To the UHD Community:

The selection of a Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) is critical to the future of our University and comes at an important juncture in our institutional life — our 40th anniversary. Our regional accrediting body, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC), requires that all member institutions develop a QEP. In the Handbook for Review Committees, SACSCOC makes it clear that the QEP must "enhance student learning," that it must engender campus-wide buy-in and participation, be "forward-looking," and "transform" the learning process. They write, "The plan launches a process that can move the institution into a future characterized by creative, engaging, and meaningful learning experiences for students."

Last year, while preparing for our Summer Leadership Retreat we made a University-wide call for possible QEP topics. Committees of faculty and staff prepared presentations, gathered assessment data and presented possible topics. During the fall 2014 semester, we further encouraged discussion of the topics by making the presentations during Faculty Senate meetings. The proposals were made available to the entire campus community via video streaming. The QEP Selection Committee prepared a thoughtful report summarizing the process and evaluating the pros and cons of each proposal, before making their final recommendations.

I have reviewed the report and your feedback. I have engaged in conversations with alumni, employers and partner organizations. I have consulted with faculty, staff and student leadership. Throughout these conversations, I have seen how the QEP provides us with an opportunity to continue to "transform" our University in three important ways: how our students learn, how we demonstrate that learning, and how we build distinction as an institution.

Clearly, each of the potential QEP topics explores a critical area for student success. Our faculty members are constantly evaluating their efforts in the classroom — revising their lectures, assignments, and tests to improve the education we provide to our students. Many professors regularly express concerns over the student learning gaps that persist across the curriculum and the different modalities. There are many suggestions on how to restructure and revise our courses, whether offered online, face-to-face, or in hybrid formats. Our faculty members regularly review their programs’ learning outcomes and develop different strategies for teaching and supplementing student learning in gateway courses — those classes that stand as barriers to student success. Professors look for ways to improve the quality of our students' writing and enhance critical thinking skills so that our students graduate with the ability to evaluate difficult problems and effectively communicate their ideas. Many faculty and staff integrate high-impact practices, such as writing-intensive courses, community engagement, undergraduate research, or service learning — and seek opportunities to further integrate those experiences in the classroom and in the community.

After thorough deliberation, the QEP Selection Committee recommended that we select either writing and critical thinking, or writing based on community engagement and service learning. After considerable thought and consultation, I have decided that we will focus on the latter. SACSCOC requires that the president, as chair of the Leadership Team, guide the entire reaffirmation process, provide active leadership and ensure continuing support for the reaffirmation process. I intend to be actively involved in this process and will be visiting each academic college, the Faculty Senate, the Staff Council, and the Student Government Association to discuss the QEP, and to provide vision to the Leadership Team and to the QEP Steering Committee.

There are several factors that influence our decision to focus on Community Engagement and Writing. First, it is consistent with our vision: "The University of Houston-Downtown will be a premier city university engaging every student in high-impact educational experiences and
ensuring that students graduate with 21st century skills." It allows our University to increase and better assess the impact of our engagement with the community, and improve student learning in an intentional way.

Second, it will allow us to thoughtfully integrate the opportunities for students to serve their community from the moment they arrive at the University to the time they graduate, and to develop leadership and critical thinking skills, along with an ethos of participation, which is essential to citizenship and democracy.

Third, students will be encouraged through research, reflection and writing to address the systemic problems where service can contribute to social change, improve social justice and address structural inequality.

Fourth, we recently earned Carnegie Community Engagement Classification. This was a challenging effort. The Carnegie Foundation classification application requires considerable empirical evidence. UHD was the only institution in Houston and one of only five institutions in Texas to earn this designation in 2015. In five years, we will begin the re-certification process, so carrying out this QEP will contribute to our national recognition and distinction, both from the Carnegie Foundation and the President's Honor Roll.

Finally, the selection of community engagement as the QEP topic has the potential to transform and build national distinction for UHD. Mark Twain said, "The two most important days in your life are the day you are born and the day you find out why." Forty years ago, UHD was established to serve the Houston community. Along the way, we discovered why. UHD has developed a reputation for engaging students, encouraging them to apply what they learn to real world settings, and improving the broader community through our research, teaching and service. This week several of us met with Cameron Waldner, CEO of Volunteer Houston. Our SGA president, John Locke, was struck by the organization's tagline, "Connecting people with their passions." Locke said, "That's what UHD does. We help students find themselves and through volunteerism connect their passion with professions and careers." After the meeting, Mr. Waldner wrote a letter to the George H. W. Bush family stating that UHD is "the most civically minded, volunteer-driven campus in Houston — arguably the country."

His words are a reflection of your valued accomplishments. It is our faculty, staff and students who undertake the community projects for which we are known. Whether it is at Crockett Elementary, the House of Tiny Treasures, the Buffalo Bayou Cleanup Service Project, work with the Harris County jails, volunteer tax preparation, tutoring in elementary and middle schools, the sustainable garden, work with Project Grad, Citizenship Month, supervision of internships, or other service, UHD is making a difference to the future of Houston.

Our work has the potential to propel UHD to the national stage. The QEP will not only transform learning, it will help transform our University into a premier city university. I salute all of you for the hard work you have put into the QEP selection process. I look forward to working with you on this exciting pathway of success. UHD truly is Houston's Major Opportunity!

Sincerely,

Bill Flores
UHD President