HIGHER LEARNING COMMISSION

FORM

Open Pathway Quality Initiative Proposal

Institutional Template

The enclosed Quality Initiative Proposal represents the work that the institution will undertake to fulfill the quality improvement requirements of the Open Pathway.

Signature of Institution's President or Chancellor *Date*

Printed/Typed Name and Title

University of Arkansas - Fort Smith

Name of Institution

Fort Smith, Arkansas

City and State

The institution completes the Quality Initiative Proposal by responding to the questions in each category of the template. Proposals should be no more than 4,500 words. The institution may choose to submit a brief implementation plan or supplemental charts or graphs as appendices to the template. The Quality Initiative Proposal will be accepted beginning September 1 of Year 5. It is due no later than June 1 of Year 7.

Submit the proposal as a PDF file to hlcommission.org/upload. Select "Pathways/Quality Initiative" from the list of submission options to ensure the institution's materials are sent to the correct HLC staff member. Submission file names should utilize the following format: QIProposal[InstitutionName][State].pdf (e.g., QIProposalNoNameUniversityMN.pdf). The file name must include the institution's name (or an identifiable portion thereof) and state.

Overview of the Quality Initiative

1. Provide a title and brief description of the Quality Initiative. Explain whether the initiative will begin and be completed during the Quality Initiative period or if it is part of work already in progress or will achieve a key milestone in the work of a longer initiative.

Planning for Student Success

University of Arkansas -- Fort Smith

Overview of the Quality Initiative

The University of Arkansas—Fort Smith has selected the Quality Initiative, Planning for Student Success, to fulfill the Quality Initiative component of the accreditation process through the Open Pathway set forth by the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. The Quality Initiative will focus on improving the persistence and retention of three specific sets of students at UAFS. Those groups are as follows: students in the "Lions Scholars" program, students who are on or moving toward academic probation, and students in their first year of higher education. UAFS aspires to directly impact and support these populations through strategic initiatives under the umbrella of the Quality Initiative. In addition, UAFS wishes to improve the quality and consistency of persistence and retention of these specific populations, as well as identify specific sub-set populations who may need targeted interventions.

As a regional comprehensive university, UAFS's commitment is *preparing students to succeed in an ever-changing global world while advancing economic development and quality of place*. For UAFS to achieve its mission, retaining students and guiding them to persist to graduation is essential. To support students in this endeavor, the Quality Initiative will assist the University in using resources wisely and efficiently in the best ways to achieve higher retention and persistence rates.

UAFS strives for continuous quality improvement, directly addressing areas of concern when they are identified. Focusing on the three identified populations meets a need within UAFS, addressing areas of concern identified by Academic Affairs; Student Affairs, including Faculty Senate; and Financial Affairs as priorities for improvement and growth within the institution. It also addresses an area of concern known to the state at large.

This initiative is aligned with UAFS's Strategic Plan. The Quality Initiative builds upon Strategic Plan objectives in Strategic Initiative 1, to increase the enrollment, retention, and graduation rates of UAFS students and Strategic Initiative 4, to strategically align resources to support university objectives. These institutional initiatives both provide foundational support and make imperative the improvement of retention and persistence in the three groups: Lions Scholars, first year students, and Academic Probation or Suspension students.

Sufficiency of the Initiative's Scope and Significance

2. Explain why the proposed initiative is relevant and significant for the institution.

The UAFS mission is that *UAFS prepares students to succeed in an ever-changing global world while advancing economic development and quality of place*. This mission is followed by a vision that *UAFS will be a national model for preparing students for workforce mobility through education and professional development while serving as the thought leader in the region for workforce training*.

This Quality Initiative aligns with UAFS's mission, relating directly to the component *prepare students to succeed*. Creating specific interventions for Lion scholars' students, first year

students, and academic probation or suspension students will increase student success and enhance the University's ability to prepare students to succeed.

The Quality Initiative both aligns with and is a result of UAFS's current Strategic Plan. Within the 2017-2022 Strategic Plan, one of the key objectives is to increase enrollment, retention, and graduation rates. As a subpart of that initiative, UAFS has set the goal of maximizing student retention and degree completion by evaluating and utilizing key and emerging retention strategies as well as attracting, retaining, and preparing students for success after graduation by providing dynamic learning environments.

3. Explain the intended impact of the initiative on the institution and its academic quality.

UAFS has identified three areas where we will work to improve during the timeline of the Quality Initiative and after its reporting period. This list is not intended to be exhaustive.

Lion Scholars: Project Summary

Lion Scholars: In the Spring 2020 semester, the university changed its admission criteria for students who would be admitted for Fall 2021. As an institution, we decided to identify a population of students who were most at risk, based on admissions criteria, recognizing that these students would need additional supports and resources to be successful.

The new admissions criteria created three populations of students – automatically admitted, automatically denied, and a third population of conditionally admitted students. These conditionally admitted students make up the population we now call Lion Scholars.

This is the criteria for Lion Scholars admission:

- Composite ACT score of 15-18, with developmental minimum in each section (13 Math, 15 Reading, 15 Writing) or ACCUPLACER equivalent; and
- Cumulative high school GPA of 2.25 to 3.0

As the program began, students were identified, sent a welcome letter introducing them to the Lion Scholars program, and given a Student Success Team, including a ROAR First-Year academic advisor, an academic coach, and a financial aid advisor. During their fall advising appointment, students were also provided a copy of Clifton Strengths for Students book and access code. They were invited to a welcome meeting, where they were told about the program, introduced to campus resources, and met with their success team member.

Throughout the fall semester, each success team member invited participants to one-on-one meetings, including coaching, advising, career coaching, and financial aid assistance. All interactions were optional, with the exception of academic advising, which is required for registration to subsequent terms. The Director of the ROAR First-Year Advising Center reviewed alerts submitted for Lion Scholars and created and assigned cases for follow up, using a higher level of concern for this population of at risk students.

We evaluated students and their participation throughout the fall semester, and these were some early observations:

- 120 students were admitted for Fall 2021; 72 enrolled. 55 of these students are PELL eligible and more than half are first generation, so in addition to being under prepared academically, they also have these characteristics that make them high risk.
- Of the 72 students enrolled for fall, 50 returned for spring – a 69.4% persistence rate.
- Of the 27 associate degree seeking students, 66.7% persisted to spring (15% higher than other associate degree seeking students not in the program)
- Of the 45-baccalaureate degree seeking students, 71.6% persisted (7% lower than other baccalaureate degree seeking students)
- While 38% of Lion Scholars are associate degree seeking, only 14% of all students are pursuing an associate degree.
- The average GPA of Lion Scholars for the fall semester was 2.09, which creates additional concern since we know historically on our campus that students with a first semester GPA under 2.5 are very likely to not return.
- Only 35 of the 72 students met with an academic coach, since program participation is optional

For Spring 2022, 25 enrolled, and our program offerings are similar this semester.

During review in December, advisors and other success team members expressed concern about their Lion Scholars, which leads us to want to continue a comprehensive review of the program and create communication, curricular and programmatic changes, and establishing a better focus on the students' first year in college. This review and implementation, as well as a review of the changes will be part of our Quality Initiative.

First Year Experience: Project Summary

Campus leadership has identified a need for a comprehensive, coordinated first year experience. Our institution has an array of existing activities, but these activities are not offered in a coordinated way and are not assessed to determine if they are meeting institutional goals. Though some academic programs require a first-year seminar course, those experiences are isolated and not campus-wide. As we study best practices and high impact activities, this is an area that needs improvement.

For the Quality Initiative, a committee will be formed to research campus data, review literature, and study best practices. This committee will create a report or white paper with recommendations for a comprehensive first year experience.

As an institution, it is important that we require students to do those things that are good for their success. It is not sufficient to only have curricular and co-curricluar support and resources available; those coordinated resources need to be built into the student experience.

To begin these conversations, these members of the Division of Student Success and Retention traveled to the First Year Experience Conference in Orlando, Florida in February 2022:

- Dr. Blake Johnson, Assistant Provost for Student Success and Retention
- Jennifer Holland, Executive Director for Student Retention
- Meagan Bowling-Fudge, Director of Student Information System Initiatives
- Susan Krafft, Director of Career Services

What We Learned

- The first year experience is not about information dissemination; it is about making a connection to the university, giving students a sense of belonging and giving students what they need when they need it.
- There is no one size fits all approach. Every campus is doing something unique and different, so it is important to determine what fits our campus best.
- The first year seminar course is only one part of a first year experience; there are so many conversations surrounding building a true first year experience, many of those involve what happens in the curriculum in first-year courses, as well as gatekeeper courses during students' first year.
- The first year experience cannot be a project of Student Affairs or Enrollment Management; it has to be a campus-wide commitment.
- A first year experience is a high impact practice and, if done well, will improve student success outcomes.

Through the quality initiative, we will create a FYE Task Force to thoroughly review and investigate FYE at UAFS, which would require a commitment of time and access to information. We will consult with other institutions, review literature and best practices, and have thorough conversations about what FYE will look like at UAFS. The goal will be to create a document as a study of our campus with recommendations about the first year experience for implementation.

At a minimum, through the Task Force, we hope to address:

- Communication: How do we deliver information to our entering students?
- Student progress: How are our students doing in their first year?
- DFWI rates in first-year classes
- Gateway courses

- Early alerts and other notifications: how to use resources to identify and track students needing academic assistance
- Student programming: What are key activities first year students should participate in?
- Support Teams: How do we establish relationships for our students?
- Advising
- Success Coach
- Financial Aid
- Housing
- Peer Mentors
- Faculty Development: How are we teaching faculty to support first year students and understand the unique needs of the first year?
- First Year Seminar Course: What would a first year seminar look like at UAFS?
- Identifying best practices in teaching that will help all faculty create effective experiences for first-year students.

Academic Probation Students: Project Summary

Campus leadership has identified a need for comprehensive, coordinated interventions for students on academic probation, academic suspension, and/or approaching academic probation. Our institution currently has little to no interventions in place for these students. Some academic programs require a contract to continue once placed on academic probation, however the contracts and the interventions are not coordinated campus-wide in a meaningful way. Additionally, there is a course identified as SAS 0201, Bridge to Success, class that students placed on academic suspension my either stop out for one semester or take the SAS 0201 course. This course is focused on study skills, however it has been identified that students on suspension may not need additional study skills, and that their reasons for being on suspension are not due to poor study skills.

As part of the Quality Initiative, a committee will be formed to review the processes and procedures in place and study best practices to make improvements. Specific focus will be given to the contracts put in place and to revise the SAS 0201 Bridge to Success class. This portion of the Initiative more than any other will be developed and began during the QI, rather than a part of continuing already established work.

At a minimum, we hope to address:

- SAS 0201, Bridge To success course: How do we enhance this course to be meaningful and relevant for our students?

- Academic Probation Students: How do we encourage students to return to school and support them to persist?
- Academic suspension Students: What interventions can we put in place to enable students to avoid Academic Probation?
- Student Progress: Can we identify a population of students by GPA or otherwise who may be likely to become academically challenged and therefore add interventions before a student is placed on Academic Probation or Suspension?

Clarity of the Initiative's Purpose

4. Describe the purposes and goals for the initiative.

Purpose statement: to significantly improve the persistence and retention of students in the Lion's Scholars, First Year, and Academic Suspension and Probation populations at UAFS.

The goals of this Quality Initiative:

1. Improve retention and persistence of Lion Scholars students.
2. Improve retention and persistence of First Year students.
3. Improve retention and persistence of Academic Probation and Academic Suspension status students.

5. Select up to three main topics that will be addressed by the initiative.

- ☐ Advising
- ☐ Assessment
- ☐ Civic Engagement
- ☐ Curriculum
- ☐ Diversity
- ☐ Engagement
- ☐ Faculty Development
- ☒ First-Year Programs
- ☐ General Education
- ☐ Leadership
- ☐ Learning Environment
- ☐ Online Learning
- ☒ Persistence and Completion
- ☐ Professional Development
- ☐ Program Development
- ☐ Program Evaluation
- ☐ Quality Improvement
- ☐ Retention
- ☐ Strategic Planning
- ☐ Student Learning
- ☒ Student Success
- ☐ Teaching/Pedagogy
- ☐ Underserved Populations
- ☐ Workforce
- ☐ Other:

6. Describe how the institution will evaluate progress, make adjustments and determine what has been accomplished.

Within each term during the Quality Initiative, the Quality Initiative Team (a group dedicated to steering the direction of the Quality Initiative components that may be transitioned into a standing committee for continuing process development and oversight) will measure process and accomplishments through the achievement of initiative milestones.

Lion Scholars:

- Increase persistence rates of Lion Scholars to be equivalent with the university averages. We will measure fall-to-spring persistence, fall to 2nd fall retention, and fall to 3rd fall persistence.
- Evaluate program participants annually with a survey. The goal is to increase the percentage of students who report feeling more connected to the university and more supported by the university because of participation in the Lion Scholars program.
- Continually monitor and improve the program. Evaluate program participants's success at the conclusion of each term. The Lion Scholars Task Force will meet each spring to incorporate programmatic and curricular changes.

First Year Experience:

The first year experience is not about information dissemination; it is about making a connection to the university, giving students a sense of belonging and giving students what they need when they need it.

- Determine what fits our campus best. There is no one size fits all approach. Every campus is doing something unique and different.
- Evaluate the place and scope of a FYE course. The first year seminar course is only one part of a first year experience; there are so many conversations surrounding building a true first year experience, many of those involve what happens in the curriculum in first-year courses, as well as gatekeeper courses during students' first year.
- Enroll the campus community for a campus-wide commitment. The first year experience cannot be a project of Student Affairs or Enrollment Management; it has to be a campus-wide commitment.
- Improve student success outcomes. A first year experience is a high impact practice and, if done well, will improve student success outcomes.

Academic Probation:

- Increase the number of students who pass SAS 0201
- Increase the number of students who persist past academic probation to completion
- Revise contracts used when students are placed upon probation
- Devise interventions for students nearing academic probation (GPA 2.5) and therefore decrease the number of students who are placed on academic probation
- Devise interventions for students on academic suspension
- Devise interventions for students on academic probation

- Reconstruct communications with students for to more encouraging routes to return and complete courses.
- Rename academic "probation" or "suspension" to more positive messaging

Changes will be made to the approach for Academic Probation students in the Summer 2022 semester and will be evaluated each semester. This evaluation will include quantitative measures of how many students achieve milestones and goals, as well as qualitative measures from students themselves to ensure we are addressing the needs of this set of students.

Adjustments will be made at the conclusion of each semester as the initiative progresses.

Evidence of Commitment to and Capacity for Accomplishing the Initiative

7. Describe the level of support for the initiative by internal or external stakeholders.

This Quality Initiative is a major component of an on-going and University-wide strategic direction to address our interventions for specific population. Senior leadership is committed to achieving concrete results to improve retention and persistence of these targeted populations. UAFS has committed to and invested in the strategic direction through preparatory actions and accomplishments that include:

- Migration to Navigate/EAB to track student success
- Attendance an participation at First Year Experience Conference in Orlando, Florida
- Budgeted, created, and hired new position of Assistant Provost for Student Success and Retention
- Preparation for performance-based funding model
- Budgeting and creating additional positions for academic advisors
- Budgeting and creating additional positions for academic coaches
- Allocation of faculty for SAS 0201 course
- Allocation of Navigate capability to track students in the initiative

8. Identify the groups and individuals that will lead or be directly involved in implementing the initiative.

UAFS has a robust policy and system of committees, task forces, and work groups. Each group is organized and charged with yearly goals at the beginning of the academic year. The Quality Initiative Team has organized the overall aspects of the initiative, from serving as thinking partners for initiative themes to proposing the initiative to various stakeholders on campus and seeking input. Those team members are as follows:

Aviance Taylor, Director of the Academic Success Center
Dr. Margaret Tanner, Associate Provost for Academic Affairs and Director of Graduate Studies
Jennifer Holland, Executive Director of Student Retention
Julie Mosley, Advising Center Director
Dr. Lisa Norris, Director of Academic Assessment and Accountability

The group studying the Lion Scholars is:

Dr. Blake Johnson, Associate Provost for Student Success sand Retention
Dr. Lee Kreibel, Vice Chancellor for Enrollment Management and Student Affairs
Julie Mosley, Advising Center Director
Karen Jeffers, Director of Financial Aid
Suan Kraft, Executive Director of Career Services
Dr. Georgia Hale, Provost

The group studying FYE is:

Dr. Bake Johnson, Assistant Provost for Student Success and Retention
Megan Bowling Fudge, Director of Student Information Systems
Susan Craft, Executive Director of Career Services
Jennifer Holland, Executive Director of Student Retention

The group studying Academic probation/suspension is:

Lisa Cady, College of Business and Industry Faculty
Rindy Crump, Director TRIO STEM
Jennifer Holland, Executive Director of Student Retention
Shana Turney, Assistant Director, ROAR First Year Advising Center
Dr. Lisa Norris, Director of Academic Assessment and Accountability
Jason Byrd, Director of Library Services
Sherry Burnett, Associate Registrar
Amber Bergthold, Advising Coordinator
Dr. Lindsy Lawrence, Department Chair, English
Dr. Margret Tanner, Associate Provost for Academic Affairs and Director of Graduate Studies

9. List the human, financial, technological and other resources that the institution has committed to this initiative.

As shown above in the previous section, substantial human resources are being directed into this initiative as part of their duties to the university.

This project has the support and commitment of senior leadership, including the Chancellor, and also the support of the faculty who voted upon the proposal in Faculty Senate.

Perhaps most illustrative of the commitment of the institution, An Assistant Provost for Student Success and Retention, Dr. Blake Johnson, was hired in 2021. He brings his experience of working in higher education since 2002, where he has worked to improve onboarding, retention, and

student success. Both the creation of the role, and Dr. Johnson's involvement personally and through his office, demonstrates the commitment of the institution through both human and financial resources to student success, retention, and persistence.

Dr. Margret Tanner works closely with Navigate, the platform used at UAFS to track student advising, academic alerts, and other important academic milestones for students. This platform will also be used to help track these populations, make notes, and serve a cohesive success team for each student in the three identified populations. This dedicated use of technology resources will help streamline tracking and sustainability of the quality initiative's work.

Since it is unlikely that new funding will be put toward this initiative, at least at the beginning stages or until the initiative evolves, human resources and technological resources are being reallocated for the effort.

Appropriateness of the Timeline for the Initiative

(The institution may include a brief implementation or action plan.)

10. Describe the primary activities of the initiative and timeline for implementing them.

UAFS is committed to continuous quality improvement. This Quality Initiative is an aspect of a larger institutional strategic direction that has already begun, will develop in intensity and scope with the Quality Initiative, and will continue into the future. However, for the reporting purposes of the HLC Quality Initiative, the initiative will begin in the summer semester of 2022 and continue for two academic years, ending with the close of the spring semester 2024.

Activities included in the timeline are as follows:

Summer 2022
Revise SAS 0201 course and evaluate after first cohort
Revise Orientation/Cub Camp for First year Students
Develop interventions for Academic Probation Students

Milestones:
SAS 0201 revisions implemented
Orientation revisions implemented.

Fall 2022
Deliver SAS 0201 with revisions from summer
Deliver interventions for students on Academic Probation
Research and Study by FYE Taskforce
Proposed changes to Lion Scholars program

Milestones:
Continued revisions to SAS 0201
Beginning study of changes for Academic Probation students

Continuing study and research for FYE
Defining changes to Lions Scholars

Spring 2023
Deliver SAS 0201 with revisions from Fall
Deliver interventions for students on Academic Probation and make comparisons to effectiveness
Review SAS 0201 success data
Lion Scholars changes proposed based on Fall cohort and opportunities and challenges

Milestones:
Data gathered on Academic Probation interventions
Continued revision to SAS 0201
Continued definition of goals and aims of Lion Scholars Program

Summer 2023
Review progress of all parts of QI for final

Fall 2023
Initial study and recommendations regarding FYE reviewed by QI Team

Spring 2024
Study and recommendations regarding FYE proposed
Final evaluation of Lion's Scholars changes
Study and recommendation regarding pre-Academic Probation/Suspension students proposed
Academic Probation student interventions finalized
Academic Suspension student interventions finalized

References

Leon, M. Guest-Scott, A. Fiorini, S. Rangazas, A. (2019) Claiming Their Education: The Impact of a Required Course for Academic Probation students with a Focus on Purpose and Motivation. Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, Vol. 19, No. 4 at 43-57.

Tinto, V. (2012) Completing College: Rethinking Institutional Action. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012.

University of Arkansas – Fort Smith Institutional Data is provided by the Office of Institutional - Research at The University of Arkansas – Fort Smith.

Institutional Contact for Quality Initiative Proposal

Include the name(s) of the primary contact(s) for the Quality Initiative.

Name and Title: Lisa-Marie Norris, Director of Academic Assessment and Accountablity

Phone: 479-788-7766 Email: lisa-marie.norris@uafs.edu