

1. QEP Project Name: Empowering students with the skills of tomorrow

2. QEP Project Abstract

Students at Southwestern have a vast array of intellectual passions, and our curriculum encourages exploration across the disciplines. However, the recent call to institutions to demonstrate their value to consumers “by increasing their alignment with the workforce” (Auter 2017) is problematic, not only in its equation of students with consumers, and teaching with customer service, but also because it simplistically measures “the success of a liberal arts education by the statistics of job placement. Without such statistics, how does one measure the growth and development of students as human beings in the higher education system?” (Graf 2019). Pedagogical experts argue that schools should be teaching “the four Cs”—critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity, downplay technical skills, and emphasize instead general-purpose life skills: to prepare our students for a world of “unprecedented transformations and radical uncertainties,” the real necessary skills will be “the ability to deal with change, learn new things, and preserve your mental balance in unfamiliar situations” (Harari 2020). Essentially, cultivating problem solving and teamwork competencies within Southwestern’s students will better prepare them to navigate the ambiguity of an uncertain future. The proposed QEP builds on SU’s successful implementation of Paideia and Mosaic (previous QEP), and positions Southwestern to achieve its strategic directions, goals, and vision.

3. QEP Project Student Learning Outcomes

Our QEP promotes the development of problem solving/creativity and teamwork/collaboration skills. The SU curriculum, Paideia philosophy, and Mosaic framework provide spaces to promote these skills. In addition, elevating these competencies will foster the skills of communication, quantitative literacy, digital and information literacies, and intellectual self-confidence—all skills we support through our liberal arts educational model and are needed for graduates to contribute to the well-being of humanity.

The American Association of Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) defines problem solving as “the process of designing, evaluating, and implementing a strategy to answer an open-ended question or achieve a desired goal.” Problem-solving also requires teams of individuals who can work across disciplinary and professional boundaries to imagine innovative and creative solutions. Our QEP fosters the skills and competencies needed to engage in problem solving.

Specific learning outcomes include:

- Problem-Solving/Creativity
 - Demonstrates the ability to construct a clear and insightful problem statement with evidence of all relevant contextual factors
 - Proposes solutions/hypotheses that are sensitive to contextual factors as well as ethical, logical, and cultural dimensions of the problem
 - Evaluation of solutions is deep and elegant, and includes: consideration of the history of the problem, reviews logic/reasoning, examines feasibility of the solution, weighs impact of solution
- Teamwork/Collaboration
 - Individuals contribute to team meetings by moving the team forward by articulating the merits of alternative ideas or proposals
 - Responds to conflict by addressing destructive conflict directly and constructively in a way that strengthens overall team cohesiveness and future effectiveness
 - Move a group toward consensus and accomplish tasks through active participation from group members

- Foster a constructive team

4. QEP Project Description

A. Introduction

Liberal arts have long been thought of as key to the development of the whole person, both spiritually and intellectually. Young people just exiting secondary education are in a pivotal point in their lives when their childhood beliefs are evolving toward a mature value system. While some institutions of higher education focus on rote learning paired with career planning, Southwestern takes a different approach and aims to tackle the challenge of preparing graduates for jobs in the next quarter of the century. As a recent article in *MLA Action Network* (2019) points out, although the value of having expertise in a specific subject or area of study is not disputed, there is increasing consensus that education based on nonintegrated academic disciplines “is not keeping up with the demands of a rapidly changing world and solving its large-scale problems.”

B. Broader Historical Context

One of the greatest challenges to contemporary education is creating a balance between the necessary rigor of academic disciplines and the growing recognition that people need to think and work in a more integrative and interdisciplinary way (Campbell & Ferguson-Pell 2018). In 2018, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine published [a report](#) that discussed and analyzed the educational challenges in preparing young people for work, life and citizenship and argued that “developing the broad set of skills desired by employers requires more than intensive study in a particular discipline during college. It requires exposure to multiple fields, practice to build employability skills, and experience with communication and collaboration” (National Academies of Sciences 2018: 47). The report also pointed to the findings of the American Historical Association: focus groups of Ph.D. historians, who had found jobs beyond traditional academic positions, agreed that five skills in particular were necessary to be successful: communication, collaboration, quantitative literacy, intellectual self-confidence, and digital literacy. Many of these skills, the report points out, overlap with the “essential learning outcomes” identified by The American Association of Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) LEAP (Liberal Education and America’s Promise) initiative (2007), including critical thinking, quantitative literacy, written and oral communication, integrative and applied learning, and teamwork and problem solving (National Academies of Sciences 2018: 48). We believe that focusing on these last two skills in particular—problem solving/creativity and teamwork/collaboration—will allow students to foster all the other necessary skills as well.

C. Southwestern University. Southwestern’s core purpose focuses on “Fostering a liberal arts community whose values and actions encourage contributions toward the well-being of humanity.” In the spirit of this purpose, Southwestern has cultivated robust programs to prepare students for problem-solving of the future. As a liberal arts university our mission involves “both the study of and participation in significant aspects of our cultural heritage, expressed primarily through the arts, the sciences, the institutions and the professions of society.”

In 2016, the Southwestern community updated the university’s direction, goals, and vision through 2026. Our QEP directly links to the following goals:

- Goal 2: Foster the highest standards of scholarship, academic quality, and differentiated educational and co-curricular experiences focused on thinking, creating, and connecting. Enhance our collective efforts to secure external funding for both faculty and faculty/student research.
- Goal 3: Cultivate the culture and practices among faculty and staff necessary to sustain institutional excellence and a community focused on student success.

Our proposed QEP builds on current campus-wide initiatives of Paideia, Mosaic, and High Impact Experiences. Southwestern’s curricular and co-curricular programs provide frameworks for supporting this QEP. Paideia, our educational philosophy, empowers students to think in broader, more collaborative, more original ways. Paideia is about connections, bringing together multiple perspectives from different disciplines. Paideia seminars, interdisciplinary Paideia minors, and out-of-classroom experiences, such as community-engaged learning, study abroad, internships, student–faculty research, and student-directed creative projects encourage students to work collaboratively and create innovative solutions to complex problems. Mosaic provides a co-curricular framework and approach that encourages students to mindfully engage in and make meaning of experiences outside of the classroom. Seeking to inspire and empower the Southwestern student to develop as a whole person, Mosaic uses *five key areas of development*: make meaning of the academic experience, develop 21st-century skills, construct a well-managed life, shape identity, and contribute as a global citizen. These key areas are the foundation for the *Residential Experience*, which cultivates, while living together, learning through teamwork and problem solving. The Mosaic approach supports Southwestern’s residential liberal arts community through intentional *collaboration and relationship-building* among students, staff, and faculty.

D. Initiatives.

The following initiatives promote professional development of faculty and students, hands-on problem solving, and working together to accomplish goals.

Faculty Development on Problem-Based Learning (PBL) Pedagogy. Introducing a new teaching method—especially one that has not gained traction until recently in the arts and the humanities—can be difficult for many faculty members. A comprehensive and protracted faculty development would thus be a central element for its successful implementation.

Student Employment Professional Development. In 2019-2020, 41 university departments employed a total of 613 students through on-campus jobs, community-engaged learning student assistants, student research assistants, internships, and the federal work study program. While student employees are essential to the operation and success of many on campus programs and departments, Southwestern does not provide oversight in student training, skill development, evaluation, or assessment. Student employment provides “real life” opportunities for students to make connections between in-class learning and out of class experiences, engage in problem solving, and learn skills essential to effectively working as a member of a team. This initiative would support the QEP by:

- Hiring a Student Employment Coordinator who would work in collaboration with Human Resources, Mosaic, and the Center for Career and Professional Development to develop campus-wide learning goals and objectives for student employment and evaluation process
- Providing professional development to supervisors of student employees on student development theory and best practices of supervision including how to encourage problem solving and critical thinking, how to give feedback, and how to integrate reflection into the employment experience.
- Implementing required training for all student employees

High Impact Experiences (HIEs). At Southwestern, HIEs are immersive opportunities that position graduates for active, meaningful lives of engagement and achievement. Eighty three percent of graduates participate in at least one HIE, while only 53 % participate in two, and only 25% in three or more. Through transformative internships, faculty-mentored research, community-engaged learning, and study abroad and study away, students gain independence and progressive mastery of new competencies and skills. Students learn to problem solve by thinking more effectively about their understanding of the world, making connections across subjects, borders, economic systems, and varying ways of life. Many of these HIEs require working collaboratively with others in order to identify effective solutions. This QEP establishes new opportunities for students to participate in a wide variety of blended HIEs.

- *Course Based Undergraduate Research (CUREs).* These courses will be co-taught by community partners and focus on problem-solving local and regional challenges such as transportation, food insecurity, aging in place, and historical/structural racism.
- *International Community-Engaged Learning.* The Global Engagement Seminar addresses interdisciplinary issues of global interconnectedness and encourages students to reflect on their roles and responsibilities as engaged leaders. The seminar focuses the first part of the semester learning about global challenges impacting Southwestern's local region. Topics could include water scarcity, immigration, or poverty. Over spring break, the class will travel abroad to examine the seminar topics.

The Residential Experience. As a residential campus, approximately 75% of our students live on-campus for the entirety of their college experience. The Residential Experience provides an educational approach to on-campus living that maximizes opportunities for learning, development, and connection beyond the classroom. Through a variety of programs, students engage with and reflect on how out of class experiences correlate with the development of skills including independent living in a shared space, leadership, effective communication, conflict management, and critical thinking. This QEP provides a new opportunity for students to practice problem solving and develop 21st century skills.

- *Student Leadership Institute.* A multi-day off-campus leadership development program, this institute is designed to teach student participants how to be effective leaders through group activities that cultivate teamwork and collaboration, interpersonal and intercultural communication, and self reflection. This summer program would target 40-60 specific first-year and sophomore students (who statistically are at higher risk of not persisting) to provide additional opportunities for personal and professional skill development that support student success and persistence. The institute would include small and large group activities that challenge students to work and communicate collaboratively to build community, set goals, and solve problems.

E. Assessment.

Problem solving/creativity and teamwork/collaboration will be assessed across all initiatives using the framework provided by the AAC&U's value rubrics. Mechanisms for assessment might include:

- Presence Campus Engagement Platform – provides a system of record for experiential learning and co-curricular engagement. This tool would enable us to integrate specific learning outcomes into the platform and measure student learning through quantitative and qualitative data.
- Student employment reflections and evaluations
- Within courses: Assessment of individual's teamwork on projects, capstone assignments, reflections on the problem-solving process

5. QEP Project Resources/Participants

This would be a campus-wide initiative involving: Advising & Retention, all Academic Departments, Athletics, Center for Career and Professional Development, Diversity Education, FYS/AES, Human Resources, Center for Integrative Learning, Center for Teaching Learning and Scholarship, Mosaic & the Residential Experience, Paideia, Student Activities.

New resources will include hiring a Student Employment Coordinator, appointing a Director for Undergraduate Research, and purchasing Presence (student engagement software).

6. QEP Project Timeline

Ac. Year 1 (2023-24):

- Faculty Development: focus on problem-based learning and teamwork
- Hire Student Employment Coordinator (Year 1 will include campus collaborations on the development of learning outcomes and professional development for supervisors)
- Develop curriculum for the Student Leadership Institute; recruit campus collaborators, and identify and recruit first- and second-year students
- Appoint a Director of Undergraduate Research
- Identify faculty and develop CUREs

Ac. Year 2 (Fall 2024-25):

- Launch the Student Leadership Institute
- Implement campus-wide student employee learning outcomes; develop student employee training; implement evaluation process for student employees
- Offer CURE courses
- Offer Global Engagement Seminar
- Faculty Development: discuss strategies for implementing the PBL approach across the curriculum
- Assess all programs

Ac. Year 3 (Fall 2025-26):

- Faculty Development: develop grant/reward opportunities for faculty and staff involved
- Continue Student Leadership Institute, required student employee training, CURE courses, and Global Engagement Seminar
- Assess all programs

Ac. Year 4 (Fall 2026-27):

- Faculty Development: opportunities for advanced knowledge and skills in PBL pedagogy
- Continue Student Leadership Institute, required student employee training, CURE courses, and Global Engagement Seminar
- Assess all programs

Ac. Year 5 (Fall 2027-28):

- Faculty Development: Cultivate advanced knowledge and skills in selected parts of the process (i.e., integration of different disciplines, involvement with the community, etc.)
- Continue Student Leadership Institute, required student employee training, CURE courses, and Global Engagement Seminar
- Assess all programs