

**Report of the QEP Topic Selection Committee to
Dr. William Flores, President, University of Houston-Downtown
December 12, 2014**

The Committee:

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Liza Alonzo
Ron Beebe
David Bradley
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John Locke
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Sarah Walker
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QEP Topic Selection Executive Summary

The QEP Topic Selection Committee was charged with soliciting and evaluating QEP proposals from across the University to result in a recommendation to the President about which QEP topics were most appropriate for our University. In accordance with SACS requirements, these proposals were solicited and evaluated for topics that would affect student learning or the learning environment and had data to support the need for action in the topic area.

The Topic Selection Committee

The committee members are: Susan Henney (Chair, Faculty Senate President), Liza Alonzo (President's Office), Ron Beebe (Urban Education), David Bradley (VP, Admin and Finance), Ermelinda Delavina (Associate Dean, CST), Shannon Fowler (Criminal Justice), Faiza Khoja (Provost's Office), John Locke (President, Student Government Association), Akif Uzman (Dean, College of Science and Technology), Sarah Walker (College of Business), and Pat Williams (Social Sciences),

The Process

- Proposals were solicited by the Provost's office prior to the formation of the committee. Four proposals were presented at the Leadership Retreat (audience was composed of leaders from all areas—faculty, staff, and students). These four proposals were: 1) Online Education, 2) High Impact Practices (HIPS), 3) Barrier Courses, and 4) Writing and Critical Thinking.
- Upon formation, the committee sent out calls for additional proposals. This resulted in the submission of one additional proposal. This proposal was for the Community Engagement area.
- Each of the five proposals was presented at a Faculty Senate meeting. The presentations were taped and made available to University constituents on the QEP Topic Selection Website (<http://www.uhd.edu/academic/gep/>). Multiple emails and reminders at Faculty Senate were provided to the University community (to faculty, staff, and students) to visit the website, view the videos, and provide comments.
 - Under each topic was a link that users clicked on to offer feedback about the topic that they had viewed.
 - E-mails and face-to-face communications were distributed via appropriate University entities (including dt_faculty, dt_students, SGA processes, and Faculty Senate processes) encouraging faculty, staff, and students to visit the website and leave comments.
 - Over all five topics, 20 comments were received, and these are included the materials for each section.

- Provost Hugetz and Dr. Henney devised and recorded a video named “What is a QEP” to inform the University of the meaning and purpose of the QEP. This video is also available on the QEP topic selection website (<http://www.uhd.edu/academic/qep/>) and was also emailed to the university community.
- A focus group was conducted for each QEP topic, comprised of faculty from each College, staff, and students. Each focus group was conducted by two members of the QEP Topic Selection Committee, one as the facilitator and one as the note-taker. A total of 51 people participated in the focus groups, including 22 faculty, 15 staff, and 12 students.
- The QEP Topic Selection Committee also went through a “learning outcome development” exercise, in which members of the committee developed possible learning outcomes for the QEP topic and brought them to the committee for discussion. The purpose of this exercise was to make sure that solid, measureable learning outcomes were possible for each QEP topic. The committee recognized that if this committee could not envision and define measureable learning outcomes for the topic, then that topic was probably too weak to move forward. The committee was able to formulate possible learning outcomes for each proposed QEP topic, and these are included in the following material.

The Recommendation

The QEP Topic Selection Committee voted to send forward two topics to the President: **Community Engagement** and **Writing/Critical Thinking**. However, other QEP topics also received votes, so the committee is submitting an executive summary for each topic area. What follows is more detailed information on each topic area, organized by number of votes received (from most to least).

Overview of Community Engagement Topic

This QEP aligns with the mission/vision of UHD to provide students high-impact experiences such as service learning, incorporates community engagement, and emphasizes improving writing as a crucial 21st century skill. Targeting the area north of UHD, bounded by I-45 on the West, I-610 on the North, and I-59 on the East, this QEP engages students in service learning projects that are focused on transforming part of UHD's neighborhood. Currently, service learning projects are scattered across the Greater Houston Area, preventing a significant impact that generates a transformational process in a specific high-need area. Furthermore, the QEP seeks to develop service learning in partnership with the community. In addition, this neighborhood reflects the diversity of the UHD student population and affords the opportunity for interaction that would bring positive change to both the community and UHD. Service learning provides a platform for the integration of a writing intensive component enhancing skills that can be used to increase the communication abilities of students. Incorporating the concept of social justice and responsibility would tie into the Texas Common Core learning outcomes included in all eight core areas, creating an opportunity to address multiple needs within a neighborhood by integrating service learning across the multiple UHD disciplines.

UHD Faculty have a long history of integrating community service into their courses, with the number of service learning courses increasing substantially over the past four years. However, it was not until this past year that the university adopted a uniform definition of service learning. The definition was developed by faculty and staff serving on the Committee for Service Learning and Community Engagement. The definition was then adopted by the UCC and is now being integrated into service learning course syllabi. Learning outcomes for service-learning courses are decided by faculty at the departmental level.

Executive Summary

Community Engagement

This potential topic received the greatest number of votes based on those in attendance. There was general agreement that this topic was supportive of the Mission and Vision of UHD, and provided aspirational goals for the university and community. The topic addresses the need to focus on writing, and does so in a way that may encourage students to write about issues in which they are invested. This topic would engage faculty, staff and students across all disciplines, thus building capacity and enhancing students' employment and graduate school possibilities. There was some concern expressed over engaging online, distance and working students, as well as the potential workload increase for faculty.

Positive aspects	Negative aspects
The topic aligns well with the UHD Vision and Mission statements, including supporting the focus on the President's Honor Roll and the goals of maintaining Carnegie Engaged University classification	The topic is limited by offering few obvious ways to include online, distance and working students in service learning
The topic includes an embedded writing component that is integrated into a high impact practice (Service Learning)	To be effective, Service Learning must be embedded in the course and not serve as an add-on; this will impact faculty in terms of course development and workload
The topic incorporates discipline-oriented writing that will enhance employment and graduate school opportunities	As described, the topic addresses two significant tasks, service learning and writing, and this may be too large a focus for a QEP
The writing component provides a potential opportunity for students to write about issues/topics that are meaningful to them	There is some indication that an increased focus on writing may be detrimental to retention, but high impact practices are good for retention
The topic involves faculty, staff and students across the university in a collaborative way to enhance the impact on the university and community	UH Social Work program is "adopting" the Third Ward, and also has Carnegie engaged status
The topic enhances community engagement by increasing UHD's connections with the surrounding community	
The topic offers a potential for increased external funding opportunities in new areas	
The topic has the potential to provide positive market recognition and branding for UHD based on distinctive programming related to community engagement	

Synopsis of Focus Group Discussion for Community Engagement

In general, the group saw the QEP topic as being in line with the mission and vision of UHD, especially in light of the work on the President's Honor Roll and Carnegie. The outcomes of improved written communication skills and exposure to real-world experiences through service learning were viewed as assets for job seekers. The group expressed agreement over selecting the topic as well as indicating students would enjoy it (topic-specific, field-specific, see the relevance of the writing component). The group indicated the idea of writing and community as part of the QEP would provide an opportunity to practice skills and writing. The final discussion indicated that all in attendance would pick this as a QEP topic. However, there was concern raised about a lack of knowledge regarding the selection process (this was explained).

Faculty Perspective

Service learning was viewed as a strategy that could be incorporated in gateway as well as discipline-specific courses. This change in focus would stress service learning as part of the course student learning outcomes, in line with the AAC&U Value Rubrics.

The QEP topic was viewed as a potential recruitment tool, but from the standpoint of students as the recruiters. One concern in this regard related to the lack of time UHD students have to focus on classes, that service learning requirements would compete with work and family matters. Consequently, it may be that students would opt not to take service learning courses due to time constraints or take online courses to avoid engagement.

The greatest impacts were seen on faculty and UHD. Faculty would need to think about how to redesign courses to incorporate service learning. In addition, faculty would be expected to vertically align service learning from lower to upper division courses, allowing students to reflect on the impact of their projects over time. Faculty will need resources to develop service learning projects/outcomes for courses (e.g., where to start, what to do), which may require a "center" that has information, potential partnership contacts, and so forth.

Staff Perspective

It was pointed out that the structuring of course time would be important; if the regular content is the course focus and service learning is viewed as an add-on, then that is not a viable model – service learning needs to be fully integrated. In terms of impact on UHD, this QEP was viewed as a way to let people know we are here (publicity), and it would be incumbent on graduates to spread the word. This QEP has the potential to differentiate UHD from other universities. One noted challenge was that communication with community partners would need to be clear: from the perspective of UHD we may be helping the community, but from the community's vantage point they might see themselves as doing UHD a favor.

Student Perspective

The students indicated that writing requirements in terms of reflection pieces was widespread, but that specific discipline-oriented writing was not always incorporated in their coursework. There was a belief that this QEP might encourage more community-based experiences that would enable the university and students to partner with communities to work for positive change.

There was interest in finding ways for students to take what they do in other areas of their lives (e.g., workplace) and tie that in to service learning. This co-curricular approach would recognize that HIPs do not happen only in the classroom but rather can be related to what people are already doing, which might facilitate the partnership process. Another concern was how distance education students could engage if there was a very specific neighborhood on which service learning focused. It was suggested that students could be encouraged to initiate partnerships in distance and online settings.

Website Feedback for Community Engagement Topic

“A worthy subject, but it seems vague in its conception.”

Overview of Writing and Critical Thinking Topic

This topic will address gaps that we currently have in both writing and critical thinking across the curriculum. This topic was identified as critical to student learning at UHD by faculty who recognize writing and critical thinking as major concerns; it involves issues beyond grammar and writing mechanics, is a pervasive, ongoing problem, and is backed by evidence in both internal and nationally-normed assessment data. We know that many transfer students do not take any writing courses from the core at UHD, and our own data says that between one-third and one-half of our students are not competent in writing. Students may not be doing as much writing at UHD compared to our peer institutions, and they may also be doing less writing that requires the higher-order cognitive skills characterized by critical thinking. Both writing and critical thinking expressed in writing are personally and professionally valuable to students, highly desired by employers, and necessary for graduate school.

Executive Summary

Writing/Critical Thinking

The writing portion of this topic has the widest support across all constituencies. A main strength of this proposal is that it appeals to many of the people who will have to work to implement it and to the students who will be impacted by it. Additionally, this is clearly an area that will benefit our students post-graduation, both in employment and in further education. One of the main weaknesses of the proposal is lack of development of the “critical thinking” aspect, leaving it as potentially a general writing intervention without a clear target area. Although a popular topic area, it is not clear that faculty will be willing to fundamentally change how they are (or are not) teaching writing in order to reach a superordinate goal.

Positive aspects	Negative aspects
All stakeholders at the university agree that this topic is important and needed.	A writing-focused QEP may have negative effects on retention and graduation (making writing requirements more stringent will hold back the many students who have severe skill deficits in this area).
Employers and graduate schools prefer graduates who can write well.	The University may not be ready for a large-scale writing program. The willingness to identify this as a problem is present, but the willingness to change in this area may not be.
There is broad faculty buy-in for this topic area.	Faculty may not be willing to engage in extra training/teaching on how to teach writing.
	The “critical thinking” portion of the proposal is not developed at all. There is little indication of how this aspect would work, or even a definition of what it means.
	Very resource-intensive.
	No obvious leaders for this initiative.

Synopsis of Focus Group Discussion for Writing and Critical Thinking

There were 11 people in attendance, comprised of five faculty, four staff, and two students.

Faculty Perspective

The faculty perspective can be understood in the context of three main themes. First, faculty discussed that students lack the basic skills of writing. There was much discussion of the lack of proficiency in grammar, punctuation, spelling, and the other “basic skills” of writing. It was pointed out that it will be difficult to get to the “critical thinking” part if students can’t communicate basic ideas proficiently. Second, participants emphasized that faculty must “teach” writing, no matter their discipline. We cannot rely only on English faculty to teach writing; faculty need to stop saying “they should have learned writing in X or Y class” and every faculty should teach it in every course. Faculty must become proficient themselves in teaching and training students to write within the bounds of their discipline. This includes the idea that there should be more focus on “quality” of writing instead of “quantity” of writing. Finally, faculty participants stated that we know our students lack in this area; it is basic, but it is a key to learning. It has a huge practical application across the board for all students. This will result in higher graduation rates. There was some concern about increasing faculty workload (including the incremental upward creep of W course caps and related increases in grading time for writing courses), but the overall tone was passionate in favor of the potential to improve student writing.

Staff Perspective

Being prepared for the workplace and having 21st century skills clearly includes the ability to write and to think critically. This QEP topic has the potential to increase recruitment because of the link to jobs. If our students are more likely to get jobs, this will bring more students to us. If properly carried out, this QEP topic has the potential to improve student’s job-seeking skills (resumes and cover letters will be better, increasing our students’ competitiveness). Staff participants also pointed out that this topic increases our ability to engage meaningfully with students. More writing assignments and more feedback is a one-to-one connection with a faculty member.

Student Perspective

Students emphasized that writing and critical thinking are important skills in the work world. They have to be professional and prepared for job seeking and working. Our students will look much better in that context if they know how to express themselves. The students also stated that they believe that each discipline should have its own specialty writing course (not a W course, but a whole course devoted just to writing). Finally, students believe that this topic

capitalizes on and could even improve the relationship between student and faculty member. It only takes one person to pay attention to you and give you feedback in order to motivate you. It also helps with the overall “feeling” that the university supports student success. Pushing students to do better in writing does help students maintain motivation and improve themselves. Students want to do better because they see that the faculty really wants them to do better.

Summary

Ten of eleven participants stated that they would endorse this QEP topic. Participants suggested overall that writing ties in to all aspects of student success, including post-baccalaureate job seeking and professional roles. Some programs that were suggested that could go along with a writing and critical thinking QEP included: a writing-only course in every discipline, improvements to the Writing Center (such as seminars or workshops on writing skills), a program that links reading and writing (because reading proficiency predicts writing proficiency), incentives and programs for faculty members to become better writing teachers; including a “writing leveling course” for graduate students; more writing in every course; formative writing, and a focus on how to teach an online writing course.

Website Feedback for Writing and Critical Thinking Topic

“I believe that implementing a writing QEP is a good idea. We should emphasize the need to properly address the communication skills of our students. I know first-hand the effects of graduating from a university with a weak emphasis on writing skills.”

“Since we don't know how many writing assignments are actually required in “w” classes, nor how they are corrected, nor what sort of feedback professors provide, then there isn't much to comment on. Show us some examples of best writing practices in giving students feedback.”

“I believe that the most productive and significant step UHD could make with its QEP is to focus on writing and critical thinking. This could be combined with other areas, like HIPS. We have an identified and significant problem, in that many of our graduates are not prepared to function in the ways they have to do in the workplace and throughout their lives because they lack writing and critical thinking skills. It's sad when I see applicants for positions who graduated from UHD and realize that they have a degree from us, but due to lack of communication and analytical skills, I would not hire them for a job here. Improvements in this area could profoundly impact our students' lives and our whole university. I was also struck by Dr.

Moosally's noting that writing is the one area that doesn't have a university-wide effort directed at it, as opposed to online and HIPS. Of course, in the library, we would see ourselves as being involved with this, and it would involve the entire university. I think it is something we need to do.”

“This to me is the primary concern that reaches across the university. It seems the appropriate focus for a QEP topic.”

Overview of Barrier Courses Topic

A barrier course is a course with high enrollment and a high failure rate. At UHD we have informally defined barrier courses as those with an annual enrollment of at least 150 and a DWIF rate (% of students who get grades of D, W, I, or F) of 30% or more. In 2013-2014 there were 41 courses at UHD that fit this definition. Of those 41, 28 had a DWIF rate of 40% or more. Thirty of these courses were at the freshman or sophomore level.

Failure in a barrier course means a student is unable to make satisfactory progress in completing their degree program. At best, it slows the student's progress and at worst, it leads to the student leaving the intended major or even leaving UHD. The effects on students' academic and personal lives can be profound. The effects on UHD show up in the form of lower retention and graduation rates, and these are important measures by which powerful external authorities make judgments about our university, its funding, etc.

There are many possible strategies that can be employed to improve student learning and, thereby, passing rates in barrier courses. Many of these strategies have been employed at UHD in the past and with considerable success in some cases. As an example, over the past 10 years, the DWIF rate in MATH 1301 (College Algebra) has been cut approximately in half. If UHD's QEP focused on improving learning in barrier courses, it would mean making specific and very deliberate efforts to improve student performance in a set of selected courses and directing a significant amount of resources to support the project. The exact nature of those efforts would be decided by a committee of knowledgeable persons who would spend several months researching best practices and mining UHD's past experiences with strategies that work.

Executive Summary

Barrier Courses

The topic of barrier courses as the focus of a QEP is widely seen as a common sense choice because, by definition, barrier courses are those in which large numbers of students fail to succeed and therefore fail to progress toward completion, with direct consequences for retention and graduation rates. So whereas barrier courses may or may not be each person's first choice, most people in all constituencies see it as a reasonable topic.

Another salient point is that UHD has experience with barrier courses. Our 2006 QEP included a focus on three barrier courses and several other initiatives have targeted student performance in specific courses. This fact lends support to barrier courses as our QEP topic because we would be building upon previous efforts which, in some cases, have been quite successful. On the other hand, there might be a sense of "been there, done that" which could detract from enthusiasm for the project.

The topic of barrier courses would narrow the QEP's focus more than some of the other options. Most barrier courses are in the lower division and some departments have no barrier courses. These facts would limit the number of faculty who are involved with the project and, perhaps, lead some to feel little sense of engagement with a project that ideally is embraced university-wide. On the other hand, this narrower focus would mean that more attention and resources would be directed to improving student performance in these problem courses.

Positive aspects	Negative aspects
Likely to "move the needle" on retention and graduation rates	We've already focused on barrier courses and haven't done a good job of institutionalizing those efforts
Would allow for attention to barrier courses wherever they exist, including in the upper division	Focus would be <i>primarily</i> on lower division courses
Opportunity to build on successful past experiences with barrier courses	People in departments without barrier courses might not feel engaged with the project
Targets our most vulnerable students	Departments with barrier courses would bear most of the effort
Broad support among all constituencies	Would involve fewer faculty than other QEP options

Synopsis of Focus Group Discussion on Barrier Courses

Participants included five students, six faculty members, and two staff members.

Discussion was dominated by themes raised by faculty members. So in this synopsis the most prominent discussion themes are introduced in the Faculty Perspective section, and student and staff sections consist mainly of responses to these themes.

Faculty Perspective

A theme returned to repeatedly by faculty was the success of their own experiences in previously-identified barrier courses. The point was that when UHD courses have been specifically targeted for improvement, improvements have been achieved, and often in dramatic fashion.

Often the focus of discussion was specific practices in these classrooms. The one receiving most attention was supplemental instruction (SI). Regarding other interventions that could be used in barrier courses, a suggestion was to incorporate explicit study skills learning outcomes into these courses. Rather than functioning exclusively as a subject matter expert, the faculty member should understand their role to be that of teacher.

When particular strategies seemed to dominate conversation, the group reminded itself that in a barrier course QEP, all effective strategies would be available and that, by the way, all effective strategies should be on the table for all courses.

An offshoot of this theme was that, of the QEP options, barrier courses and online were more targeted (on a subset of courses) and the others (HIPs, writing, service learning) might have a broader focus and might involve more of the community. But it was acknowledged that HIPs, writing, and service learning would all be among the many kinds of interventions that would be available in barrier courses.

Faculty members liked the fact that in a barrier course QEP, faculty members would take the lead in designing changes in their courses. This reflected Bill Waller's point that no intervention could be successful without buy-in from frontline faculty members, and the best way to secure their buy-in is by giving them the lead role.

Another theme was that UHD students are often poorly prepared. A faculty member suggested it might be a mistake to prioritize interventions, like those in barrier courses, to improve performance in these students. Maybe top priority should go to addressing the underlying problem of so many poorly-prepared students enrolling at UHD.

Another concern was the large percentage of UHD students who are transfers, of relevance to this discussion because most barrier courses are 1000- and 2000-level. So prioritizing resources for these courses would not yield as much “bang for the buck” because most of our students would not be taking these courses. This concern was allayed by pointing out that barrier courses, by definition, have high enrollments; so, regardless of level of students, large numbers are not succeeding and moving on. If more native students were succeeding in lower-level barrier courses, more of them would be progressing and constituting a larger proportion of our upper-class student body. The bottom line is that the level of the course is irrelevant to the problem.

Business and Urban Ed faculty members made the related observation that there are few barrier courses in their disciplines so their faculty members might be less interested in this topic. But they acknowledged that greater success in barrier courses would mean larger numbers of better-prepared students moving into Business and Urban Ed.

Regarding fit with UHD’s mission, faculty members agreed that producing career-ready graduates requires enabling them to succeed in barrier courses. Others pointed out that sometimes it’s more important how well students do in subsequent courses. The point was made that these goals are not mutually exclusive but are, rather, complementary.

The consensus among faculty was that helping students succeed early in their academic career (most barrier courses are 1000- and 2000-level courses) and thereby enabling them to persist to completion was the best way to improve retention and graduation. In sum, most faculty members in this focus group were knowledgeable about all five QEP topic options and a focus on barrier courses was their top choice.

Student Perspective

Students picked up on the discussion about specific classroom practices. Several spoke of experience in SI classrooms (one as an SI tutor). All agreed that SI is highly effective. Another resource they singled out was the Writing Center. A theme was that too many students do not take advantage of resources available to all, regardless of whether one is in an SI classroom. This led to discussing whether the problem in barrier courses is something about the courses, themselves, or that students don’t use available resources and, if the latter, consideration should be given to incentivizing their use.

Regarding fit with UHD mission, students expressed their main concern of being able to apply what’s learned in the rest of one’s life. They spoke of courses in which real-world application, such as service learning, was stressed. All were reminded, as with the faculty discussion on these topics, that any of the strategies they had experienced as successful could be incorporated into barrier courses if that topic were selected.

On the bottom line question of which option they favor, students agreed that barrier courses is the most fundamental option because if students can't pass their courses, nothing else matters. In addition, a focus on barrier courses would beneficially affect students across the university.

Staff Perspective

In addition to expressing general agreement with the views described above, the only additional concern raised among staff members was that courses identified as barrier courses might be stigmatized. However, it was pointed out that Bill Waller noted that the term barrier course would not necessarily be used. It was also noted that particular benefits would accrue to courses selected to be included in a QEP focused on barrier courses.

Website Feedback for Barrier Courses Topic

"This will not impact the greatest number of students, as compared to other QEP topics."

Overview of Online Education Topic

A noted concern about online education is quality of the education and whether students achieve the same outcomes in online courses as they do face-to-face courses. Given the growth of student online enrollments, it seems important to focus the goals of greater course retention and student success in online course. In order to achieve these goals, it is important to focus efforts on: (a) increasing an institutional environment supportive of online course success and completion; (b) faculty preparation, readiness to teach online courses, & opportunities to assess and improve; and (c) working to increase student readiness by providing services to increase self-regulatory practices, motivation, and technological support to students in online courses.

Executive Summary

Online Education

Stakeholders generally view online education as an important component of modern higher education that allows UHD to follow its mission by increasing student access to college courses. Online enrollment has become a major component of education at UHD, and has the potential to become one of UHD's major sources of revenue. Further, increasing our online capacity aligns with UHD's efforts to increase student access to higher education. Even though UHOnline looms as a program that can compromise our online expansion, UHD can still benefit from dedicating QEP-level resources to improving our current capacity and improving student success in online education. However, UHD infrastructure for online delivery in terms of technology, physical resources (e.g., testing centers), and faculty and student preparedness is inadequate to provide a rigorous online education and expand well beyond our current capacity. Furthermore, questions about the quality of the data regarding online education at UHD and its ability to establish a valid baseline and accurately demonstrate change were prominent concerns. Also, there were concerns that if this topic were chosen as the QEP it would impact few students and faculty members.

Positive aspects	Negative aspects
There is a growing demand for online courses.	The university is not ready for this as a QEP topic, because among UHD faculty there exists an ambiguity regarding the acceptance of online teaching/courses. Additionally, different standards exist among departments as to what constitutes appropriate course delivery and engagement.
Additionally, this topic aligns with the university mission to increase student access to higher education by granting greater opportunities for students to participate.	Focus group participants more strongly recommended other topics for the QEP with the recognition that online education is important to UHD.
Low faculty preparedness to effectively teach online provides an excellent opportunity for faculty intervention and training.	There are problems with the data for online courses such that accurately demonstrating change over time and making appropriate comparisons could be difficult.
Low student preparedness for online courses provides an opportunity to intervene with student readiness programs.	The selection of the online topic would impact a small number of people as only a limited number of faculty teach online courses and small proportion of students enroll in online courses.
	There is uncertainty of the impact of UHOnline and its impact on UHD.

	Issues with technology and support infrastructure.
	The university has recently invested in the CTLE to strengthen online teaching and courses; the center needs an opportunity to demonstrate its performance before any related interventions potentially make it difficult to evaluate its progress.

Synopsis of Focus Group Discussion on Online Education

Based on the discussion from focus group participants (FGPs) in the online education QEP focus group, it seems that the online education should not be the QEP topic moving forward. Many more of the points were negative or mixed when it came to choosing online education as the QEP. The group sentiment was that online education was beneficial to the university, just not as a QEP topic.

When asked if online education fit in with UHD's mission, FGPs seemed largely positive that it did. Specifically, FGPs discussed that online course offerings increased student access to higher education and UHD. One staff FGP stated online course enrollments accounted for nearly a third of all enrollments, stating that at UHD the online program added a dimension that allowed increased access to traditionally underserved Houston populations and working students. The discussion then turned to an evaluation of the 30% online enrollments with a faculty FGP parsing the number to 20% online and 10% hybrid course enrollments. She then suggested that since so few of the UHD student population were served by this topic, it was not the best choice for the QEP.

When the FGPs were asked about how online education might impact recruitment, retention, and graduation rates there were mixed appraisals. Some of the faculty FGPs raised the issue that online education could increase our recruitment and retention rates. Another faculty FGP stated that it simply keeps some of our students from taking courses at other institutions, so it essentially keeps the student enrolled here for a few more classes. A negative aspect associated with online education raised by a faculty FGP was that because of persistence issues with students in online courses, an increase in the number of student taking online courses could actually reduce our graduation rate.

A discussion thread consistently raised in the focus group centered on measurement issues and demonstrating change over time with valid data. For instance, not all online courses have face-to-face (FTF) equivalents with the implication being that there are no fair comparisons for these courses. FGPs raised the issue that in the online QEP topic video Cindy Stewart pointed out repeatedly that the data presented was not valid. If the data being used to describe the issues associated with this topic are invalid, the major issue is that UHD may be unable to accurately demonstrate improvement by the end of the QEP. Another repeated topic was that there is an issue as to which students should be eligible for analysis in such comparisons between online and FTF courses. The major point here is that students are enrolled but stop participating in class but never formally drop. The discussion centered around the question, "How do we account for students who stop paying attention to the course (just stopped logging in but haven't officially dropped)?" The suggestion was that analyses would need to be fine-tuned such that engaged vs. non-engaged students could be compared or teased out of the analyses. A third strand of discussion raised by faculty and staff FGPs was that students enrolling in online courses may be far different than student enrolled in FTF courses because they self-select into these courses. FGPs speculated that this may be related to student perceptions that online

courses are easier. Faculty, staff, and students FGPs were all of the opinion that this is a common belief among the student population.

Another sentiment put forward by FGPs is that the university may not be ready for online education as a QEP topic. For one, a faculty FGP stated that not all faculty use same level of engagement in their online courses; she stated that some faculty may only be posting presentation slides while others rely on techniques they learned in their Quality Matters courses. This was echoed by other faculty FGPs. Differential levels of engagement by faculty can be highly detrimental to students in an online course, a sentiment agreed on by faculty, staff, and student. Another faculty FGP stated that some faculty hide online—not grading and/or posting grades in a timely manner and generally being non-responsive. Student, staff, and faculty FGPs agreed that this can be devastating. One faculty FGP relayed that there is a need to make the best hiring/course assignment decisions when deciding who teaches online courses relying on online teaching background, experience with instructional design, completion of training courses (like Quality Matters). Another issue raised by a staff FGP familiar with online education is that there are seemingly different standards between departments when it comes to online delivery of courses in what is and isn't acceptable. His feeling with the situation was that in order to move forward with online education as a more developed component, each academic department would need to review and decide what sorts of decisions were acceptable when it came to delivering online courses.

When asked to make recommendations for types of programming that could be presented if online education were selected as the QEP, FGPs responded by making no specific recommendations regarding the QEP. However, from discussion points raised earlier in the process several potential programs received attention. Two students discussed the capacity of making sure students were ready to take online course. Each discussed how, as traditionally FTF students, each eased her way into taking online course with gradual introductions into their schedules. In fact, one of the students stated that a course she took would be better suited as a hybrid rather than an online course. The same student also questioned the veracity of assessing students for readiness to take online courses, stating, “we may be able to assess their capability to stay online, but when the heat is turned on [some of them] will melt away.” When discussing assessments of readiness (either technological readiness or skills useful to completing online courses) faculty raised concerns about such assessments. One faculty FGP stated that if an assessment of readiness were to take place, she believed the best option was to only assess a basic level. She did not want to deny people the ability to take online course because they may score low on the assessment, when they could be a great student. Another issue raised was the assessment itself. Questions raised were “What would it look like? What things are being assessed?” When discussing technological issues about navigating Blackboard, a staff member familiar with Blackboard stated that such an assessment already exists in Blackboard. However, there were conflicting views about whether students would be well served by such assessments of technological readiness and navigational training. One faculty FGP stated that it's rare to find students who are unable to navigate our LMS, suggesting that a mandatory assessment was not necessary. Staff FGPs disagreed, stating that transfer students

coming from institutions with different LMSs were the most in need of such training and assessment to successfully complete our online courses.

Another programmatic issue not raised at the end but in various places in the discussion was the issue of faculty preparation and readiness to teach. As mentioned above, FGPs suggested that faculty were at differential levels of preparation and readiness when it came to teaching online courses. Staff and faculty FGPs suggested that faculty teaching online should engage in formal training for instructional design and being prepared to teach online, but no specific techniques were mentioned. Additionally, no other FGP disagreed with the idea when mentioned.

Finally, when the FGPs were asked to make recommendations for programs regarding online education, an unexpected theme emerged. One faculty FGP suggested that it was too difficult not to make comparisons among the different QEP topics, and that given the nature of the other topics she was more apt to simply recommend another topic—writing and critical thinking. This was repeated by multiple other faculty and staff FGPs, all suggesting that writing and critical thinking should be the choice for the QEP. One staff FGP that occasionally taught online courses suggested that writing would be the most beneficial not to just the students, but the community at large, as this QEP would help churn out graduates better prepared for life after UHD. They mentioned that since this was their belief, they could not make specific recommendations for this potential QEP topic.

Website Feedback for Online Education Topic

“I support this QEP initiative.”

“This was very well done and very informative. If Best Practices suggest that we should not have more than 20 students in our online classes, classes with 40, 50, 60, and more are not being well served. Selecting this topic as a QEP topic will definitely benefit many students and help many faculty. “

“Online enrollment is limited by the number of classes offered online. At the College of Business, we definitely see a strong trend toward enrollment in online classes - the face-to-face classes tending to fill only after the online enrollment in the same class have met the limit.”

“Despite that only 23% of UHD students are currently enrolled in online classes annually, the demand for online classes continues to grow and this QEP includes aspects of all the other proposals, therefore online class analysis and improvement would likely impact more UHD students in the future.”

"I don't think that online education is a viable QEP; there are too many faculty who are opposed to or have no interest in online education."

"My concern is the emphasis that online classes are gaining over F2F classes."

"This seems to be the most pressing problem that we can do something about right away. Second would be the writing, but we need to hire Writing Faculty as most of our English Faculty are literature people."

"I believe this topic represents the best expenditure of our qep effort, because of the broad use of online education, and the comparative lack of training and pedagogical resources available for online teaching. So many of our courses are delivered online without being an experience equal to the ftf version of the course. It becomes a disservice to our students to offer those courses, and we need a quality improvement effort on this front."

"I don't think we are ready to adequately handle online course preparation and assessment--in a medium that has much to prove in terms of its efficacy."

Overview of HIPS Topic

High-impact practices is an evolving field. The experts in the field are not willing to put a stagnant definition on it. We are continuing to develop ideas about high-impact practices.

Hallmarks high-impact practices are:

- Requires students to invest more time, effort, and active learning than is generally expected from a student in a particular course.
- Allows students to have meaningful interactions with faculty, staff, and peers, and to build sustained, substantive relationships as a result of these interactions.
- Allows students to experience diversity and/or engage people different from themselves.
- Increases students' engagement and achievement of course and/or program learning objectives.
- Increases students; retention and persistence to graduation.

Executive Summary

High Impact Practices (HIPS)

This QEP did not receive any votes from the QEP selection committee. The primary issue with this topic is that it is too broad and not well enough defined to move forward. There are two other topics (Community Engagement and Writing/Critical Thinking) that also involve HIPS, but are more focused. On the positive side, HIPS in general have moved the needle at other Universities and increasing numbers of Universities are adopting one or more HIPS as their QEP.

Positive aspects	Negative aspects
It was identified as the BHAG five years ago.	The topic is too broad for a successful QEP effort
Data shows that Universities that implement HIPS show an increase in retention and graduation rates.	Very resource intensive
	The University is still in the process of defining each of the HIPS
	Very premature for our University

Synopsis of Focus Group Discussion on HIPS

Both faculty and staff had a very prolific conversation. There was no input from students on this topic.

1. What do you like or not like about this QEP topic?

The participants thought that there were too many components in this QEP topic, ranging from undergraduate research to study abroad to internships. It would be more of a “shot gun approach than a rifle approach” if we chose this QEP. The discussion reflected that the one HIP that everyone was in agreement with was writing and critical thinking.

Having said that, the participants did agree that this topic fits with our vision and it could be implemented at all levels of course work. This would also allow for increased faculty involvement and could be implemented across colleges. Hence, it would have more coverage. In addition, faculty could move beyond the text books and engage students in different ways. It would allow faculty to meet the student where they are and expose them to different learning methodology.

2. How does this QEP fit the university’s mission?

Everyone in the room was in agreement that this QEP would impact career preparation. For example, with a service learning program, students are out in the field, doing and writing in their area of interest. It was brought forth that employers emphasize critical thinking, writing, and problem solving, each of which can be addressed in this QEP.

3. In what ways might this QEP topic impact recruitment, retention, and graduation rates?

In terms of recruitment, faculty were of the opinion that study abroad was very appealing to students. However, only a small percentage of students could gain that experience. We lack the resources and infrastructure to promote study abroad at this time. It was again emphasized that incorporating writing in any HIP with specific writing outcomes will be most beneficial to students, although not necessarily to retention.

It was recommended that we should promote HIPS within the University to speak to students’ personal development, and that can be done, for example, by developing portfolio and career goals. HIPS should be introduced in lower level courses; it is currently offered primarily in upper level courses. This would all add to retention, recruitment and graduation rates. Everyone was in agreement that we need to focus on two HIPS that may be of interest to the students and will help them be successful. It could be writing and “something else.”

4. In what ways do you see the QEP topic as having an overall impact on the university community (staff, student, faculty, administration)?

Staff and faculty have different roles to play. Staff only provide support. It's primarily the faculty that would shoulder the burden to implement the QEP. An example was given of learning communities that did well initially for the faculty, but not so much for the students, and then it even tapered off for the faculty due to increased workload.

Participants did say that HIPS would definitely make UHD more visible, especially with service learning, internships, and capstone projects. Staff recommended that student employment could be a HIP. There would be more participation from staff if that were the case. Internships within and outside of the University could lead to employment in most cases.

5. What are some of the concerns/ recommendations?

We should take a university-wide, continuous approach for the QEP. More training and integration opportunities should be provided. For example, writing could be combined with learner's community to have the greatest impact. The question that remains is, "how does it work for us?" For example, how would a learner community work for online students? Those questions remain to be addressed.

6. Are there any other comments?

HIPS should be determined based on what interests students the most and what value it brings to them. Community engagement and writing was thought of as the other QEP that would be interesting and are also HIPS.

Website Feedback for HIPS Topic

"After watching the video, I'm still not sure what a university-wide service learning program would look like."

"This seems to be the best proposal because HIPS can distinguish UHD from other schools (in particular, community colleges). HIPS should also help with student retention by increasing students' feelings of community and commitment to the university."

"We are doing much of this in various ways already--the presentation is too broad, not making the specific focus of the other presentations."