

Engagement Graduation Requirement Initiative The UCF Experience

Background and Goals for the Proposed Requirement

Identifying and shaping “The UCF Experience” has been discussed at UCF for more than a decade. The UCF Strategic Plan advocates this goal: “Make recommendations for the undergraduate UCF Experience that are both curricular and co-curricular, are consistent with the UCF mission, and will produce desired student outcomes.”

One aspect of this experience is to leverage the advantage that UCF has by its location, situated as it is in a region of 3.6 million people as the only comprehensive university. This advantage provides opportunities for student engagement activities such as co-operative education, internships, clinical, research, leadership development, and service-learning opportunities adequate for an undergraduate student population of 42,000.

Our university, therefore, should encourage our students to take advantage of this institutional advantage by participating in engagement activities, thereby enriching their personal lives, academic careers, and civic experiences.

Other institutions understand the value of such engagement opportunities, and a civic service requirement is not unusual for undergraduate students.

The UCF challenge is to design an engagement experience that provides learning experiences for the diversity of our student population, colleges, disciplines, and programs while simultaneously supporting an institutional mandate. We have learned that at UCF one-size seldom fits all.

The proposed design, therefore, includes the more traditional civic engagement activities and adds other experiences to foster academic success and personal growth. All these activities, however, have a common set of goals:

- to encourage students to be actively engaged in their education
- to structure student contacts with faculty members and professionals on an individual basis
- to build sustainable learning communities inside our large institution
- to increase the retention and graduation rates among undergraduate students
- to support faculty members in their need to grow as teachers and researchers
- to provide a common “UCF Experience” for all undergraduates that supports our goal to be “America’s leading partnership institution”
- to design “The UCF Experience” as a means to differentiate UCF from other institutions of higher education

Activities and Criteria for the Proposed Requirement

The purpose of the Engagement Graduation Requirement Initiative, in brief, is to enhance undergraduate student learning and career success, to create a hallmark UCF undergraduate experience, and to serve the central Florida community and beyond.

The vision of this initiative is for all UCF undergraduate students to participate in academic-based experiential learning, serving the interests of students, faculty, the university, and the community.

To meet these objectives, students will field-test classroom learning and skills in real world settings to enhance learning, and the products they create from these experiences will support their educational and career goals. Undergraduate experiential learning will augment faculty members' pedagogy, enliven their teaching, and support their scholarship. This requirement will further the university's goal of being America's leading partnership university and serve our region and state.

Activities that are in place, that meet the proposed graduation requirement, and that have been completed by 80% of our undergraduate students by the time of graduation are the following:

1. capstone courses that meet the criteria
2. clinicals
3. cooperative education
4. fine arts projects that meet the criteria
5. honors program
6. internships that meet the criteria
7. LEAD Scholars
8. leadership development
9. practica that meet the criteria
10. service-learning
11. studies abroad that meet the criteria
12. undergraduate research that meets the criteria

Following are the criteria to be met by the activities listed above or by any new engagement activity recommended by a college to qualify that activity as a graduation requirement:

- a. activity shall be credit-bearing (a minimum 1 credit hour)
- b. activity shall demonstrate personal growth, civic engagement, or academic engagement
- c. activity shall be of appropriate duration (a minimum of 15 hours of engagement)
- d. activity shall have faculty or other professional mentoring
- e. activity shall have a structured student reflection
- f. activity shall have clearly stated learning objectives
- g. activity shall have approved assessment design

Many existing activities occur during a student's four-year career, which fulfill the proposed graduation requirement. Here is a brief summary.

Freshman Year: connecting with the campus. Students beginning their college careers are likely to be involved with the campus. In fact, freshman year is an excellent time to participate in an engagement activity that can spark other activities during a student's college career. Existing engagement activities appropriate for freshmen include:

Honors College
LEAD Scholars
service-learning

Sophomore Year: connecting with the community. Sophomore year is a time for students to look beyond the campus. Among the existing community engagement activities at UCF that meet the criteria are the following:

EXCEL
Honors College
LEAD Scholars
leadership development
service-learning

Junior Year: connecting with the field of study. Many students connect with their major during their junior year. This can be an exciting time for students to practice what they learn in the classroom. Engagement activities appropriate for juniors that meet the UCF criteria include:

co-op
clinical
fine arts projects
internships
practica
study abroad
undergraduate research (RAMP, McNair, SMART, contract and grant)

Senior Year: putting it all together. During the senior year, students synthesize their learning and experiences of their university career. Some possible engagement activities that meet the UCF criteria for seniors are:

capstone course
Honors in the Major
fine arts performance
Orientation Team
service-learning

Implementation for the Proposed Requirement

Upon approval by the university, students completing one of the above activities will be certified as completing the engagement requirement. Programs that wish to supplement the above list of acceptable activities may provide details establishing that the activity meets the engagement criteria and is worthy of certification as a "UCF Engagement Activity." An Engagement Council composed of faculty members, staff members, and students will consider requests for additional activities as well as other issues related to this initiative. The requirement will be in place for students graduating under the catalog in which the requirement is published.

The Future of the UCF Experience Phase Two: After the Proposed Requirement

Requiring a single engagement activity for graduation is the first step in developing a comprehensive UCF experience focused on student engagement. The larger goal of The UCF Experience is to embed engagement experiences in all four years* of a student's college career. This goal subscribes to a developmental design for student engagement, supporting personal growth with an ever increasing complexity of experiences during an undergraduate career.

An Engagement Certificate, awarded upon graduation to students who qualify, will reward students who complete four years* of approved engagement activities. A holistic approach to student development will inform this fully-developed UCF Experience, and the activities will reflect cognitive, affective, and behavioral growth. A menu of curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular activities qualifying students for the Engagement Certificate will be developed in concert with the Student Government Association, Student Development and Enrollment Services, Faculty Senate, and colleges. Student portfolios will track student participation in these engagement activities.

The goal of a comprehensive, university-wide engagement initiative is admittedly ambitious. The implementation of a requirement for a single engagement activity, however, will be the catalyst for the ultimate four-year UCF Experience program. The full UCF Experience can be implemented within three years of the approval of the graduation requirement.

* two-year design for AA students

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