

# QEP PROPOSAL

## EQUIPPING STUDENTS TO FACILITATE PUBLIC DISCOURSE

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### THE NEED

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Democracy has been described as a grand public conversation in which citizens engage in discourse to explore and develop governing policies on issues of common concern. To be effective, it follows that this discourse should be conducted in an orderly fashion, one characterized by respect, openness, objectivity and purpose. It would be increasingly difficult to cite instances of that being the case in the United States. What is needed is a concerted effort to improve the quality of public discourse, and university campuses would seem to provide appropriate settings for that to occur. This proposal calls for an effort to equip faculty with the skills to impart to students the capacity to participate in and to facilitate meaningful, structured citizen discussion of major policy issues.

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### THE BACKGROUND

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In 2006, the [Interactivity Foundation](#), a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the quality of public discourse, selectively identified a cadre of about a dozen faculty members from disparate fields and a number of U.S. campuses for an intensive training program. UNC Charlotte was the only university to have two faculty members selected. These faculty members were trained in the Foundation's "facilitation process" – a structured approach to leading small groups of citizens (including students) in the exploration of public policy issues. These instructors, in turn, incorporated these skills into their curricula in two ways: One was to teach stand-alone classes, conveying these new skills directly to students; the other was to incorporate discussion facilitation techniques into existing courses. The results have been remarkable. Students completing these courses report and demonstrate greater capacity for learning. They testify to improving their performance in all classes because of the innovative perspective they now bring to each course. Instructors who have completed this training experience and introduce the process in their classrooms report livelier student discussions with useful results, especially in group projects. At the university where these techniques were pioneered, growing evidence points to improved retention as well as performance in all classes for students completing the training. Students expand the communication dimension of their academic experience, acquiring improved abilities to present ideas, lead discussions and explore concepts.

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### THE PARTNERSHIP

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The Interactivity Foundation subsequently conducted a second training session for selected faculty in 2009 and has recognized the value of equipping university faculty with these skills. When approached by one of the UNC Charlotte faculty members who participated in the 2006 training session, the Foundation director embraced the concept of developing a more intensive training program on a single major campus. Consequently, the Foundation is willing to partner with UNC Charlotte in developing and conducting a multi-year effort to train a larger group of faculty in a single-campus, targeted program. The Foundation will assist with program planning, provide training for faculty members and provide access to all training materials, which can be printed locally for faculty and students. They will also assist in designing research projects to assess longitudinal effects of the program, projects that may foster scholarly and professional publications. The Foundation asks only that UNC Charlotte reimburse it for travel expenses incurred by Foundation fellows who would conduct the training.

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## HOW IT WORKS IN THE CLASSROOM

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In a student-centered discussion, the students themselves direct the discussion. One student serves as the discussion facilitator, and the discussion flows from student to student. The teacher serves as an observer and coach, making notes to assess student performance in the discussions and to guide future improvements. In the student-centered classroom, teams of 5-8 students form a discussion or “thinking group” that focuses on collaborative explorations of the course subject matter. Typically these discussion groups stay together for the semester and develop a high level of collegiality. The atmosphere in a student-centered classroom is described as a “sanctuary” -- students feel free to express contrasting perspectives without fear. The role of each team is typically to develop alternative ways to understand or present the course subject matter. These are collaborative discussions -- not debates -- and intellectual “showing off” is discouraged. The discussions are a success when the students work as a team in generating and developing contrasting approaches to thinking about, clarifying and presenting the subject matter.

Course content in the student-centered class is integrated into the class in a variety of formats. In some cases, the instructor first presents the content, and the students then develop their own understanding of the content through the discussions. In other cases, the student-centered discussion serves as a prelude for a subsequent content presentation delivered by the instructor. The discussion groups become, in effect, a learning team that explores questions about the content area as their thoughts evolve into possibilities.

The role of the instructor in the student-centered classroom is as mentor for students in addition to the more traditional instructor roles. The instructor provides feedback on the discussions and makes suggestions for improvement. This is done in a face-to-face meeting with support from observation notes made by the instructor.

Finally, the student-centered discussions use a structured discussion process. Students are trained to be discussion facilitators, and they learn how to become effective discussion participants. The student-centered classroom requires a much higher level of social skills than is typically required in a classroom.

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## THE INITIAL APPROACH

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Faculty from UNC Charlotte and Fellows from IF will collaborate on the design of a course using the student-centered discussion approach in selected freshman seminars as a pilot test. IF will conduct a workshop on the student-centered teaching approach for a team of 12-16 faculty and staff who will be teaching the freshman seminars. The student-centered discussion approach could be pilot tested in the fall 2011 semester. A total of 12-16 course sections will use this approach. Each of these sections will link to the Crossroads Charlotte initiative.

IF will work with the course leader at UNC Charlotte to develop an approach to monitor the seminars as they are being taught so this pilot effort can lead to a successful model that can be transferred to others. Also, IF will work with the UNC Charlotte course leader to create a way for the faculty to share their experiences with each other.

IF will work with the Institutional Research staff at UNC Charlotte to develop an evaluation of this course on student success. This effort is likely to include a longitudinal analysis of how students apply the skills they learned in this course in subsequent courses. Other areas of interest include the sustainability of the relationship groups that were formed, the continuing connection between the students and the professor in the course, and students’ assessments over time of the impact of the course on their academic success. It is expected that IF and UNC Charlotte faculty might collaborate on research papers coming out of these studies

IF and the faculty at UNC Charlotte will review the course experiences and develop plans for the future use of this approach at UNC Charlotte. This review could occur in early January 2012.

Should there be a discussion to broaden the use of the student-centered discussion approach in more sections, IF will work with selected faculty at UNC Charlotte to prepare them as trainers for additional workshops.