

Enhancing the Undergraduate Experience through Research & Creative Activity

Quality Enhancement Plan

Prepared by:
QEP Planning Committee
Contact us at qep@gmu.edu; 703-993-8652

Section 1: Vision

Share your vision of how your proposed topic has the potential to transform an issue related to student learning at the institutional level. Consider your audience of the Mason community members – why should we embrace this topic and how will it enhance student learning at Mason?

Enhancing the Undergraduate Experience through Research and Creative Activity directly and powerfully addresses the challenges that face higher education in the coming decades. As a university we strive to teach our students to think beyond what is already known and generate new knowledge. Mason already has strong undergraduate programs in original scholarship that should be expanded throughout the University to allow more students to participate in research and creative activities. By providing new opportunities while expanding and continuing to support existing programs across all disciplines we will encourage our students to explore new areas of scholarship and make discoveries, both personal and professional. Undergraduates participating in research become part of a community of lifelong learners and of the subset of learners within a discipline, generating opportunities to discuss and explore ideas that may be fuzzy in class with peers and with those more advanced in the discipline, including professionals in the community. It is through this participation, whether sharing thoughts of expression in the visual arts, strategies for diplomacy in public affairs, or positing rationales for physical or chemical responses, that what often remains unstated – the *analytical process* – becomes apparent, modeled, shared, challenged, and applied practically in other contexts. By providing students with outlets for their energy, enthusiasm, and intellect through supervised projects in original scholarship, Mason will support student growth and development, deepen their learning, increase faculty-student interaction, enhance their education, benefit faculty research programs, and transform George Mason University. In 2008 George Mason University was ranked as the #1 university in the up-and-coming category by U.S. News and World Report¹. This list identifies "schools that have recently made the most promising and innovative changes in academics, faculty, students, campus or facilities." Enhancing the undergraduate experience through research and creative activity will further strengthen Mason's reputation as an innovative university that remains focused on students.

¹ U.S. News and World Report, August 22, 2008.

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Section 2: Congruence with Mission and Goals

Demonstrate how your proposed topic is consistent with Mason's mission and 2014 Strategic Plan.

Enhancing the undergraduate experience through research and creative activity will enhance George Mason University's reputation as a national research university while contributing to the University's mission and strategic plan. The 2014 Strategic Plan identifies the major strategic goals to guide Mason's development through 2014. As part of the goal to raise our profile as that of a nationally ranked university, the plan states that "campus leaders must find more ways to invest in the creation of a climate that nurtures and supports scholarly inquiry and creative activity". The plan also explicitly calls for the university to 'nurture and support research, scholarship, and creative activity not normally supported by funding agencies.' Achieving these goals will require research and creative activity across all disciplines, and this QEP topic directly addresses these issues. The 2014 Strategic plan also includes challenges in balancing research and teaching and a new emphasis on lifelong learning, both of which will be addressed by this topic. It calls for increasing infrastructure investments, including University libraries, necessary facilities, and ancillary services, to support significantly expanded research and creative activity, expanding opportunities for faculty to interact with students outside the classroom, and increasing research opportunities for undergraduate students such that their baccalaureate education is further enhanced by working side-by-side with faculty and graduate student researchers. All of these goals and strategies will be addressed by the proposed topic.

Section 3: Student Learning Outcomes

Identify at least four measurable student learning outcomes that your proposed topic expects to address. Specifically, *if* your plan were to be adopted, what would students know and be able to do as a result?

1. Students will be able to connect the central ideas of their discipline with a community outside their classrooms.
2. Students involved in research and/or creative activity will be able to analyze the relevance of their education in the world beyond the university.
3. Students will be able to identify and assess the validity of key assumptions and ethical dimensions of a research/creative project in their field/discipline.

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4. Students will be able to reflect on and identify the limitations of their own and others' research/creative projects.
5. Students will be able to articulate the central idea of their research/creative projects to their peers.
6. Students will be able to apply some of the key methodologies of their discipline in a research and/or creative project.

Other Student Outcomes

7. There will be an increase in plans to attend graduate school among students participating in undergraduate research and/or creative activity.
8. Students who participate in an undergraduate research and/or creative activity will report positive faculty/student interaction.
9. Higher retention rates will be achieved by students who participate in undergraduate research and/or creative activity compared to those who do not.
10. Students will report an increased academic challenge that was a direct result of their research project and/or creative activity.

Measures

Many of these learning outcomes could be assessed through participation in *Innovations*, a celebration of student learning and research, and the production of a university publication.

Section 4: Possible Avenues for Implementation

Describe how your proposed QEP topic relates to an issue where there is momentum building on campus or an issue that would be significantly strengthened through added attention and resources. Include your ideas about possible strategies for implementing this topic so that we could obtain meaningful results. Where possible, highlight opportunities to build on current institutional initiatives and resources.

'Enhancing the Undergraduate Experience through Research and Creative Activity' is designed to challenge students and enhance their learning through:

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- a. Identifying potential undergraduate research or creative opportunities as they already exist and expanding them to include additional students, either as individuals or groups.
- b. The creation of undergraduate research or creative activities in departments where they do not currently exist.
- c. The expansion of the undergraduate apprenticeship program.
- d. The expansion of the Innovations research symposium to include research and creative activities from all levels and departments in the university.
- e. The creation of a University publication dedicated to undergraduate research and creative activities.
- f. The use of new media to display undergraduate research and creative activity in fields which in the past may have been limited to a one-time production.
- g. Funding, either internally or externally, to help foster research and creative activity.
- h. Encouraging collaboration, between students, students and faculty, and departments, to foster more dynamic research and creative activities in areas that cross several fields.
- i. The development of living-learning communities that support undergraduate research projects.

Through the expansion of undergraduate research and creative activity opportunities, more students will gain the ability to create real and meaningful advances in their education and in their chosen field. As Mason continues to showcase the research and creative talents of its students, there will be a snowball effect where more students will seek out and participate in research and creative activities, producing additional meaning to their education. An increase in the productivity of the University as a whole will be one of the long term effects of the adoption of this QEP topic. Students will be more competitive for jobs and for graduate schools due to their practical experience. Faculty will be more productive due to student accomplishments and cross-discipline interaction. The University as a whole will be more

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productive as a result of community and commercial partnerships which result from individual projects and research beyond the confines of the University. This QEP topic will take Mason to the next level as a nationally known research and learning institution.