

Proposal Summary for Quality Initiative Project

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.

Our QIP embeds “environmental and institutional sustainability” within the educational framework of a cohort of incoming first-year students at EIU. These students will jointly take a number of general education courses centered on various projects to enhance and improve the environmental sustainability of the campus and the region. This project will be entirely new to our campus. We propose to create a stream of general-education courses into which students may opt, at the beginning of their studies, that provides an interdisciplinary framework for engaging with issues of sustainability. Rather than taking courses in “composition,” “public speaking,” and a host of discipline-specific “GenEd” courses as in the recent past, we propose a series of courses that integrate various competencies (e.g., writing and reading, quantitative reasoning, critical thinking, citizenship, speaking) through an interdisciplinary, “problem-based” and experiential approach. While we have yet to determine how many of the 40 credit hours (CH) that EIU (currently) requires in its general-education curriculum for graduation, we anticipate that a minimum of four courses (12 CH), and optimally around six (18 CH) would create a coherent educational stream for a sustainability cohort. Courses could include at least 3CH in each of Foundational classes (writing, speech, and/or mathematics), humanities, natural sciences, and behavior sciences.¹

Service learning is a best practice in higher education where opportunities are created to give students opportunities to implement classroom learning into hands-on practice outside the classroom. This not only deepens their learning, but also has a positive impact on the community. As part of the sustainability cohort, we suggest that students identifying and choosing sustainability projects and then working to implement these changes on campus or in the Charleston community will drive engaging learning, and furthermore produce a greater sense of community within the cohort itself. Students would be meeting the learning objectives of general education courses by recognizing and defining problems, understanding potential barriers, identifying solutions, and working collectively to make positive change.

Potential project ideas include the following: writing grants for modest initiatives on campus, such as installing water bottle filling stations, identifying green solutions for replacing the use of plastic straws in the dining halls, finding solar or other sustainable solutions for energy use across campus, creating and facilitating campus-wide educational programs and protocols for

¹ EIU has two natural science courses (PHY 1010G: Sustainable Energy; BIO 3333G: Sustainable Energy and the Environment) and one in behavioral science (HTM 2600G: Sustainable Communities) already approved in the general education program.

energy conservation, partnering with the city to have tree planting and native-flora pollinator programs, and/or support the Charleston Urban Butterfly Initiative project.

We intend to create a platform where the students have the opportunity to make change in matters they are passionate about, and while doing so, learn that each person has the power and the responsibility to make a positive community impact. The intent is that we will be creating graduates who have stronger understandings of what it is to be an engaged member of society.

Because Charleston was recently designated the “Butterfly Capital of Illinois,” we propose to call this initiative “House of Butterfly: An Alternative General Education Cohort focused on Sustainability at Eastern Illinois University.”

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

EIU recognizes, as do the vast majority of teaching institutions across the U.S., the grave dangers to species diversity, habitat viability, and the prolongation of life that unsustainable development poses for the future. Many of our students, too, are keen for their instructors to acknowledge the interconnectivity between the global environmental crisis and their everyday lives. While the relevance of the issue is not exclusive to EIU, our institution is uniquely positioned to intervene successfully. We are fortunate to have researchers from diverse disciplines who share scholarly and principled interests, and municipal representatives who share these concerns, and have recently embarked on an Urban Butterfly Initiative as a campaign to promote sustainability and tourism, and we are currently at work in an institutional reevaluation of the effectiveness and relevance of our General Education Program.

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

We anticipate the following: 1) the reconfigured “GenEd” track for this cohort of students will allow for enhanced interdisciplinarity and “problem/project-based and experiential pedagogies”; 2) in turn, this will encourage these students to recognize a continuity between their “GenEd” experiences and “real-world” problems and solutions; 3) the cohort will see their education as a group experience, and recognize the need to work in project teams and collaboratively with off-campus partners; 4) the program will identify, deliberate, and problem-solve sustainability challenges on- and off-campus; 5) the institution will benefit, potentially fiscally, from meeting these challenges in creative and collaborative ways through energy savings; 6) the program may become a model for other cohorts such as community justice, public health, mental health, and other topics; 7) the option for freshmen to choose a “sustainability cohort” will open recruiting opportunities for EIU; 8) student retention may improve due to enhanced sentiments of “belonging.”

4. Describe the purposes and goals for the initiative.

The purpose of this initiative is to establish a system of ongoing commitment to sustainability within the EIU community and to develop graduates with a stronger sense of social responsibility through the implementation of a sustainability stream of courses in EIU's general education program. We accomplish this by creating co-curricular sustainability initiatives.

Goals

- Conduct an inventory to identify current sustainability course offerings.
- Conduct an inventory of the institution's infrastructure and operations to identify what can be utilized for applied student learning.
- Establish a list of general education learning goals that can be used for the sustainability cohort.
- From the learning goals list, create learning objectives that will be used in the assessment and evaluation process.
- Obtain commitment from faculty who will be overseeing student learning.
- Develop a syllabus for service learning and class project.
- Develop criteria for evaluating student portfolios.
- Market new general education completion path.

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

- Civic Engagement
- Learning
- General Education
- Environment

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

Clear Processes for Evaluating Progress

College credit will be awarded for knowledge that comes from the learning conducted outside of the traditional classroom.

The following standards will be used to assess experiential learning. These categories of standards were developed by Dr. Whitaker and the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL):

1. Credit should be awarded only for learning, and not for experience.
2. College credit should be awarded only for college-level learning.
3. Credit should be awarded only for learning that has a balance, appropriate to the subject, between theory and practical application.
4. The determination of competence levels and of credit awards must be made by appropriate subject matter and academic experts, and
5. Credit should be appropriate to the academic context in which it is accepted.

Portfolios will be the main basis for evaluating student learning and progress while participating in the cohort project process.

A list of learning objectives will be developed that clearly articulate the knowledge, skills, or abilities that the students will be able to perform after completing certain components of the portfolio. By utilizing this list of learning objectives, the students will then be required to demonstrate their proficiency in specific areas. Those faculty who facilitate the learning and oversee and monitor student progress will evaluate the sections of the portfolios (the specific areas of their expertise) in which they were assigned.

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

Stakeholders must include the Council on Academic Affairs (CAA) and its General Education Subcommittee, and EIU's Administration for support and approve the Sustainability General Education cohort model. We need engaged, reliable, and creative faculty willing to develop and teach a stream of interlinked and interdisciplinary courses that will cross departmental and college border to be fully inclusive. Admissions and New Student and Family Programs staff (for those who don't attend a traditional Orientation Day and need alternate orientation/advising appointments) will need to be informed and supportive for both educational and recruiting purposes. Advisors will need to be apprised of the opportunities, and champions for this option. Students will play an active role in the success of this model.

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

Unknown at present.

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

Unknown at present.

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

TIMELINE:

- Identify courses/instructors currently in place across campus (S20)
- Identify faculty with expertise and/or engagement in issues of sustainability, willing to assist in the construction of a stream of courses (S20)
- Understand the evolving guideline for EIU's future General Education courses (F20)
- Define the future mission and framework of General Education at EIU (F20?)
- Develop the cohort model and the order/linking of the courses (F20/S21)
- Identify campus/community projects and community partners (F20/S21)
- CAA, General Education Committee and the Provost approve the stream (S21?)
- Market to incoming students (Su21)
- Initial cohort launch (F21?)