

Professional Experience and Knowledge (PEAK)
Francis Marion University
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PEAK is the result of a broad-based, campus-wide effort to develop a long-range strategy to improve student learning. PEAK builds on the successful Ready to Experience Applied Learning (REAL) program that was initiated in 2008 at FMU. While the REAL program has provided students with a rich array of experiential learning opportunities PEAK focuses on professionalism. REAL broadens students' perspectives, largely through travel opportunities; PEAK will foster skills and experiences that are attractive to employers. PEAK does not replace the REAL program; instead, it provides a necessary complement, one that help students transition from school to careers.

PEAK was developed based on extensive research as well as on input from university faculty, students, and stakeholders. Instrumental in the development process were two surveys distributed to faculty and students that gathered information about the value and benefits of professionalization activities. In addition, focus groups were conducted with a group of students and a group of business leaders. A literature review also has helped to pinpoint the benefits of professional experience as it pertains specifically to FMU students, taking into account their particular demographic characteristics.

PEAK goals involve students understanding how academic learning can be applied in professional contexts, developing students' career-readiness skills, and increasing opportunities for internships and other professional experiences. PEAK is designed to develop students' "soft" skills such as etiquette, interpersonal communication, resume building, interviewing, professional appearance, networking, and provide professional experiences. The PEAK program addresses these needs through non-traditional, out-of-the-classroom experiences. The program goals will be measured through both internal and external assessments that evaluate how students and employers regard the provided experiences.

FMU has devoted significant resources to supporting the QEP, including allocating funds for the program and creating organizational structures to disburse these funds in the form of PEAK grants. The award for academic year 2018-2019 was \$65,000, which will increase to \$100,000 for academic year 2019-2020. It is estimated that \$30,000 will be added to the fund each year for the following three years 2020-2023. Of the \$65,000 first year funding, \$7,500 was set aside for a total of five \$1,500 Departmental Planning Grants designed to jumpstart the process of creating new PEAK program activities.

As recommended by the PEAK Committee, which was formed in Spring 2018, the Provost awards grants to individual faculty members and departments to support professionalization activities for students. Faculty members and departments submitted the first grant proposals to conduct nontraditional learning activities that support the PEAK program learning objectives in Fall 2018.

In summary, Francis Marion University has developed PEAK, a Quality Enhancement Plan that demonstrates institutional capability for initiating, implementing, completing, and assessing professionalization activities for students. Overall, PEAK will improve students' career-readiness through expanding students' knowledge of their intended professions and enhancing their professional skills.