LEARNING IN ACTION:
Developing Real-World Problem Solvers through High Quality Experiential Learning

FAQs

What is LEARNING IN ACTION?
- 5-year quality enhancement plan (QEP) that focuses on enhancing students’ abilities to solve “real-world” problems related to their disciplines through their involvement in high quality experiential learning opportunities
- Provides faculty and staff development and support for offering experiential learning opportunities that meet recognized standards
- Will result in more and higher quality experiential learning opportunities for students
- Will measure impact of the high quality opportunities on students’ problem solving skills

Why is UA doing this?
- A QEP is a requirement of UA’s institutional accrediting agency, SACSCOC
- UA faculty, staff, and students suggested topics and planned the LEARNING IN ACTION project

How did UA choose experiential learning?
- A representative committee of faculty, staff, students, and administrators from across campus solicited ideas from everyone on campus through a GREAT IDEAS campaign
- The committee presented the best ideas for enhancing student learning to the Deans & VPs Council for final ranking
- President and Provost presented the highest ranking theme: experiential learning

What is experiential learning?
- Another committee of faculty, staff, students, and administrators defined it as a process whereby
  - Learners participate in activities that enable them to apply what they are learning in the classroom to real-world situations
  - Instructors purposefully engage students by allowing them to solve problems, make discoveries, and experiment with knowledge
- Basically, it involves giving a student hands-on experience with situations that are complex and require problem solving (e.g., co-op, internship, creative activity, research, leadership development)

Experiential learning produces lots of good outcomes. Why focus on problem solving skills?
- Many employers, including some of our own, tell us that they need employees who know how to handle ambiguity and other difficulties found in every career
  - They need people who can initiate an analysis of the situation, identify possible solutions, and be willing to try a solution that may not work
- Literature suggests that the best way for students to learn how to solve problems is to give them problems to solve—problems that are complex and require discipline knowledge and skills

What are the goals of the LEARNING IN ACTION project?
- To increase the number of experiential learning opportunities offered in each college/division that are certified as incorporating all best practices (note: some already do so—they will receive recognition)
- To improve the students’ ability to apply knowledge and skills in real-world problem-solving through experiential learning opportunities that utilize best practices
- To increase the proportion of graduating seniors who report their educational preparation at UA to be excellent/optimal

What will the LEARNING IN ACTION project involve?
- Mostly, faculty/staff development: Workshops and webinars; Seminars; Professional learning communities; Grants—lots of them; Annual showcase; plenty of opportunities to get involved
- Instructors will include two types of assignments: reflection papers and “product”
  - Product can be physical (e.g., paper, performance, presentation) OR temporal (e.g., clinical setting, study abroad) – must be able to evaluate students’ problem solving skills
  - We will provide instructions for reflection papers and rubric for evaluating product (another group will evaluate reflections)
- Will measure the level of students’ problem solving skills before and after high quality experience
- And, compare results with problem solving skills of students who did not participate
- End of five years: Know impact of high quality experiential learning opportunities on students’ problem solving skills
Definitions of Key Terms for the QEP:

- **Experiential Learning Opportunity (ELO).** An ELO is operationally defined here as an in-depth, typically semester long, field experience related to one’s academic program of study (i.e., practicum, internship, co-op, clinical, fieldwork, research apprenticeship, student teaching, public art exhibition or arts performance, etc.) that engages the student in the application of classroom learning to real-world problem solving under the supervision of an experienced practitioner with structured opportunities for learning from that experience.

Note that although some learning experiences have ELO qualities, the focus of this QEP will be limited to those experiential learning opportunities that are structured as certified best practices ELOs. Also, note that although field experiences are typically outside the classroom, they may also occur both in and outside the classroom (e.g., creating advertising campaigns for community clients or art performances for the public).

- **ELO Best Practices.** As the literature suggests, ELOs that utilize best practices will: (1) be well-designed on-campus or off-campus experiences in real-world contexts that are aimed at engaging the student in the application of related academic knowledge and skills to the resolution of complex real-world problems; (2) provide orientation and training for the students regarding the real-world situation; (3) provide continuous monitoring, assessment, and feedback to students about their performance in the real-world context from supervising practitioners; (4) require the production of a work product that demonstrates the student’s real-world problem-solving achievement; (5) provide structured opportunities for the student to reflect regularly on what is being learned through the field experience and how it relates to their academic studies, and (6) incorporate procedures to evaluate the effectiveness of the ELO as a whole.

- **Real-World Context/Situation.** A socio-cultural context/situation that exemplifies relevant post-graduation settings, requires the application of discipline-related knowledge and skills, is perceived as authentic by those within the setting, and presents opportunities for problem-solving.

- **Work Product.** A work product is operationally defined as a physical product (e.g., presentation, research paper, case study, art performance, computer code) or temporal episode (e.g., on-going interactions with native speakers in an international setting, performance in an applied setting) that can be evaluated by more than one individual for (a) the extent to which a student has used academic knowledge in a real-world context at an advanced level, and (b) the extent to which a student has identified and derived solutions to real-world problems in ways that demonstrate advanced awareness of the complexities of the situation.

- **Certified Best Practices ELO (CBP-ELO).** A CBP-ELO is an existing or new ELO that has been reviewed and certified by the ELO Advisory Board as following and incorporating all ELO best practices in its structured and supervised real-world situation.

- **Certification Team.** A group of faculty and staff who represent each college/school/division and who have experience related to the topic of the QEP. The Board will evaluate existing and new ELOs for certification of best practices, among other duties.

- **Comparison Groups.** A comparison group is a student learning experience that does not incorporate ELO best practices. One comparison group will consist of students whose learning experiences include less than 50% of ELO best practices (i.e., in-class-only ELOs, labeled as Low-ELO Comparison Group). The other comparison group will consist of students whose learning experiences include less than 25% of ELO best practices (i.e., lecture classes, labeled as No-ELO Comparison Group). Only the direct measures of learning will be gathered for these control groups. Data for the comparison groups will be collected during the first year of the QEP (i.e., Fall 2015, Spring 2016).

- **Baseline Data.** Baseline data are data that were collected before the launch of the QEP. These data are from surveys and/or focus groups of students, faculty/staff, and employers that were administered within the past four years (e.g., NSSE, UA Graduating Senior Survey, and UA QEP Survey of faculty/staff).

- **Faculty/Staff Development Programs and Resources.** These include face-to-face workshops, online webinars, a resource-rich website, professional learning communities, an annual showcase highlighting the diversity of CBP-ELOs across campus, grants for the enhancement of existing ELOs and the development of new ELOs, and Faculty Fellows who will serve as mentors.