students. It is more important than ever that students develop effective decision-making approaches early in their academic experiences. (College Pulse, 2020)

We know that college graduates who enter the labor force during a recession, get into lower-paying jobs, and that carries forward for much of their lifelong working careers. It is imperative that ECU increase the focus on workforce readiness to improve the employment outcomes of our graduates. Additionally, we know that the average number of jobs in a lifetime is now 12 to 15 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics January 2020) and that our graduates need to further develop their workforce readiness skills. National and regional surveys conducted by educational and business organizations continually identify these soft skills as attributes associated with competitive applicants (Berrett 2013; "The Role" 2012; "Raising" 2010).

Improving support for student major and career decision making is important to reducing the number of students leaving ECU before graduation. 3638 first time ECU students enrolled in 2016, to date 743 have left the University, 20.4%. While this is consistent with national retention of students at 4-year public institutions, this rate of attrition is unacceptable. In addition to students not graduating, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, just 41% of first-time full-time college students earn a bachelor’s degree in four years, and only 59% earn a bachelor’s in six years. Assisting students with major and career decision making will reduce the time to graduation as well as improve retention.

This new initiative will not expand upon the existing QEP but will relate to it and utilize some of the existing programs and services. Specifically, the attention to inclusiveness, sensitivity to existing efforts in academic units, support for first-generation students, and providing need-based financial aid.

The mechanisms that will be used to measure the success of the QEP would include the establishment of a baseline and improvement therefrom (from admission to first year, from first year to second year) in the level
of confidence in major and career choice (utilizing existing, valid instruments), a decrease in number of times a student changes majors, a reduction in “excess” credit hours at graduation, retention and increase in the proportion of first-time, full-time freshmen who graduate with a bachelor’s degree. Furthermore, an increase in student satisfaction based on responses to the National Survey of Student Engagement, specifically the areas of “Acquiring job or work-related knowledge and skills” and the “Satisfaction with ECU” rating. Additionally, measures that indicate more effective advising and counseling from both the student and advisor perspectives will be used to determine success.

In order to develop broad-based support for this QEP, presentations will be made to the SGA, academic advisers throughout the University, to the Faculty Senate, and to the University Student Success Council. Delivering Career Service’s Career Advocate Network training and incorporating it into the Faculty Symposium theme will also increase faculty and staff support.

This QEP relates to the ECU Mission as elaborated on in the “Commitments” contained in the ECU Strategic Plan (“Maximizing Student Success,” https://strategicplan.ecu.edu/our-commitments/). Specifically, it aims to improve retention and graduation rates, support the transition of “key student populations,” and promotes experiential learning (including but not limited to internships, research, co-ops, service learning and study abroad). Clear and consistent guidance makes ECU’s resources more accessible to all.

Expertise and interest in this topic exist in the academic departments, academic advising units and Career Services. Research has been conducted on major and career confidence, retention, 4- and 6-year graduation rates and factors affecting graduation, competencies, career readiness, career self-efficacy and employability.

RESOURCES


Ellucian, October 2019: New Survey: Student Confusion Selecting Majors Increases Higher Education Cost and Time to Earn Degree

NACE SPOTLIGHT, ARE COLLEGE GRADUATES “CAREER READY”? February 19, 2018 | By NACE Staff. www.naceweb.org/career-readiness/competencies/are-college-graduates-career-ready/

O’Keeffe, Strayhorn, December 2013: A sense of belonging: Improving student retention
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/319523471_A_sense_of_belonging_Improving_student_retention

Straumsheim, August 2016: Decision Time


Terenzini, July 29, 2020: Rethinking Effective Student Learning Experiences
University Business, October 23, 2019: Survey finds most students change majors at least once.  
Survey finds most students change majors at least once | (universitybusiness.com)