

A Moc's First Year

Designing a Comprehensive First Year Experience and Learning Community Model Serving all First-Time Full-Time Students

QUALITY ENHANCEMENT PLAN

University of Tennessee at Chattanooga
Chattanooga, Tennessee



Executive Summary

The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, home of the “Mocs” and our fighting mockingbird mascot, “Scrappy,” is a regional comprehensive university in southeastern Tennessee. Like other campuses, UTC’s administration has experimented with a range of student success initiatives over time including the development and implementation of First



Year Experience (FYE) courses, living learning community models, a freshman common read program, advising centers, an honors college, residential colleges, and Cohort 2025, a first-year academic cohort program. Each initiative has had a different level of success, with only advising developed and centralized so that it can scale and touch all students. This QEP will focus on a specific student success initiative: the development of campus-wide learning communities for all first-time, full-time (FTFT) undergraduates. In addition to increasing student success initiatives broadly, A Moc’s First Year will also address what the COVID pandemic has exacerbated, if not created: a terrific need for intentional community on the UTC campus. We believe *all* of UTC’s student success initiatives would be strengthened by a central, comprehensive, encompassing first-year experience that builds on the recent success of our residential colleges and strengthens the academic experiences of all FTFT undergraduates, residential or not. This QEP offers a way to bridge and connect these various initiatives, culminating in a centralized learning community model that will increase: interaction between new students and faculty; the community on campus overall; the connection of our new students to greater Chattanooga; and student success at UTC, particularly those metrics measuring student retention, academic success, and graduation rates. We understand that while it is difficult to isolate factors impacting graduation rates, it is still important to include them as a measure of student success. Graduation rates are one of a number of measures that, when reviewed together, provide a holistic view of student success.

A Moc’s First Year scales the current departmental and college-specific learning community efforts residing largely in our new residential colleges to meet the needs of FTFT UTC students, residential or commuting. The QEP aligns with the university’s mission which states that “the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga is a driving force for achieving excellence by actively engaging students, faculty, and staff, embracing diversity and inclusion, inspiring positive change and enriching and sustaining our community.” The 2021-2025 UTC Strategic Plan states that “UTC will transform the lives of our students and the futures of our region by increasing access to a distinctive model of education, grounded in the liberal arts and tied closely to workforce opportunities,” going on to indicate that “by 2025 we will . . . improve student performance” specifically by increasing the freshman fall-to-fall retention from 73% to 83% and increasing the six-year graduation rate from 53% to 63%. Under the goal to “define and

promote UTC's distinctive graduation experience," the plan states that we will "implement and expand *Cohort 2025* to include all first-year students." This QEP intends to do just that. The UTC 2021-2025 Strategic Plan also holds that we will "develop and launch a Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) that is aligned with this strategic plan, central to the university's educational experience, and focused on student success."

As part of A Moc's First Year, all incoming FTFT undergraduates will enroll in a 1-3 credit-hour FYE course; all of these courses will share a common course number (1250). Primarily full-time faculty will teach the 1250 courses that will either link students to a major or introduce them to the UTC academic experience while also introducing them to a major (i.e., either an "Introduction to Environmental Science at UTC" or "The Flora and Fauna of UTC," an experiential course that introduces students to both the campus's ecology and to the study of environmental science at UTC). As we note below, our existing FYE seminars, USTU 1250, currently use an extended orientation model that research indicates is less successful than seminars grounded in actual academic content. Each 1250 section will be linked to an introductory gateway content course (e.g., CHEM 1110); the combination of the two will be termed "a learning community." Faculty teaching both the 1250 FYE courses and the linked content courses will participate in an annual faculty development workshop in which they familiarize themselves with issues pertaining to FTFT students and campus resources those students will need. These faculty will also take time during the workshop to plan two out-of-class experiences for their learning communities: at least one social event that will take place on campus (e.g., a pool party at the UTC Aquatic Recreation Center) and another community-oriented event that introduces them to some aspect of Chattanooga (e.g., a trip to the Hunter Museum of American Art).

While similar initiatives have been attempted at UTC, they have not been fully institutionalized. A historical sketch of UTC's student success programs helps to clarify why.