

# The World as Text: Diverse Communities, Shared Understandings

## Quality Enhancement Plan

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### **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?

This QEP proposes an infusion of global perspective in the University General Education program at two levels: new first-year courses, across many disciplines, built around a common text or texts; and an upper-division major course designated as globally-focused. The current Global Understanding requirement would be replaced by this new structure.

At George Mason University, our internationally diverse student body and dynamic global programs present us with a unique opportunity. Through examination of the general education core subjects, our goal is to foster an expansive vision of liberal education that creates a sense of self understanding as it investigates the intersection of multiple international and transnational contexts and identities, which we will refer to in shorthand throughout this proposal as “human cultures”. Orienting our general education program within this global context will promote a more vigorous engagement with the ideals of liberal education. AAC&U's Project LEAP summarizes these ideals as “Essential Learning Outcomes” for college students today:

- knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world
- intellectual and practical skills such as:
  - inquiry and analysis
  - critical and creative thinking
- quantitative and information literacy
- written and oral communication
- teamwork for problem solving
- personal and social responsibility, including civic knowledge and engagement, both global and local
- integrative learning
- intercultural knowledge and competence
- ethical reasoning and action
- foundation skills for lifelong learning

(College Learning for the New Global Century, 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.

Mason's new mission statement speaks to the importance of a global understanding to include educating "men and women capable of shaping a new economy in a global community with vision, justice and clarity." Further, Goal #5 of the 2014 Strategic Plan calls for Mason to "develop more fully as a global university, in outreach, research and education, to promote increasing global competence among our students, while extending global and local awareness in the environmental area."

Few, if indeed any, activities of the modern large university cross more disciplinary boundaries, involve more resources (over 1,000 sections in an average semester), and affect the lives of all undergraduate students more comprehensively than the general education program. Yet at Mason, like many similar universities, the gen ed program has become difficult to manage, evaluate, and articulate to students and faculty because of its complexity. One key node of complexity at Mason is the Global Understanding requirement, currently satisfied by more than seventy courses and generating hundreds of sections per year. This requirement is central to the University's identity, mission, and goals; but it is virtually impossible to assess whether these goals are being realized in the current iteration.

This QEP proposes a reformulation of the current Global Understanding requirement into two parts: first, a group of new or revised courses at the 100 level using at least one of a limited set of common texts viewed through the lens of many disciplines and diverse human differences; second, an upper level "Globally Focused" course unique to each major, on the analogy of the current Writing Intensive model.

Considered together, these two courses will locate basic concepts integral to the general education curriculum within the shared understandings and differences in perspective of our heterogeneous university community, and bring an expanded global perspective to bear upon concepts primary to the students' major disciplines.

In the 100-level course, a common text might be a literary work, a film, a piece of music, a scientific treatise, a work of visual art, or some other recognized artifact of civilization. All units would be invited to create courses in which the interests of the discipline would be reflected in the common text, with additional emphasis on comparative analysis of the text's intersection with at least two human cultures. The texts (chosen by a faculty committee) will have substantial paradigmatic, historical, philosophical, scientific, or aesthetic import, but the definition of a text will be intentionally broad in order to accommodate and challenge students

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and faculty from the humanities, arts, sciences, professions, and other disciplines. Discussion of these texts will build on the global diversity of the Mason community and allow critical inquiry into the multiple contexts, historical and current, that the community embodies. The “common-text” model of curriculum design as envisioned here engages at least three of the ten “High-Impact Education Practices” – first-year experiences, common intellectual experiences, and diversity/global learning -- identified by George D. Kuh in a Project LEAP report to be published in October, 2008.

The upper-level courses will integrate global perspectives into a required course in the major to deepen contextual understanding within disciplines and to increase global awareness. A committee of faculty from across the university will oversee these courses and certify that they meet criteria designed to foster the relevant learning outcomes. In some cases, these courses might be designed to fulfill the gen ed synthesis requirement as well.

In partnership with this invigorated global perspective in general education, immersive international, cross-cultural, and other experiences will be offered through co-curricular programs (perhaps building upon the Global Proficiency Certificate offered by University Life). Co-curricular certifications will receive formal recognition, and will take their rightful place alongside academic work as a significant way of developing global understanding.

### **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?

Students will be able to compare and contrast aspects of at least two human cultures distinct from the culture with which they self-identify.

Students will be able to analyze alternative points of view as held by various human cultures.

Students will be able to identify, analyze and evaluate their own assumptions with regard to cultural difference and identities.

Students will be able to identify and critique the credibility of resources/source material pertaining to at least two distinct human cultures.

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Students will engage in research and creative activity and as a result be able to demonstrate their synthesis of insights and knowledge drawn from studying the intersection of multiple human cultures.

### **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.

Resource needs associated with this topic include faculty support and development, curriculum and co-curriculum development support, advising, staff acquisition, and support for collaborative activities. Recurring investments in global education are made in most colleges already. This topic will focus and leverage those existing investments, as well as existing investments of service divisions. Removing the core requirement of Global Understanding will free resources that will be applied towards weaving a thread of global awareness throughout the undergraduate curriculum and co-curriculum.

Additional financial commitments, new and in-kind, will be needed to fine-tune existing general education courses to global interests, as well as encourage and support collaboration between disciplines on core texts. Funding for reduced class size at the 100 level may also prove to be desirable. The actual budget will be determined during the QEP planning process in consultation with the University Standing Committee on General Education, University faculty and students, and stakeholders in colleges and service divisions.

Upon implementing this QEP, the university would immediately convene a committee of faculty to begin refining learning objectives and choosing common texts to be used in the lower-level courses. For illustrative purposes, we offer the following examples of possible texts and some of their applications across disciplines:

Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*

Examination of evolutionary models in multiple disciplines

Historical uses of Darwin's theory and related ideas in various human cultures

Evolution theory and the history of scientific paradigms, Religion, and Education

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Biological, statistical, and scientific theoretical models as used in various scientific and nonscientific disciplines

Ludwig van Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 in D Minor, Op. 125

The enlightenment and revolutionary context of Beethoven and Schiller

Appropriations of the work

German Nationalism and historiography

Use as the European Union National Anthem

Use during the Olympics

Bernstein's "Freiheit" performance after the fall of the Berlin Wall

Quotation and adaptation in popular culture

Musical and cultural influences of the work on figures as various as Richard Wagner and Anthony Burgess

Herodotus, *The Histories*

Analysis of the contextual position of history and historiography

Depictions of The Other in reference to historical and contemporary contexts

Global perspectives: the influence of point of view on history and historiography

Influence of history on literature and cultural narrative in various settings

The *Ramayana* and/or *Mahabharata*

Pervasive influence of the epic(s) on cultures from India to Indonesia

Cultural import of adaptations such as Javanese and Balinese shadow plays

Religion, syncretism, and cultural practice

The relationship of religion, nationalism, epic, and art

Bertolt Brecht's *Galileo*

Effect of paradigm-changing scientific discoveries in various human cultures

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Principles of classical astronomy and Galileo's scientific reasoning (including lab simulations of his observations)

Scientific ethics: are all discoveries created equal? Are they communicated and received differently in different human cultures?

The scientist as hero and villain