VCU Quality Enhancement Plan — Revised QEP

Executive Summary

This summary reflects changes discussed with the University community in response to SACSCOC site review team recommendations. The summary was drafted and refined in early summer, 2014. For the complete text of the SACSCOC recommendations and our responses, please see the menu at the right of this page.

Virginia Commonwealth University's Quality Enhancement Plan aspires to *learning that matters* by means of a cultural commitment to *generalizable education*, that is, *education that has substantial and lasting impact beyond any particular course, major or degree*. A truly generalizable education crosses domains and expands the boundaries of what the learner considers possible. This aspiration needs a proof of concept, a case-in-point (Park, 2005) that demonstrates what we mean by "generalizable education" and provides a key part of the foundation for building this culture at VCU. To that end, our QEP focuses on a perennially difficult curricular design challenge, one that is especially difficult for a research university: general education. While our current general education curriculum complies with SACSCOC standards, we seek to exceed those standards, and indeed to become leaders in the national conversation about how general education in the digital age can support increases in integrative thinking, and while doing so, lead to increases in digital fluency as well. We believe that personal, interactive, networked computing in all its varieties—if students are truly fluent in this medium—offers the richest opportunity yet for integrative thinking within and beyond

schooling. Our QEP situates curricular innovation and quality enhancement within this framework.

How do we do this? Our QEP begins by imagining general education as a *learning environment*. This learning environment, enriched and empowered across the curriculum by curricular and co-curricular strategies of digital engagement, leads to our QEP's two desired *learning outcomes*: integrative thinking and digital fluency. We believe that this QEP's focus will itself generalize across the university, eventually affecting students at all levels, including graduate and first professional students. The entire campus will benefit from the ongoing and inclusive commitment to curricular innovation and digital engagement represented by this initial case-in-point of our general education curriculum.

Our QEP's focus suggests three specific actions: 1) crafting a 30-credit-hour general education curriculum common to all schools and the College of Humanities and Sciences, with participation by all undergraduate academic units; 2) substantially increasing formal and informal modes of effective, influential learner-centered digital engagement—primarily across courses, though within them as well; 3) substantially increasing opportunities for VCU students to participate in creative, distinctive online learning. Each action speaks directly to an area in which VCU has identified a need. Currently, the general education curriculum varies among programs, Schools, and the College of Humanities and Sciences, a situation that is confusing to students, faculty, and even advisers. We know that some faculty teaching in Tier II of the "Core" curriculum, the general education curriculum beyond the first-year experience that is currently shared across the university, are not aware of the structure and purpose of those courses. At least some of that confusion is likely caused by related but different paradigms for general education across the university, of which the Core Curriculum is

only one. Moreover, an excellent general education curriculum should ideally include participation from all or nearly all undergraduate programs, and ours does not. We also lag in the area of digital engagement, perhaps the most crucial area of quality enhancement for 21st-century learners. We see this QEP as an opportunity to increase opportunities for digital engagement within a specific curricular area—general education—and thus to situate digital fluency (one of the outcomes we seek) within the larger outcome of integrative thinking, an outcome at the heart of general education itself, and a hallmark of what we are calling *generalizable* education.

Further, this QEP identifies three primary implementation strategies. Some of these will be consecutive, while others will be concurrent. As a necessary starting point, we will build the foundation for curricular change by energizing a university-wide conversation about a distinctive, innovative, effective VCU general education curriculum supporting the above objectives. We strongly believe that effective curricular change must begin with a sense of shared mission and purpose, with intellectual stimulation, and with conspicuous institutional commitment to faculty development focused first on *thinking* and only then on *deliverables* that put that thinking into practice. To that end, we will undertake a phased approach to the plan, one that begins with an emphasis on idea generation, not on implementation. We also propose three programmatic and faculty development initiatives. The first is a year-long "Grand Challenges and Wicked Problems" program that will be an exercise in integrative, transdisciplinary thinking for the entire university community. The second is a summer University Seminar on General Education that will support up to twenty-five faculty for a week of intensive study, reflection, and planning. The third comprises specific faculty development programs aimed at stimulating innovative curricular thinking as well as faculty's own digital fluency. These faculty development programs will also include student participation where appropriate, and will be supported by a variety of programs aimed at learning

excellence. We believe these three initiatives will themselves offer rich opportunities for integrative thinking among the faculty, an outcome we will of course seize every opportunity to promote.

Our second implementation strategy is to increase "pathways to participation" so that all academic units offering undergraduate degree programs will contribute to the general education curriculum. General education courses should be open to all undergraduates, not only to declared majors within specific programs. At the same time, they must not be marginalized as mere "service courses" with no relevance to the major whatsoever. To fulfill these criteria, we propose several pilot initiatives to explore new opportunities for general education, including the "forms of inquiry" courses described elsewhere in the QEP. While we recognize that curricular innovation can be fostered and encouraged by senior academic leadership, including specific proposals and directions, we also believe we must stimulate and support the ideation, planning, and implementation of a new general education curriculum from the "bottom up," with incentives, development opportunities, and other programmatic support to facilitate these efforts. Additionally, we must ensure that both faculty and students understand and make effective use of the general education curriculum, an effort that requires expert academic advising as well as strengthened communication among all academic units. As logistical support for the new general education curriculum as well as for curricular innovation generally, we will purchase and implement new software and revised policies to facilitate the submission, review, and approval of new courses. Likewise, we will continue to strengthen our academic advising through the phased implementation of comprehensive systems of metrics, diagnostics, and student guidance affordances in our new Education Advisory Board software, with training and professional development for all academic advisors. VCU aims for its students to be

able to choose from creative, high-impact general education courses that represent the full range of VCU's excellence and distinctiveness.

Our third implementation strategy seeks to increase digital fluency and leverage digital engagement to stimulate and support learner-centered integrative thinking. Our plan proposes development opportunities, programs, incentives, and leadership opportunities to promote learning- and curriculum-enhancing digital fluency among students and faculty. We will increase the number and frequency of fully online course offerings, thereby potentially increasing our four-year graduation rate. Most importantly, we will develop integrative web-facing platforms to support all learners, with a particular focus in this QEP on *learner-initiated*connections among general education courses. Two related areas will inform our work in this regard. One is the "open education" movement, an area of growing importance in the international discussion around higher education (Weller, 2013). The other, related area is that of "connected learning," with programmatic support by the Connected Learning Alliance and the MacArthur Foundation for Digital Media and Learning. Indeed, this description of the learning paradigm and research questions emerging from the idea of "connected learning" serves as an overview of our entire QEP focus:

Efforts to understand the dynamic processes of learning situated across space and time, beyond the here and now, are presently challenging traditional definitions of learning and education. How can we conceptualize learning in a way that is able to respond to and explain the increasing complexity, connectivity, and velocity of our times? We elaborate on the notion of "connected learning" as a conceptual heuristic that has recently received recognition as a potential lens and a model through which to research and promote learning as a holistic experience that stretches beyond formal and informal communities. We reflect on the methodological challenges of describing, defining, and analyzing

connected learning across young peoples' everyday "learning lives" from the sociocultural and dialogic perspectives. We discuss such key notions for connected learning as understanding, tracking, and tracing learners; chronotopes; boundary crossing; intertextuality; and learning lives. (Kumpulainen and Sefton-Green, 2012)

We believe our revised QEP's focus on "generalizable education," with outcomes of integrative thinking and digital fluency generated by innovation in general education within an environment of increased digital engagement, can truly enhance the quality of a crucial part of VCU's undergraduate curriculum "in a way that is able to respond to and explain the increasing complexity, connectivity, and velocity of our times." We also aspire to empowering our students to do the same in their lives, during their studies at VCU and also after their coursework here ends.

Our QEP aligns well with *Quest for Distinction*, our university's current strategic plan, which seeks to maintain a learner-centered curriculum within the aspirations of a major research university. The development of our second QEP provides VCU the unique opportunity to directly align the components of this QEP with the priorities outlined in the institution's strategic plan. We do not want one bolted-on initiative whose influence will quickly fade and be forgotten. Our 2004 QEP aimed high, identified systemic concerns, and brought lasting, positive change to VCU. We aspire just as highly now.