

## QEP Proposal 4

Title: The Mocs Living Learning Community: A Comprehensive and Collaborative UTC First-Year Student Experience and Living Learning Community

Summary: A comprehensive, collaborative, cross-campus plan to place all incoming first-year, new-to-UTC college students in one freshmen living learning community with key common academic and experiential elements that can be scaled. This plan makes the most of the best space on campus for the first iteration of this community of incoming first-year students—West Campus—which was designed to facilitate the creation of community. Mocs LLC students will all take one common course and each section of this course will be connected to another class, many if not most of which will be among those typically taken by first-year students to meet General Education requirements. This freshmen LLC is for all students not already participating in a pre-existing or planned residential college, residential learning community, or other cohort. The Mocs LLC will also promote adaptations for commuting first-year students and, in a second phase focused on the degree-granting colleges, transfer students.

Rationale/Problem Statement/Growth Opportunity: Students living on campus in their first year are vulnerable to homesickness and overall dissatisfaction due to their move to a new, often unknown environment with little or no sense of community when they arrive. Our current housing structures largely employ apartment living for the bulk of our students, structures that are easy to sell to students but difficult in which to actually create the community that will retain them. An intentional living learning community that reaches each incoming student not already seated in an existing or planned residential community—most of which, like the residential colleges for CECS, Honors, the RCOB, and CAS seek to engage students in and beyond the first year—will increase not just our students' sense of community and belonging to the campus, but their retention, their overall academic success, and their eventual graduation. A host of studies back this up and in fact, it was because of their impact that LLCs became another in the AACU's list of High Impact Practices. A truncated list of relevant references follows. In addition, including a course focusing on diversity, equity, and inclusion that will meet whatever revised general education outcome will encompass this category as the single common course all of these students take ensures that understanding diversity and one's own cognitive processes will be among the first issues these students encounter when they come to UTC.

Expected Outcomes/Impact on Student Learning or the Learning Environment: With the right infrastructure and partners at the table, a university-wide first-year Mocs LLC can facilitate the creation of the kind of community and sense of belonging that students need to be retained at an institution. An academic core is central to this initiative as is the residential space, staffing, programming, and curriculum. But all of these pieces must be carefully interwoven in order for the model to succeed. The Mocs LLC should achieve the following for an initial pilot of 500 freshmen living in West Campus: 1. the successful delivery of two connected first-year courses that emphasize diversity, equity, and inclusion; 2. the execution of an integrated residential curriculum that is an extension of the baseline "Brain Class," the common course all of these students will take; 3. the provision of activities in the classroom, in the residential space, and out of the classroom that strengthen social bonds between students and generate planned and organically appearing study and work groups. All of these outcomes lead toward these students' retention, academic success, and overall satisfaction with their UTC experience. In the long run, this kind of strengthened community can further animate and enliven our campus while vastly increasing loyalty among our alumni.

Strategies/Actions to be implemented: First-year students, first stage:

All residential students in the first iteration of the Mocs LLC will live in West Campus Housing; this plan does NOT necessitate that all residential Mocs LLC classroom cohorts live in the same apartment or even the same floor of the building, just that they all do live in this central facility.

All first-year Mocs LLC students will take two common courses. The first of these courses—the Brain Class—will count toward whatever diversity/equity/inclusion requirement the revised UTC General Education curriculum contains. (While this proposal includes a proposed common DEI class, this could easily be revised to something else; the main issue is that the common and connecting course needs to meet a general education requirement unique to us and that immediately prompts students to consider and process issues of diversity that directly confront them when they arrive on campus; in addition, a course of this nature will also address issues of learning and how students can best maximize the cognitive science offered in the course in order to strengthen their own learning and student success. A course that meets these requirements could potentially eliminate the need for a non-departmentally affiliated 1-credit hour USTU course that now attempts to meet similar outcomes for this particular cohort.) More on the Brain Class is below. The second course will be a second course that will likely, but not necessarily, meet general education requirements; each second course will be linked to a particular section of the Brain Class. More on the development of these courses is also below. This plan necessitates investment in faculty resources and faculty and course development, investment outlined in Resources Needed. It is not assumed that these additional teaching needs will be met by existing faculty. These courses will be linked in the university schedule and advisors building freshmen schedules will have clear information regarding what general education sections are indeed linked to the Brain Class. Advisors will be able to focus first on scheduling students for their connecting course, assured that a section of the Brain Class will be attached to it. All sections of the Brain Class will be capped at 25 students; all connecting courses will be capped at 35 students.

Faculty teaching the Brain Class will each teach 3 sections of it in the fall; all of these faculty members will teach in their respective disciplines in the spring. The Brain Class will address issues of perception, implicit bias, and prejudice as well general issues of cognition as they pertain to learning, writing, quantitative skills, and overall college success. The Brain Class will be developed by a multi-disciplinary faculty team and be offered by faculty from a range of disciplines; this is, in other words, largely a generalist class. There will be opportunities in the Brain Class for individual faculty to highlight issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion in their own disciplines. Depending on the data collected regarding common courses taken by first-time freshmen, faculty teaching those courses will be solicited to link a section of their courses with a section of the Brain Class. These two groups of faculty will meet in the spring, in the summer, and regularly throughout the fall semester. Participating in these teaching cohorts will be considered its own faculty learning community. A primary expectation for all of these faculty members is that they will participate in out-of-the-classroom and residential programming. Their roles as academic leaders for these freshmen will be critical to the success of the Mocs LLC. Student-faculty interaction is key to student retention and satisfaction and such interactions must be intentionally generated; as noted in *Living Learning Communities that Work* (2018), “an LLC could offer a course for credit taught by a regular member of the faculty, but if that course does not take advantage of the learning community inside the LLC (e.g., the cocurricular activities offered, the propinquity of the students’ living environments, the special events the community hosts), then it is just a course, like any other course offered at the university (127).

While the Brain Class will address the issues of bias, perception, and general cognition as they affect us as learners and as humans in the world, its work is incomplete without a complementary and fully developed experiential curriculum. All students, whether commuting or residential, will be required to attend a set number of programs and events; cognitive-health related activities will be organized in the

ARC to support commuting students. Much of this curriculum will, for the residential students, take place in the residence hall; out-of-class activities will be available to all Mocs LLC students regardless of their residential status. This curriculum will give place and face to issues of bias and inequity introduced in the course, issues that require students and residential staff to introduce Chattanooga and our region through a variety of activities and events that are co-planned by the faculty teaching the courses and the residential staff teaching the residential curriculum. Many of these are already in place and could easily be incorporated in such a curriculum, events connected to our Read 2 Achieve Program, our Office of Multicultural Affairs, and our office of Women and Gender Studies. Rather than create numerous new activities, this project will require an intentional collaborative use of existing opportunities on campus and in Chattanooga. These events and other socially focused events are critical for the intentional creation of community among these students. This residential and collaboratively developed curriculum allows residential staff to utilize their own creativity to meet the experiential needs of The Brain Class and its two key prongs—diversity, equity, and inclusion AND physical and cognitive health. Possible relevant residential experiential activities could include, but are not limited to, the following:

- City history tours and guided or intentional city walks
- Visits to local and regional sites of civil rights significance in Atlanta, Nashville, and Birmingham
- Faculty/administrator/staff/community member visits and “discernment” events that demonstrate how individuals on our campus and in our community have overcome marginalization and other obstacles to attain professional success
- Service trips to and with area organizations that illustrate different forms of inequity in our communities and how they are being addressed (La Paz, Habitat for Humanity, the Urban League, Chattanooga Food Bank, etc.)
  - Movie nights and social events that celebrate diverse communities and sensibilities
- Regular sessions that explore the strengthening of cognition function such as meditation and yoga
  - Group exercise sessions that have also been demonstrated to strengthen cognitive function
- Recreation activities that introduce students to Chattanooga’s rich outdoor resources and that also have been shown to strengthen cognitive function
- Safe zone/bystander/other relevant trainings that have been shown to decrease the likelihood of Title IX incidents and offenses linked to racism/sexism/ableism, etc.

First-year students, second stage:

The Mocs LLC second stage will expand the model into additional living spaces on campus. Additional faculty will be hired or brought into the program as is necessary.

Transfer students, second stage:

Although beyond the scope of this proposal, transfer students who will reside on campus should be heavily recruited into existing residential colleges and/or LLCs. In addition, transfer commuting students should also be incorporated into some kind of learning community with a designated location on campus solely for them. It is the recommendation of this proposal that transfer students be uniquely surveyed, perhaps will focus groups and other techniques, to explore how best to create community within that circle and/or how to best draw these students into existing communities.

Students: Phase 1: ~700 first-time, first-year undergraduates with ~550 in West Campus with 150 commuting students.

Phase 2: Additional groups of first-time, first-year undergraduates as determined by size of building and group. All first-year transfer students (recruiting by all residential colleges and all degree-granting colleges).

A model like this one for the Mocs LLC could eventually ensure that EVERY student on the UTC campus has been touched by it.

Assessment: Assessment for the Mocs LLC will be handled in two ways: first, via the normal channels of residential life assessment adjusting for the learning outcomes of the Brain Class's residential curriculum; second, with additional tools developed and administered by graduate students who apply and are accepted into the four GA lines affiliated with the program. Assessment of our currently LLCs, RLCs, and RCs is ongoing and these students will simply be tagged in Banner as are our current residential students and tracked regarding retention, GPA, and graduation. In addition, tools like surveys and focus groups can be used to gauge the students' satisfaction and "feeling of belonging" over the course of their first year, plus.

Resources Needed: Funding will be required for the following:

Mocs LLC coordination: \$100,000.00

This funding could be configured in a range of ways, depending upon the leadership model decided upon; whomever this/ese coordinators may be, s/he/they will largely in a liaison and communication capacity; s/he/they report to the provost and the VC of Enrollment Management but will work with the head of housing, OPEIR, the faculty involved, and all other relevant parties.

10 tenure-track faculty members @ \$70,500 (\$50,000 salary plus \$20,500 benefits)  
each: \$705,000.00

This part of the proposal is critical. Students need to interact with invested, tenure-track faculty who will be hired with the expectations connected to this initiative; department heads need to feel the benefit of this initiative at the level that matters most to them. The Provost would approve which departments could make these hires.

Residential curriculum support to cover student programming, travel, museum admissions, food, etc.: \$150,000.00

Professional development funding for all faculty and staff involved in the collaborative elements of the LLC particularly coordination between the Brain Class and its residential curriculum (faculty teaching courses linked to sections of the Brain Class will all receive an additional planning stipend as will participating hall directors and resident assistants: \$200,000.00

Funding for four graduate assistant lines to be used for assessment, additional residential assistance, and other programmatic needs @\$17,618/GA:  
\$70,472.00

Total projected cost: \$1,225,472.00

Research/Best Practices Gathered to Date: There are many resources that emphasize the benefits of LLCs in student retention, success, and overall satisfaction with their undergraduate experience, as well as the impact of coursework focused on diversity. The AAC&U's resources are also abundant on these

topics: <https://www.aacu.org/node/4084>. Below are only a few of the most recent and potentially relevant:

Bañales, Josefina Kira Hudson Banks & Meghan A. Burke. (2021). The impact of a diversity intervention on White college students' colour-blind racial attitudes, *Whiteness and Education*, 6:1, 1-18, DOI: 10.1080/23793406.2020.1867480

Caviglia-Harris, Jill. (2021). Community is key: estimating the impact of living learning communities on college retention and GPA, *Education Economics*, DOI: 10.1080/09645292.2021.1958167

Fosnacht, Kevin & Polly Graham. (2021). Is a HIP Always a HIP? The Case of Learning Communities, *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, DOI: 10.1080/19496591.2021.1885423

Inkelas, Karen Kurotsuchi; Jessup-Anger, Jody E.; Benjamin, Mimi; Wawrzynski, Matthew R.. (2018). *Living-Learning Communities That Work: A Research-Based Model for Design, Delivery, and Assessment*. Stylus Publishing. Kindle Edition.

Makhene, Mammotsa. (2019). *The Role of Curriculum Content in College Diversity Courses: A New York College Case Study*. Dissertation. Milano School of International Affairs, Management, and Urban Policy of The New School.

Paige, S.M., Wall, A.A., Marren, J., Rockwell, A.D., & Dubenion, B. (2017). *The Learning Community Experience in Higher Education: High-Impact Practice for Student Retention* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315279695>

Richardson, Lawrence. Jennifer Volberding & Melissa L. Zahl (2020) The Impact of a University Approved Diversity Course on Undergraduate Students' Multicultural Awareness, *SCHOLE: A Journal of Leisure Studies and Recreation Education*, 35:1, 28-40, DOI: 10.1080/1937156X.2020.1720461