

# Integrated Critical Communication for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

## 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?

Our proposal provides support for Mason's commitment to educating "21st century men and women capable of shaping a global community with vision, justice, and clarity." Mastering the content and processes of a particular field is not sufficient for graduates who aim to transform their communities, whether those communities are civic, professional, national, or global. The shaping of any community requires superior communication skills and the ability to critically choose and deftly employ a range of tools and approaches for communication. In an era in which information is plentiful but effecting substantive change is as difficult as ever, educating students to become master communicators should be central to the goals and mission of this university.

***Integrated Critical Communication for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*** (ICC-21) is designed to guide administrators, faculty, and staff at Mason in helping students develop crucial communication skills that will enable them to put their Mason education to use in shaping local and global communities. ICC-21 has several characteristics that allow it to draw on Mason's particular strengths and provide the kind of unique, trademark education that is expected of a "University to Watch." ICC-21 provides communication-education for future graduates who

- will need new skills to enable them to present their ideas in multimodal formats: 21<sup>st</sup>-century reports, proposals, editorials, mission statements, analyses, performances, classroom materials, policy statements, and online informational sites will require graduates to combine written, spoken, and visual information using a range of new communication technologies
- will be increasingly called upon to work across disciplinary, cultural, political, and social borders: integrating information, building coalitions, and collaborating with other professionals as they share their knowledge and inspire change in their workplaces and communities
- will be rewarded for their ability to make critical judgments about information, rhetorical angles, ethical implications, and professional relationships as they envision, research, compose, design, and publicize their work

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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.

The ICC-21 QEP serves GMU's mission by providing students with the skills and practices of critical engagement that will allow them to become "the new generation of leaders for the 21st century." ICC-21 specifically provides a mechanism for supporting "innovative and interdisciplinary undergraduate ... courses of study that enable students to exercise analytical and imaginative thinking and make well-founded ethical decisions" because the ICC-21 courses include critical thinking components (i.e., an engagement of analytical, imaginative thinking and ethical decision-making).

Additionally, we see this plan as highly entrepreneurial because it allows departments and programs to design educational experiences that most suit their students' communication needs (within the ICC-21 framework). It also builds upon and creates bridges among already-existing programmatic and curricular initiatives, including our General Education program, WAC, and Critical-Thinking Across the Curriculum, among others.

ICC-21 speaks directly to several of the recommendations detailed in the Strategic Goals for 2014 report. As the report notes, "[r]esponses to continuing changes in educational and research technology, and to student markets that increasingly depend on new technology, must be part of any core plan for the future." ICC-21 engages technologies not just at the level of their purpose (education or research) but at the more fundamental level of rhetorical action: that is, students need to be able to understand current communication technologies and how these technologies present new affordances and constraints for effective communication.

The 2014 vision document recommends that the university "expand the current cross-curricular academic initiatives in the improvement of teaching and learning, including Critical Thinking, Writing, Technology, and Global Studies." ICC-21 provides a bridge that connects these initiatives and allows students to synthesize and evaluate their work across the disciplinary and departmental silos that too often remain insulated rather than interconnected via the institution's organizational structure.

The vision document also recommends that the university "increase the quality of student outcomes by developing measures to quantify Mason's connections to the world of work and service." As we envision the implementation of ICC-21 as a Quality Enhancement Plan, service-learning and client-based communication projects can be built in as central opportunities for students to engage the 21<sup>st</sup>-century communication competencies in real-world contexts. Students who opt to create final portfolios will be able to demonstrate and evaluate not only their communication proficiencies, but also showcase the ways they have used those proficiencies to work with local, national, and global communities.

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### 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?

#### ICC-21 experiences will focus on five elements:

1. Overtly guiding student learning concerning at least **two of four communication components**—spoken, written, visual, and technological—via direct instruction and hands-on projects in such a way as to help students see relationships between the components
2. Aiding students in **adapting their core communication skills** as needed, with particular attention to how communicators adapt their methods as their content, discipline, purpose, situation, audience, and affordances change
3. Helping students see their communication work as **integrative** rather than isolated, for instance through experiences that encourage one or more of the following:
  - a. collaboration with other student-authors
  - b. collaboration with and/or outreach to groups or communities outside the university
  - c. integration of cross-disciplinary information
  - d. communicating across cultural and/or national borders
4. Emphasizing the need for **critical thinking related to the communication** of particular information, proposals, analyses, and/or policies, for instance through one or more of the following:
  - a. attention to ethical questions concerning—among other questions—the development and exchange of information, the power-relations between authors and recipients, the choice of communication means or methods, the responsibilities of researchers or leaders in sharing information
  - b. attention to social, political, and/or cross-cultural issues that arise in the communication process
  - c. attention to social and/or ethical issues raised particularly by 21<sup>st</sup>-century modes of communication: usability, access, ownership, performance
5. Increasing **students' awareness** of and ability to articulate their options, deliberations, and responsibilities as communicators

Students who complete at least one ICC-21 experience will thus be able to demonstrate

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- strong communication skills regarding at least two communication components, as measured by assessment of products/projects and/or by reflective writing about communication situations
- flexibility as communicators, as measured by comparative assessment of *multiple* products/projects and/or by assessment of reflective writing about communication situations
- ability to use integrative and/or collaborative processes to enhance communication, as measured by assessment of products/projects and/or by reflective writing about communication situations
- enhanced critical awareness of ethical, social, and/or technological challenges facing communicators in particular rhetorical situations, as measured by assessment of products/projects and/or by reflective writing about communication situations

Students who complete multiple ICC-21 experiences and seek to be recognized as advanced or master communicators should, in addition, be able to demonstrate the following, most likely through a print and/or online portfolio of work containing a critically-reflective element:

- Strong communication skills across all four communication components
- Advanced integrative and critical thinking skills regarding communicative endeavors

### **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.

Mason already has a nationally-ranked WAC program, one committed to giving students "frequent opportunities for writing across the university curriculum [so that they will] think more critically and creatively." The ICC-21 project would build on and expand the WAC program (not replace it) in order to help students transfer communication skills across modes, across disciplines, and beyond the borders of university coursework. As noted in the Vision 2014 document,

Over the last seven years, Mason has instituted four campus-wide academic initiatives related to teaching: 1) Writing across the Curriculum; 2) Technology across the Curriculum; 3) Critical Thinking across the Curriculum; and 4) Global Studies to strengthen further our expectations for what our students should know and be able to do.

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ICC-21 is designed to make specific connections between these initiatives at the curricular level. Because we see ICC-21 as both integrative and networked (in the sense that it works across and among the university's organizational units), it can provide an experiential synthesis that is currently unavailable to our students.

We do not envision ICC-21 as a new graduation requirement, either on the General Education model (X number of courses required) or on the Writing Intensive / Writing Across the Curriculum model (each department is responsible for integrating X number of ICC-21 experiences). Nor do we wish to specify exactly *what* curriculum or products students would need to encounter, or how those would be integrated into a curriculum or program.

Instead, we would like to encourage individual faculty, departments, schools, and programs to envision opportunities for implementing ICC-21 experiences in ways that

- enhance current learning goals, content material, (inter)disciplinary expectations, and learning experiences, through assignments that are defined locally in line with ICC-21 goals
- expand students' critical communication competencies in ways relevant to the content, issues, professional expectations, and social impacts of current courses or experiences
- draw on current faculty/staff expertise, and provide opportunities for faculty or staff to engage more deeply/broadly with critical communication experiences relevant to their students and their fields
- build on current infrastructure and resources, and provide targeted goals for enhancing those resources in ways that support both communication goals and broader educational goals of the program, unit, or department
- help contribute to a culture of communication on Mason's campus, by reaching a range of students in a range of settings while reinforcing common central tenets of ICC-21

**ICC-21 experiences could be implemented at Mason via some or all of the following endeavors:**

1. Revision of current course curricula to more overtly include the five ICC-21 elements: for example,
  - a. Many lower-division writing- and communication-focused courses, along with others whose learning goals or content align them with ICC-21 elements, already reach a large number of undergraduates, particularly at the general-education level. Some of these could be enhanced to meet ICC-21 expectations and to demonstrate to students how

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those expectations transfer from one course to another, thus adding more coherence to the educational experiences of first- and second-year students.

- b. Upper-division or specialized courses that already involve some ICC-21 elements could be revised to address those elements in a more integrative, overt, and/or enhanced manner, in ways directly relevant to the specific material at hand, helping students transfer skills and ways of thinking introduced in lower-division courses into situations more relevant to their personal and professional interests.
2. Creation of new courses or guided experiences that would fulfill the ICC-21 elements: for example,
    - a. new courses within majors or programs that focus explicitly on the intersection of disciplinary material with communication projects
    - b. new cross-disciplinary courses that use a communication-project to integrate content material from a range of fields in order to help students learn to respond to civic, national, or global issues
    - c. new internships, on or off campus, that help foster students' ICC-21 learning
    - d. specialized capstone or synthesis ICC-21 courses, during which students seeking advanced or master-level communicator status would revise and assemble works, and perhaps collaborate on new works, for a communications portfolio
  3. Creation or enhancement of co-curricular endeavors to emphasize ICC-21 goals: for example,
    - a. Elements of ICC-21 could be integrated into, or draw upon, programs already supported by the Center for Leadership and Community Engagement; the Center for Global Education; and various for-credit and non-credit internship programs sponsored by departments, programs, and colleges.
    - b. Programs sponsored by Student Life or Residence Life could be designed or revised to explicitly help students or student-groups integrate ICC-21 goals into extra-academic aspects of their Mason experience.
    - c. Student support services such as Career Services or Learning Support Services could incorporate ICC-21 elements into extant programs, or design new programs specifically to support 21<sup>st</sup>-century communication skills development.
  4. Support for faculty in learning strategies for teaching communication components with which they are unfamiliar: for example,

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- a. Faculty seeking assistance in developing communication pedagogies relevant to their fields and courses could participate in stipend-supported workshops to learn strategies for designing, supporting, and evaluating student communication projects.
  - b. Faculty seeking assistance in working with new communication technologies relevant to their fields and courses could participate in workshops and/or be assigned staff or student communications assistants.
  - c. Inter- and intra-disciplinary groups of faculty could meet in faculty learning circles, post information to common online spaces, collaborate on teaching-and-learning research, and otherwise share ideas across disciplinary boundaries, to promote exchange and coherence among Mason ICC-21 faculty.
  - d. In some cases, programs with demonstrated need and clear plans for ICC-21 programs could be receive resource-priority for faculty lines designated in whole or in part for ICC-21 teaching.
5. Support for the development of ICC-21 classroom and/or lab space or other resources to enable students to work collaboratively and with current communication technologies to produce communication projects: for example,
- a. Additional classroom space equipped with sufficient hardware and software to enable students to have hands-on in-class learning for at least part of their ICC-21 experiences
  - b. Additional communication-laboratory space, designed and supported by individual university programs or units (but coordinated across the university) to meet the particular needs of ICC-21 students under their purview for composing, editing, designing, and publishing student work
  - c. Additional communication-production hardware (laptop computers, cameras, recorders) and software made available to students for check-out and/or low-cost purchase
  - d. Specially trained ICC-21 staff and student consultants to staff labs, classrooms, dormitories, and hotlines in support of students working on communication projects
  - e. Support for off-campus research, community service, and/or presentations of student work related to ICC-21 projects
6. Enhancement and promotion of a culture of integrated critical communication to help drive student demand for these important skills and experiences:

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- a. Students who so desired could apply to be designated as having achieved "Communication Mastery" status and demonstrate, through a capstone course and/or independently-evaluated portfolio, that they have achieved particularly high competencies across the components and in service to a unified field, discipline, or civic project.
  - b. Students who so desired could apply to take part in a Student Communication Fellows program (before or en route to Mastery), during which they served as lab consultants, classroom assistants, and/or tutors for lower-division students in ICC-21 courses.
  - c. Student work produced as part of ICC-21 could be shared each year through a public Celebration of Communication or Project Recognition Week: since projects would be designed to effectively reach a range of audiences, such public demonstrations would help make the work of the Mason community accessible to and inspirational for our civic, professional, and governmental audiences.
7. Creation of an ICC-21 administrative body with a director and/or directing committee which, though not responsible for centralizing curriculum or resources, might
- a. Review applications from faculty and/or programs to have particular experiences officially designated as ICC-21
  - b. Help coordinate and publicize efforts, resources, support structures, and accomplishments
  - c. Review or arrange for review of advanced student portfolios and/or coordinate student ICC-21 consultants
  - d. Design and oversee local and/or university-wide assessment of ICC-21 endeavors