

QEP proposal 17

Title and Summary

This section will contain a descriptive title and a short summary of your concept. A strong summary statement should contain only a couple of sentences but still leave readers with a good sense of your concept paper's central idea and impact.

COHORT 2025

When the incoming class of freshmen arrive at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga for fall semester 2021, they found a campus environment unlike any freshman class had found before. This fall's freshmen made up the inaugural class of "Cohort 2025," a sweeping new approach to building community through cohort groups of incoming students around their main interests, whether: academics, connections, or residential learning.

The Cohort 2025 project was so named to signify that the incoming freshman class will be the first to complete all four undergraduate years—by 2025—fully as members of cohort groups. There are three general categories for the Cohort 2025 program

1. Residential Learning Communities
2. Learning Communities (to include commuter students)
3. Connections Cohorts: communities built around shared interests in recreational, extracurricular or service activities.

While the initiative is intended to increase student retention and graduation, Chancellor Steve Angle says he also wants it to become part of what "defines a UTC experience." "In terms of a high-impact practice that works, there's a lot of data, nationally, to show that retention and graduation rates are higher for students who get more connected with the institution and other students," Chancellor Steve Angle says. "It is something that I've been focused on for a while." Chancellor Steve Angle announced the initiative during his September 2020 State of the University address: "Building on the model of our Honors college, we will expand programs that bring together groups of incoming students in cohort experiences. We have set an aggressive goal to offer every incoming student such an experience beginning fall 2021."

Rationale/Problem Statement/Growth Opportunity

Describe why this concept is important to UTC at this time, and how our students and the overall institutional will benefit from the proposed plan. You could include relevant data here (quantitative, qualitative, or experiential). Clearly demonstrate the connection to cohorts, collaborative learning, and diversity, as appropriate.

The UTC strategic Plan 2020-2025 outlined Student Experience First; we must address the student experience. Building on the model of our Honors College, we needed to expand programs that brought together groups of incoming students in cohort experiences. Based on UTC Strategic Plan – Cohort 2025 supports the incoming student cohort experience. Cohort 2015 one-year retention for RLCs was 85.9% compared to 68.5% for off-campus students and 74.1% for on-campus students. In addition, the GPA for RLC participants was 3.13, 2.25 off campus and 2.59 on-campus.

Expected Outcomes/Impact on Student Learning or the Learning Environment

Describe the impact of this concept on student learning and success and explain the expected outcomes in terms of student knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, or behaviors. How will UTC be fundamentally different and better when your concept QEP is implemented.

As stated before, the initiative is intended to increase student retention and graduation. However, we feel that each cohort type should be assessed individually as to its impact on retention and graduation. We also propose that each individual cohort experience be assessed along three domains:

1. Academic or Student Learning (e.g., EMSA based experiences will be assessed on the division's broad student learning objectives and its strategic initiatives)
2. Community (or inter-group relationships)
3. Engagement (connection with others either on or off campus)

Strategies/Actions to be implemented

Describe how this concept would be implemented to improve student learning or student success. What steps or actions are needed?

Learning Communities (academic cohorts)

This year, 40% of first year students participated in an academic cohort as a part of their major or residential experience. In an effort to expand this model and ensure students remain enrolled in the cohort courses, we will transition to having student's opt-in to an academic cohort via the AIQ process. This will allow for creating a link between the cohort classes at the CRN level, which will require students to remain enrolled in both courses.

Academic Departments can design learning communities with an embedded connection between the classes (shared learning outcomes, assignments, etc.), which has been done in some isolated cases but is not the overall model. There is also an opportunity for academic departments to expand and design learning communities around a broad set of majors (or college-based cohorts), but this will take additional support to build out this model.

Residential Learning Communities

This fall, Business launches its own residential college, and Jaclyn York, program director for Rollins Scholars and the College's career services office, anticipates an eventual LLC (Living Learning Community) for each major. "I envision at some point additional living, learning communities like 'Idea Central,' which is the entrepreneurship one, attached to every major that wants to have one," she says. "I can see a living-learning community around the SMILE (Student Managed Investment Learning Experience) Fund for those students who are like-minded in terms of portfolio management and investments. You see what works and you see what doesn't, and you must shift, change, and adapt. "York also teaches a first-year experience course for all freshmen that covers the range of majors and opportunities within the College, along with introducing them to business career culture and tools for success. "Currently as they come in, they take my class as freshmen and it's very much professional development," York says. "The first semester they learn how to interview through community members coming in and doing mock interviews and resume reviews with them. We've done a mentoring program this semester, and we usually do on-site tours of local companies the second semester, but COVID forced us to change that. "It's so much fun to see the students really connect, and I think that's only going to be stronger as we go forward, and they all have an opportunity to be a part of groups of students who are like-minded and take their course work seriously and living together on the same dorm hallway."

The Engineering College will offer 12 cohort groups this fall. One cohort is the residential community, six cohorts will be built around the College's engineering-specific first-year experience course, and the remaining five will be based on students taking the same three courses together as freshmen. Early success is the reason for expanding, says Dean Daniel Pack. "Retention has improved in students going from freshman to sophomore year, as well as their GPAs," Pack says. "I know we're working with a small group, so I don't know if it's statistically solid, but whether it is or not, we have seen that the ones who have gone through the program are doing better in retention and in their coursework. That is why we are expanding it, and that is why we are putting value into this experience for our freshmen. The plan for this fall is that all our freshmen students will be coming into some sort of cohort experience, whether it's residential or first-year experience course, or just taking three courses together." Pack says he hopes "there is a strength in numbers" in the cohorts, that they can knit together a community of student support for classmates who may struggle with challenging courses such as calculus, physics, inorganic chemistry. "Seeing that they aren't the only ones having difficulty and that they can help each other or get help as a group from teachers or administrators," Pack says, "that's a powerful resource and a network this cohort system provides."

College of Health, Education and Professional Studies (CHEPS) Dean Valerie Rutledge has lots of ideas as she prepares for students, faculty and courses in her college to get on board Cohort 2025 this fall, but she says one element is key for now. "Things like this succeed when there is some contagious enthusiasm around them, and that's what we're working to build—to get the faculty in place who are really excited about this, who have ideas about what they want to do," Rutledge says. "Maybe some who lived in a setting like or similar to this when they were in college, so they can take those ideas but also use feedback from students."

Connections Cohort

This year, we have 11 connections cohorts. There are already plans for additional cohorts that will be offered in the fall of 2022. In order for the Cohort 2025 goal of 100% participation, it will be crucial that more individual cohort-based experiences be created by academic and administrative departments across campus.

At the end of the fall 2021 semester, we will have a good idea of how many incoming freshmen were impacted by the initial Cohort 2025 offerings. Perhaps more importantly, we will learn which students were not impacted. This should inform the development of new experiences that focus on those communities who have traditionally been left out of cohort-based experiences (e.g., student veterans, adult students, and commuters).

Students

Identify which students will be impacted by this concept. For example: undergraduate students, graduate students, first-time full-time freshman, all first-year students, etc. Note: The QEP does not need to impact every student directly, but it does need to offer a significant enhancement to student learning at UTC.

It is the stated goal of the Cohort 2025 initiative to have all new freshman engage in at least one cohort 2025 experience.

Assessment

Describe how this concept would be implemented to improve student learning or student success. What steps or actions are needed?

This was largely addressed in an earlier section.

Resources Needed

Describe resources necessary to implement this concept successfully. A detailed budget is not required at this time, but if possible, include needed staff, physical space, software, etc.

We need to establish (and fund) a faculty partner/leader to work directly with the Department Heads and cohort faculty in enhancing/developing academic communities for future years. In a model similar to FYE, we could hire a “Faculty Director” through a paid stipend and course release(s) each term to lead the academic components of the program. There also will be a need to create a coordinator position that could handle the logistical elements of academic cohorts (and other cohort experiences).

We also need to establish at least a coordinator level position that can recruit, coordinate, and market connections cohort opportunities around campus. This person would also track the students involved with the cohorts and assess the success of the individual cohort experiences and the Connections cohort in aggregate.

Research/Best Practices Gathered to Date

Describe any research, data, or best practices that you have found thus far in thinking about your concept. Is your concept novel, based on another model, or based on your own research?

There is a significant amount of research that points to the efficacy of Learning and Residential Learning Communities. There is also a large body of research that points to the positive impact the participation in student activities and programs on student learning and retentions.