

Enhancing Student Engagement in Learning Quality Enhancement Plan Virginia Commonwealth University

Background

“Core Requirement 12 requires an institution to develop an acceptable Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) and show that the plan is part of an ongoing planning and evaluation process. Engaging the wider academic community, the QEP is based upon a comprehensive and thorough analysis of the effectiveness of the learning environment for supporting student achievement and accomplishing the mission of the institution. It is used to outline a course of action for institutional improvement by addressing one or more issues that contribute to institutional quality, with special attention to student learning.” – *SACS Principles of Accreditation*, pp. 7-8

The Importance of a Focus on Learning

A significant cultural shift has taken place in how institutions think about their learning missions. Ever since Barr and Tagg’s seminal article “From Teaching to Learning: A New Paradigm for Undergraduate Education” (1995), institutions have been encouraged by institutional accreditors and others to shift from a focus on “delivering quality instruction” to “designing a climate most conducive to student learning.” Numerous studies have examined what it means for an institution to be centered on learning in this way. All agree that a true “learning-centered” institution thinks first about what students need to learn, then organizes itself in ways designed to bring this about most effectively. As Tagg points out in his most recent book (2003), “the mission of colleges and universities is to produce student learning. This end is primary; means are secondary and are to be judged by how well they achieve the end” (p. 31).

The literature on collegiate student learning is remarkably clear on what it takes to produce quality learning. Based primarily on two landmark works, Pascarella and Terenzini’s *How College Affects Students* (1991) and Astin’s *What Matters in College* (1994), the Education Commission of the States (1996) produced a report detailing what these attributes of quality are, namely:

- “Quality begins with an organizational culture that values high expectations, respect for diverse talents and learning styles, and an emphasis on early years of study [i.e., recognizing the importance of the student’s first years in college].

- “A quality curriculum requires coherence in learning, synthesizing experiences, ongoing practice of learned skills, and integrating education and experience.
- “Quality instruction builds in active learning, assessment and prompt feedback, collaboration, adequate time on task, and out-of-class contact with faculty.”

Numerous other studies, beginning in the mid-1990's and continuing to the present, have built upon frameworks such as these to develop more detailed characteristics of “learning-centered” institutions. Krakauer (2000), for example, produced an extended definition of a “Learning College,” defined in terms of 100 criteria organized into such categories as “the learning process,” “learning content,” “learning outcomes” (i.e., demonstrated change in knowledge, competence, and behavior), and “college culture.” According to O’Banion (2000), the key marker of a learning college is the frequency with which the following question is asked and answered: “How does what we are doing promote student learning?”

Recent attempts to define more precisely the characteristics of a learning-centered institution have been undertaken by McClenny (2002) and Tagg (2003). McClenny suggests that “learning-focused” institutions share six characteristics:

- clearly-defined outcomes for student learning;
- systematic assessment and documentation of student learning;
- student participation in a diverse array of engaging learning experiences that are aligned with required outcomes and designed in accord with good educational practice;
- institutional and individual reflection and action typically prompted and supported by data about student learning and institutional performance;
- an emphasis on student learning in processes for recruitment, hiring, orientation, deployment, evaluation and development of personnel; and,
- a focus on learning consistently reflected in key institutional documents and policies, collegial effort, and leadership behavior.

Tagg, in his new book *The Learning Paradigm College* (2003), suggests that a “hot cognitive economy” leading to deep and substantial learning by students:

- emphasizes students’ intrinsic goals;
- elicits a high level of student activity;
- has a high ratio of feedback to evaluation;
- has a long time horizon, thus promoting long-term investment;
- has a strong support community which encourages students to take risks, try new things, and persist;
- promotes institutional behavior that is consistent and aligned with the learning mission of the institution.

Staff of the Alverno Institute (2002) examined 26 institutions, large and small, public and private, all of which had made a commitment to student learning as their central focus. Investigators found four common attributes across these diverse institutions:

- First, they had achieved clarity about learning outcomes, defined by the authors as “how students think and understand and what they are able to do with what they know.” They had made educators “responsible for articulating student learning outcomes and making them public in ways that were clear, appropriate, and meaningful for students” (p.4). The authors found that institutions determined these learning outcomes in a wide variety of ways, ranging from college-wide faculty committees to more inductive approaches based upon individual courses. In all cases, faculty had taken on a sense of collective responsibility for student learning.
- Second, they coordinated teaching and assessment in ways that promote student learning. They encouraged faculty members to “think pedagogically” about their disciplines, that is, to use their disciplines as a framework for applying principles of learning theory, with learning outcomes as focal points. They also encouraged faculty to share course designs with each other and to approach the assessment of student learning as integral to learning and to making judgments about how to improve it.
- Third, they aligned structures and resources to serve student learning. They paid attention to faculty “reward systems” to encourage sustained attention to curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment; they designated time for faculty collaboration regarding teaching, learning, and assessment; they allocated resources in ways that demonstrated a priority for making student learning central; and they sought ways of reinforcing important student learning in virtually every area of campus life.
- Fourth, they worked continuously to improve the environment for learning. They had processes in place for program, curriculum, and institution-wide assessment; they generated multiple forms of feedback about patterns of student and alumni performance; they encouraged dialogue about the meaning of assessment data among constituencies both on and off campus; and they sought to make evidence-based judgments about institutional effectiveness in ways that would guide improvement.

The commonalities – across both theoretical and empirical domains – should be obvious. An institution that takes its learning mission seriously and that views the quality of student learning as one of its core purposes is clear and public about the learning outcomes to which it aspires for its students; it uses these learning goals, as well as knowledge about learning, as drivers for organizing instruction; it provides an environment which signals support for student learning at all levels; it promotes an atmosphere of critical reflection about teaching and learning; and it insures that its behavior as an institution is aligned with its learning mission.

Selection of “Student Engagement” As a Theme

During the summer and early fall of 2002, the SACS Leadership Team considered several potential themes for VCU’s Quality Enhancement Plan – including student retention, general education, and educational technology. In the end, “Student engagement with learning” was selected as a theme for VCU’s QEP, for these reasons:

- First and most important, research on collegiate student learning undertaken over the past fifty years, as reported by Pascarella and Terenzini (1991), is unequivocal in placing student engagement as the single most important factor leading to quality student learning. The more students are actively engaged in their learning, the better and deeper that learning will be.
- Second, student engagement is a chronic challenge at most urban universities with substantial commuter populations, and VCU is no exception.
- Third, VCU has participated in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) since 2000, providing quantitative baseline data against which to judge the impact of the Plan.
- Fourth, the theme meets SACS’ criteria for an acceptable QEP: it is justifiable, feasible, and assessable, and it is directly related to the improvement of student learning.
- Fifth and finally, a focus on student engagement encompasses other student learning themes of interest, including those mentioned above.

Process Followed in Developing This Plan

Three streams of information enlightened the development of this QEP: the NSSE data, analyzed and interpreted by multiple VCU constituencies; an inventory of what is already being done to enhance engagement at VCU; and the extensive national research base on engagement strategies most likely to improve student learning. Throughout development of this QEP, the authors of this document deliberately used each stream of information to form judgments about where and how best to invest our time and resources.

The National Survey of Student Engagement

As noted above, VCU has participated in the NSSE survey since 2000, thus giving us a rich source of data for both identifying needs and assessing impact. We thought it important to involve the entire VCU community in “making meaning” of these data, and so organized two on-campus retreats, one in September 2002 and the other two months later. For the first retreat the prime QEP author sent a broadcast email message to all faculty, staff, and students at the University, inviting them to express interest in a Friday night/Saturday morning session. More than 120 people from all parts of the institution volunteered their participation and of this group we selected 45 in a manner that insured the greatest diversity of representation (equally divided among faculty, staff, and students, and across all Schools and the College of Humanities and Sciences, as well as non-academic areas). The charge given to the group was simple: what are our students telling us? In November 2002, we constituted a second retreat group of 40 participants from those not selected for the September retreat and asked this group to develop workable strategies for addressing the issues identified in the first retreat.

Attendees were asked to visit VCU’s [web site on NSSE](#) and carefully absorb the data provided there, most especially the Institutional Benchmark Reports that compared responses of VCU students to those from two sets of peer-group institutions – urban universities and doctoral/research extensive universities – as well as to those of the entire national sample, consisting of students from more than 300 institutions nationwide.

At the retreat we assigned attendees to one of six discussion groups, each a mix of students, staff, and faculty. Each group had an opportunity to review results for all five NSSE categories, plus offer observations on the findings as a whole. A summary of these conversations follows.

Level of academic challenge. “Academic challenge” in this context refers to both the amount of effort required of students (e.g., “I worked harder than I thought I could to meet an instructor’s standards or expectations”) and the complexity of the learning itself (e.g., “coursework involves making judgments about the value of information, arguments, or methods”). First-year students at VCU rank below those

of both urban universities and doctoral/research-extensive universities, while seniors are roughly equal to these benchmarks and to the national sample as a whole. VCU freshmen report not being assigned the same amount of coursework as their peers in other comparable institutions: they scored significantly lower in both the amount of reading assigned and the number of written papers required. The retreat group interpreted these data as indicating that our diverse student body may present special educational challenges that are not easily overcome in the students' first year and that our large classes make it more difficult to engage and challenge students, especially freshmen.

Active and collaborative learning. Here again, an apparent disparity exists between first-year students at VCU and their peers in other urban universities and doctoral/research-extensive institutions, a disparity that mostly disappears by the senior year. The retreat group interpreted the data in this category to mean that, due to the prevalence of large classes with traditional lectures, VCU students do not experience a sufficient amount of active learning. However, while scores on items in this category were slightly lower than benchmark averages overall, the only single item that was significantly lower statistically was "worked with other students on projects outside of class to prepare class assignments." Also, both urban and doctoral/research-extensive universities as a group scored significantly lower on active and collaborative learning than the national sample as a whole.

Student interactions with faculty. The frequency of student interaction with faculty was slightly lower for freshmen and slightly higher for seniors at VCU compared to our urban and research university peers. None of the individual items reached statistical significance. As in the previous category, our peer institutions as groups also scored lower than the national sample overall. The retreat group noted several points of concern.

Faculty are perceived as generally unavailable to students, and students perceive a faculty culture that supports this contention. Large classes dampen meaningful interactions, and students may feel intimidated about seeking out faculty. These concerns are borne out by specific items in this category:

- Less than 50% of students reported receiving "prompt" feedback from faculty on their academic performance, compared to 60% of the national norm.
- More than three-fourths of freshmen and two-thirds of seniors had "never" worked with faculty members on activities other than coursework, compared to 63% and 55% for other doctoral institutions in the sample. More than half of freshmen and 40% of seniors had "never" discussed ideas from reading or classes with faculty members outside of class, compared to 45% and 28% of the national sample.

Enriching educational experiences. Of the five NSSE dimensions, this one generated the most positive results. First-year students gave higher scores on all items than any of the benchmark norms, including the national norm. Seniors were

positive as well, giving higher scores than urban universities and nearly equal scores to both of the other norm groups. The retreat group pointed to the rich diversity at VCU and to the high-profile programs and activities geared toward freshmen as the probable sources of this result. Two items for which scores are significantly higher for VCU than peer institutions – “had serious conversations with students of a different race or ethnicity than your own” and “had serious conversations with students who differ from you in terms of their religious beliefs, political opinions, or personal values” – support this conclusion. Still, the group noted that the scores seem depressed somewhat by the lack of a “sense of community” at VCU and the lack of faculty involvement with students. Fewer VCU seniors than those in other research universities, and than NSSE seniors as a whole, reported engagement in a “practicum, internship, or field experience” or “research with a faculty member outside course requirements.”

Supportive campus environment. Student ratings of the items in this category, alone among the five general markers of engagement, dropped between the freshman and senior years. This is true not only at VCU but also in all of the norm groups. Still, VCU students, both first-year and seniors, scored these items lower than benchmark urban universities, doctoral/research-extensive universities, and the NSSE sample as a whole. Although scores for VCU seniors were lower than those for freshmen, these scores dropped less than the norm averages. The retreat group saw the results as pointing to a limited “sense of community” at VCU, a sense that VCU students feel “disconnected.”

NSSE data support these conclusions. First-year students score lower than students at peer institutions on quality of relationships with other students, with faculty members (to a statistically significant degree), and with administrative personnel and offices. Freshmen also rate the quality of advising lower than do first-year students at peer institutions. Data improve to norm levels, or almost so, for seniors. This improvement suggests either that relationships improve over a student’s career or that relatively more students who are unhappy with their connection to the institution leave before their fourth year. VCU’s relatively low six-year graduation rate of 41% for first-time, degree-seeking undergraduates supports the possibility of the latter interpretation.

Overall observations. VCU student ratings on the NSSE of the overall experience were either at or below those of urban universities, doctoral/research-extensive universities, and the entire national sample. VCU seniors evaluated the adequacy of their general education and career preparation roughly on a par with peer institutions. Both first-year students and seniors evaluated the quality of their entire educational experience as generally “good,” about the same as other urban universities but below other doctoral/research-extensive institutions, especially for freshmen. VCU students’ responses to questions specific to urban universities were similar overall to those given by students at other urban campuses: time spent on campus, extent of family and work commitments, and anticipated length of time to degree are all comparable. The retreat groups made these general assertions:

- Student engagement at VCU is below average, even when compared with other urban universities where one might expect engagement to be relatively lower. The data from first-year students are especially disappointing, although when one examines the average ratings themselves, not compared to other institutions, the findings are not all that bleak. For example, while both VCU freshmen and seniors scored lower than the national average on the extent to which they felt the institution “provides the support you need to help you succeed academically,” the average scores fell on the positive end of the scale.
- Students experience detachment from VCU: they lack both identification with the institution and a sense of community. Although their contact with each other (except for out-of-class learning) is relatively high, their contact with faculty and administration is low.
- Freshmen are not challenged enough; not enough is asked of them.
- Freshmen in particular are not sufficiently engaged with faculty members.
- The amount of active learning, already low, is likely to get worse, due to the lack of resources for supporting smaller classes.
- The positive data under “enriching educational experiences” affirm diversity as a strength at VCU, although some wondered about “diversity without true integration.”
- Both freshmen and seniors agree on the need to improve the campus environment for learning.

We invited members of both retreat groups to form an informal “cabinet” of advisors to the QEP and sought their advice and counsel periodically as the Plan took shape. We especially valued feedback from this group because its members do not represent any particular institutional constituency, but rather the University community as a whole.

Current Efforts to Enhance Engagement at VCU

Few of the challenges enumerated above are new or surprising to VCU, and the University as a whole, along with individual faculty members on their own, has undertaken several key student engagement initiatives. Our desire in developing the QEP has been to build upon what is already working, with a view toward enhancing and expanding these activities. The QEP thus reflects an emphasis on congruence and extension rather than on new initiatives.

Classroom Strategies. In the Spring of 2002, the deans of the two largest undergraduate schools, the College of Humanities and Sciences and the School of

Business, surveyed their faculties electronically, inviting them to post descriptions of what they were doing in their own classrooms to stimulate student engagement. More than three dozen faculty members responded, some at length, and as a group they contributed a rich array of classroom-tested strategies. Appendix A provides a list of these strategies.

One of the most powerful ways to improve teaching and student learning is to provide settings in which faculty colleagues are able to share good practices, and this will be one of our major engagement strategies (see “Communities of Practice,” below).

Campus Environment. VCU has long recognized the challenges of student engagement in an urban environment and has the following activities already underway:

- STAR-ry Nights: evening activities for incoming students as part of their orientation to the VCU community;
- Residence Hall Community Living Agreements;
- Freshman Interest Groups (FIGs): learning communities for first-year students having similar academic interests (although the degree of integration among faculty and courses is currently perceived as weak);
- Supplemental Instruction (SI): voluntary, student-led, out-of-class study groups;
- The Honors Program, a living-learning residential community based in one of the residence halls; Honors students may choose to live in special housing for honors students as freshmen and may continue to live in such facilities throughout their undergraduate careers at VCU. For continuing Honors students, remaining in an Honors residence hall requires a statement of commitment to and a plan for continued participation in the Honors Program.
- The Honors Program public seminars for students, utilizing speakers from both campuses and the community. Seminars cover a diverse range of topics and allow students to sample broadly from the full academic environment of the university.
- Student organizations (more than 180 in all);
- Campus programming, such as the Intercultural Festival;
- Cultural programming sponsored by VCU Libraries, such as the annual Brown-Lyons Lecture (on Judaic Studies) and the James Branch Cabell Lecture, featuring novelists who speak on the art and technique of writing;
- School-based programs: professional service and outreach, faculty/student coffee hours and forums, social events; and,
- Service-Learning (S-L). VCU's urban setting makes it a natural site for S-L. Service-Learning is a major force on campus, attracting the participation of hundreds of students every year. Building on the quality of our Service-Learning is a key part of this Plan.

Comprehensive Intervention: Perhaps the most ambitious project yet undertaken to enhance VCU students' engagement in their learning is Project

PRISM (Producing Results in Science and Math), a five-year, \$1.8 million Title III grant awarded to VCU in 2003. This project will revamp so-called “gateway” courses in mathematics and the sciences and centralize campus learning support resources in order to address high failure rates in these courses, especially by minority students. The project aims to work with course faculty to develop and use comprehensive, detailed learning objectives in large lecture courses; incorporate technology effectively in these courses; and use more cooperative learning techniques. The project will also restructure math and chemistry placement testing and establish an integrated developmental math-science course. Target project outcomes include improving freshman retention by 7%, increasing the 6-year graduation rate by 8%, reducing percentages of “D-F-W” grades to 25% in historically difficult courses, and reducing the percentage of students on academic warning to 20% in Project classes.

The Research Base on Engagement and Student Learning

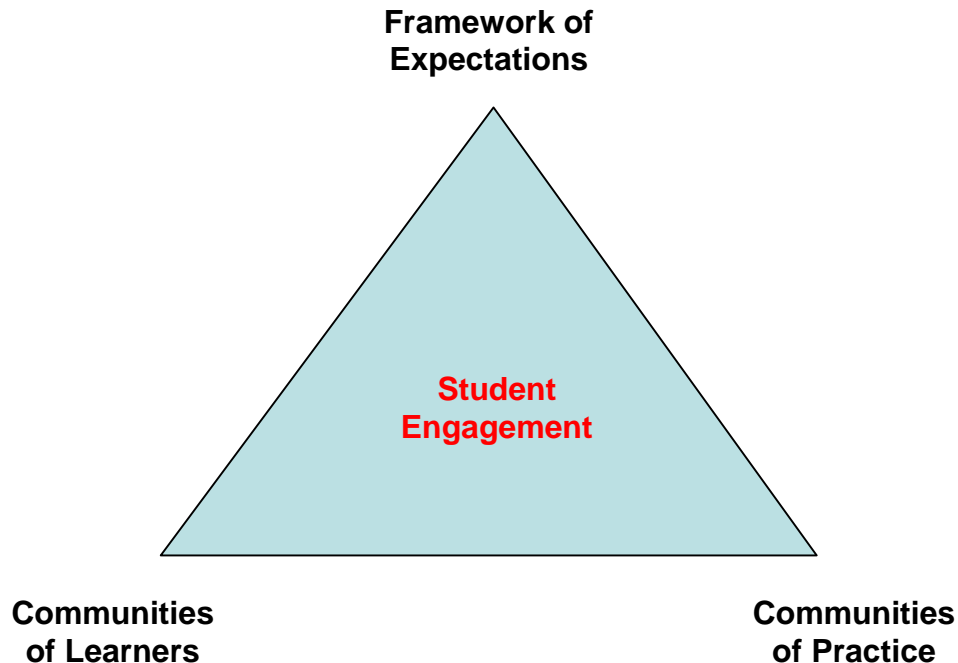
As noted in the introduction to this document, national research on engagement as a key factor in student learning is extensive. Our own NSSE data suggest that VCU freshmen are less engaged in their learning than are students in other urban and doctoral/research-extensive institutions. Both the national and local research data suggest several framing concepts for VCU’s Quality Enhancement Plan:

- Students’ engagement with learning happens when they have a sense of connection to their learning and to the source of their learning and when the learning they do is active and purposeful;
- Strategies must be systemic: for example, the University should not just “raise the bar” of academic performance but also provide a structure for helping students learn;
- Effective engagement puts meaningful interaction of students with faculty at the center; and,
- Engagement strategies must fit the VCU environment and student mix. This means that our strategies must focus on a more rigorous academic challenge, especially for first-year students; a stronger sense of community; and more and richer contact with faculty members.

Engagement Strategies

Action strategies for the QEP rest on three major themes, as depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1
QEP Engagement Themes



The strategy theme at the top is “Framework of Expectations” – a focus on communicating clear and relevant learning expectations to students. The theme at the left corner is “Communities of Learners”, which we plan to strengthen through learning communities at the lower-division level and Service-Learning at the upper-division level. And at the right corner is “Communities of Practice” – forums for faculty to share strategies for engaging students. Here is a brief rationale for the selection of these foci, followed by objectives and strategies for following through on each one.

A Framework of Expectations - Rationale. As confirmed by a recent FIPSE project (Schilling and others, 2002), if institutions do not make clear and repeated statements to students about what they expect of them, student expectations – and resulting behaviors – are likely to be based primarily on what they remember from high school. Students today report that they expect to spend 30 hours or less per week on schoolwork, including class time. If institutions want to engage students, they first have to get and focus students’ attention. One way to do this is to build upon the work of the “*Standards for Success*” project (2003), which

has defined what students must know and be able to do in order to succeed in entry-level university courses.

VCU also plans to conduct a gap analysis between the results of the NSSE, and those of the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE), which VCU will administer in spring 2004, so that it will be possible to compare and contrast student and faculty expectations.

Communities of Learners - Rationale. Tinto (1996) and Astin (2000), among others, have found that learning communities and Service-Learning are two of the most powerful pedagogical innovations in recent memory. Tinto's research suggests that learning communities have considerable promise: they help students develop a sense of belonging and connection, and this in turn is closely related to academic achievement, satisfaction, and retention. Many colleges have jumped on the learning community bandwagon, leading to a fear expressed by some that this innovation will evolve into little more than a superficial scheduling gimmick, without taking the next step to true reform. Astin found that students learn more and they learn more deeply in Service-Learning courses. Service-Learning is a natural focus for VCU, given its clear tie to our institutional mission and its strong current administrative infrastructure.

Communities of Practice - Rationale. The results of the faculty poll mentioned previously reveal a remarkable array of ways in which faculty are working to engage students in their courses, including creating discussion groups in large classes, electronic chat rooms, learning assignments in the community, and capstone courses, among others. Faculty who teach in the Honors Program often note that the program serves as a teaching laboratory for faculty to experiment with novel methods for engaging students in their coursework. Faculty leaders, including the president of the VCU Faculty Senate and the director of the Center for Teaching Excellence, have noted that VCU needs to focus on what faculty do in the classroom. Authors of this document believe that the best way to encourage faculty to engage students more effectively is to engage them with each other in ways that will disseminate and extend good practices.

A Framework of Expectations – Objectives and Strategies

As noted previously, the NSSE data revealed that first-year students at VCU rank below those of both urban universities and research-extensive universities in "academic challenge." VCU's NSSE data indicating students are not challenged enough in their first year coincide with perceptions from the retreats that faculty view students as not being well prepared for their classes. We concur with the Education Commission of the States report (1996) stating that attention to the quality of student learning must begin with high expectations for the learner, particularly in the learner's first year of college. We concur also with numerous other essays and reports which stipulate that high expectations must be expressed and communicated in terms of learning outcomes – how students think and understand and what they

are able to do with what they know. And we agree that college faculty must be responsible for articulating student learning outcomes and making them public in ways that are clear, appropriate, and meaningful for students.

Like many other institutions, VCU has had mixed success with institution-wide learning outcomes for general education. In the late 1980's, the University undertook, with grant support from the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV), a project called The Varieties of Undergraduate Experience, in which task forces of faculty and academic staff came together to define learning outcomes both in traditional academic areas and in personal growth and development. "Varieties" generated detailed learning outcomes statements, and the work of this project informed later revisions of the general education curriculum. However, getting course objectives into alignment with general education outcomes, and doing so in a manner that communicates expectations clearly and consistently to students, remained a challenge.

Specific objectives and strategies VCU will undertake to develop a stronger framework of expectations for student learning include:

Objective FE (Framework of Expectations) 1: Prior to summer 2005, the University will have defined and promulgated what students entering VCU should know and be able to do in order to succeed in their first year of college.

The *Standards for Success* Project, a project of the Association of American Universities and The Pew Charitable Trusts, recently released a report entitled *Understanding University Success* (2003), the result of an effort by more than 400 faculty and staff from 20 research universities to identify what students must do to succeed in entry-level courses at their institutions (www.s4s.org).

The project developed detailed academic standards for five core areas (English, mathematics, natural sciences, social sciences, and second languages) plus the fine arts. For example, one of the standards under "writing" in the English subject area reads, "[successful students] know and use several pre-writing strategies, including developing a focus; determining the purpose; planning a sequence of ideas; using structured interviews; and creating outlines." For each general education area, VCU will form a faculty community of practice, with members representing the relevant disciplines. VCU will provide these communities with the Standards for the appropriate academic disciplines. Each group will examine the pertinent Standards and modify them in ways befitting expectations for VCU students. VCU also will give attention in these groups to cross-cutting topics such as information literacy, the ability to distinguish a trusted source of information from an unsound or biased one. Modified Standards will then go to the University Undergraduate Curriculum Committee (which already has copies of the project's book, *Understanding University Success*) for formal adoption. These modified Standards will be used as a tool for both student and curricular assessment, with particular application to the University's learning outcomes for general education.

Objective FE 2: By the end of the spring 2005 semester, VCU will have revised learning outcomes for general education and will have communicated them to students.

Current statements regarding general education read as follows:

1. Communicating

“Students should demonstrate effective oral and written communication skills. Beyond the general basic knowledge of composition and rhetoric, the student should learn the standards of communication within the student’s own discipline.”

2. Ethics

“Students should demonstrate an understanding of the main concepts and theories of ethics and the role they play in our public and private lives at both the professional and personal levels. Students should be able to examine their fundamental moral beliefs, to form rational arguments and judgments relative to ethics, and to enable them to act on their values to make ethical choices.”

3. Quantity and form

“Students should be able to quantify or represent information symbolically. Students should be able to use such codified information with respect to questions of size, proportion or order, and to analyze it or manipulate it in a manner consistent with the standards of the student’s own discipline.”

4. Science and technology

“Students should demonstrate some understanding of and experience with the processes and concepts of modern experimental science and the impact of science and technology on society.”

5. Interdependence

“Students should be able to demonstrate an awareness of the cultural, economic, informational and social interdependencies that exist among nations and cultures today.”

6. Visual and performing arts

“Students should demonstrate an enhanced understanding of and experience in the various visual and performing arts which represent and express the complexities of the human condition.”

7. Humanities and social sciences

“Students should demonstrate an appreciation of the varieties and complexities of human cultures and values as expressed through literary, religious, historical and philosophical works. They also should demonstrate an understanding of individual and collective behavior as structured through political, economic, social and cultural institutions.”

VCU is now in the midst of a major reformulation of general education. The General Education Task Force has developed an outline for new general-education requirements that will apply to all students. The committee will develop outcome statements that will appear in the *VCU Undergraduate Bulletin* and on the University's web site. VCU plans to cross-reference the outcome statements with departmental objectives for the majors and use them to review syllabi for general education courses. Faculty members will tell students what will be expected as benchmarks for learning accomplishment, for both course *and* general education outcomes.

VCU will communicate student learning outcomes by doing the following:

1. Putting VCU's revised expected learning outcomes for general education into print and electronic documents describing VCU's undergraduate programs.
2. Asking each academic department contributing to general education learning outcomes to indicate the nature and extent of its contribution. The result of this effort will be a *Learning Grid*, showing how departmental learning objectives lead to accomplishment of general education objectives.
3. Asking instructors of each course eligible to meet general education requirements to post general education outcomes in their course syllabi, and to explain how the course will contribute to students' development on any or all of these.
4. Capturing data in our *WEAVEonline*[™] assessment management system.

As a result of completing work on Objectives FE 1 and FE 2, VCU will have accomplished a critical first step in making our expectations of students both clear and public: that is, incoming students will know both what VCU expects of them in their first year (modified *Standards for Success*) and what the institution expects students to learn from their general education experience (the *Learning Grid*). These two documents will make up the first part of *The VCU Compact*, a publication describing what VCU expects from students and what students should expect from VCU.

Objective FE 3: During summer 2005, VCU will ask incoming students to assess themselves on competencies related to VCU's *Standards for Success*.

VCU will give the revised Standards to entering students during STAR (Student Testing, Advising, and Registration – VCU's summer program for entering students) and ask students to rate their competencies on the revised standards. (VCU will use matrix sampling procedures in order to reduce the amount of assessment time required per student.¹) Welcome Week (orientation) will include a session describing the Standards as a set of college-level expectations. The session will cover expectations regarding anticipated workload, connection of the Standards to VCU's general education outcomes, and students' effort to meet these outcomes.

Communities of Learners - Objectives and Strategies

VCU will expand learning communities and Service-Learning opportunities. These are complementary strategies that will focus on learning communities during students' early years and Service-Learning in students' upper-division and major courses.

Learning Communities. Curricular learning communities are classes that are linked or clustered during an academic term, often around an interdisciplinary theme, enrolling a common cohort of students. Institutions use a variety of approaches to build these learning communities, with all intended to restructure the students' time, credit, and learning experiences to build community among students, between students and their teachers, and among faculty members and disciplines.

National research shows that learning communities can improve student retention and academic achievement, increase student involvement and motivation, lessen students' time to degree completion, and enhance students' intellectual development (Tinto, 1996). Students involved in learning communities become more intellectually mature and responsible for their own learning and develop the capacity to care about the learning of their peers.

¹For example, entering students could be divided into five equal groups, each group responding to Standards from one of the five core areas.

The National Learning Communities Project (<http://learningcommons.evergreen.edu/>) notes that, in cases where learning communities facilitate cross-faculty collaboration, faculty expand their repertoire of teaching approaches, continually revise their course content, and acquire new scholarly interests. Learning community faculty members also build mentoring relationships with each other and more frequently engage with beginning students and general education offerings. When carefully designed and implemented, these programs offer more coherent opportunities for the teaching of literacy skills, such as reading, writing, and speaking, as well as more coherent pathways for students to engage in the general education curriculum. They also offer a robust way to address interdisciplinary ideas and a more coordinated platform for study in the major.

Learning community programs also can address a variety of societal issues, such as the increasing fragmentation of information and student alienation toward participation and engagement. With an emphasis on interpersonal dialogue, collaboration, and experiential learning within the context of diversity, these programs can counteract a decreasing sense of community and connection and allow students to relate their college-level learning to larger personal and global questions.

As described by the Learning Communities Commons, learning communities take three general types of structures. The Student Cohorts/Integrative Seminar enrolls a small cohort of students in larger classes that faculty do not coordinate. Intellectual connections and community-building often take place in an additional integrative seminar. In Linked Courses/Course Clusters, a cohort of students takes two or more classes that are linked thematically or by content. This structure requires faculty to collaborate in planning the courses. In Coordinated Study, single courses are taught by teams of faculty members, and course work is embedded in an integrated program of study.

Learning communities at VCU. Learning communities at VCU have taken the form of FIGs (Freshman Interest Groups), an idea pioneered in the late 1980s at the University of Washington, Seattle. FIGs have a linked-course type of structure, that is, cohorts of students having similar interests are grouped together in linked general education courses. The number of FIGs at VCU has grown from 17 in 1996 to 76 in 2003, each enrolling between 15 and 27 students. Some FIGs have evolved into full class schedules for students entering highly structured professional programs. FIGs for Honors students require at least one limited-enrollment class focused on discussion-based learning. The Honors Program offers multiple sections of HONR 190, the Freshmen Honors Seminar, each fall, and each section includes a collaborative learning project and a focus on acquiring and using critical thinking skills.

VCU has anchored its extended orientation class, *VCU 101*, to some of these FIGs in the form of a seminar to introduce students to a discipline or career area. However, the logistics of FIGs have created challenges for those responsible for course scheduling: budget pressures have limited the number of course sections available, while enrollments continue to grow. One of the key elements of the

“Communities of Learners” corner of the engagement triangle will be to assess thoroughly what will be required to revitalize FIGs as a more viable and integrated part of the freshman experience.

Service-Learning. Service-Learning is the integration of course content and community service within a single course. What makes Service-Learning different from traditional community service is this pedagogical connection, an opportunity for reflection on the course’s subject matter that occurs through the service students perform. Service opportunities are carefully selected to align with the learning goals of the course or learning community experience.

A recent evaluation study published by Astin and his colleagues at the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA (Astin, et al., 2000) collected longitudinal data from a sample of more than 20,000 undergraduates attending national colleges and universities. About a third of these students had participated in Service-Learning during college. Through both quantitative measures and in-depth case studies, the researchers found a significant positive impact of Service-Learning courses on student academic achievement, as measured by such variables as GPA, writing skills, and critical thinking skills. More than 80% of the students felt that their service “made a difference” and that they had learned from their service experience.

The qualitative data suggested that Service-Learning is effective in part because it facilitates four kinds of learning outcomes: 1) an increased sense of personal efficacy, 2) an increased awareness of the world, 3) an increased awareness of one’s personal values, and 4) increased engagement in the classroom. The results further suggested that the most important pedagogical components of Service-Learning were the following: providing training to the students prior to service participation; connecting the service experience with the course subject matter; and providing students with an opportunity to reflect upon the service experience with each other.

Dr. Astin, senior author of the longitudinal study, revealed in a personal communication that, in all his years of doing research on student learning, he had never seen such impressive results and called Service-Learning one of the most important pedagogical innovations of the past fifty years.

Service-Learning at VCU. VCU has had substantial experience with Service-Learning. As the following table demonstrates, S-L has grown to enroll nearly 1000 students per year in nearly 50 courses. VCU’s students annually contribute more than 16,000 hours of community service while they are in S-L courses.

Table 1

VCU Service-Learning Annual Counts

Year	Service-Learning Courses	Service-Learning Enrollments	Community Service Hours
2002-03	78	901	16,834
2001-02	48	894	17,868
2000-01	42	894	16,580
1999-00	28	655	10,000
1998-99	30	559	9,962
1997-98	10	292	5,488
1996-97*	8	34	595

*The first faculty training program (Service-Learning Associates Program) occurred in the fall of 1996. The first Service-Learning courses were taught in spring 1997.

The Office of Community Programs, which reports directly to the Provost, coordinates Service-Learning. Dr. Catherine Howard, director of the Office, is a major force for Service-Learning on campus. Initiatives already underway include integrating community service into VCU 101, the one-credit orientation course for first-year students; funding a "Service-Learning Associates" program, consisting of six to eight faculty awards of \$1000 annually; providing Service-Learning training through a weekend for teaching assistants; having Freshman Interest Groups (FIGS) with Service-Learning as a theme; and creating a more structured experience for the approximately 7% of students who are engaged in community-based workstudy.

Students who serve as teaching assistants for Service-Learning are trained through a module offered by the Honors Program.

Specific objectives and strategies that VCU will undertake to strengthen communities of learners include:

Objective CL (Communities of Learners) 1: By January 2005, VCU will determine the institutionalization of, and needed support for, current communities of learning initiatives, using the following criteria:

- Philosophy and mission;
- Faculty support and involvement;
- Student support and involvement
- Institutional support; and

- **Community participation (for S-L only).**

Both learning communities and Service-Learning have solid histories at VCU as strategies for creating true communities of learners, although as noted earlier in this document, FIGs have experienced some pressure in recent years as enrollments in first-year classes have increased. Moreover, the current impact of FIGs and S-L courses is limited, as not all students enroll in courses having these features, and when they do, there is little reinforcement elsewhere in the curriculum. Far too often, for example, individual faculty members with an interest in pursuing the design of learning communities or Service-Learning receive only minimal support in their academic departments. Faculty colleagues may support or even embrace the idea in principle, as long as their own teaching doesn't have to change.

However, as pointed out by Campus Compact, the national voice of Service-Learning, the development of more engaged student learners depends on the extent to which academic departments take on student engagement as a departmental priority. Our strategy for strengthening communities of learners will therefore focus on the institutionalization of these programs in a way that makes them a seamless part of the undergraduate experience. One guide for doing this will be the Self-Assessment Rubric for the Institutionalization of Service-Learning in Higher Education, authored by Andrew Furco of the University of California, Berkeley, and published by Campus Compact (2002). Although the rubric was designed for Service-Learning, the components (with one exception) will serve equally as well for learning communities. The rubric contains five dimensions, each with several components:

- Philosophy and mission of Service-Learning: definition of Service-Learning, strategic planning, alignment with institutional mission, alignment with educational reform efforts.
- Faculty support for and involvement in Service-Learning: faculty awareness, faculty involvement and support, faculty leadership, faculty incentives and rewards.
- Student support for and involvement in Service-Learning: student awareness, student opportunities, student leadership, student incentives and rewards.
- Institutional support for Service-Learning: coordinating entity, policy-making entity, staffing, funding, administrative support, departmental support, evaluation and assessment.
- *(applies to Service-Learning only)* Community participation and partnerships: community partner awareness, mutual understanding, community agency leadership and voice.

Furco and his colleagues identify three stages of development for each component: 1) a critical mass building stage, 2) a quality building stage, and 3) a sustained institutionalization stage. A hypothetical sample full rubric, with specific

benchmarks for each component at each stage, is presented in Appendix B to this Plan. Specific strategies are as follows:

1. VCU will use the rubric (which serves, with one exception, equally well for learning communities) to reach initial judgments about the current institutionalization of learning communities and Service-Learning at VCU. The QEP Steering Committee (see “Key Players and Timetable”) will direct this work.
2. The QEP Steering Committee will use this assessment to identify and analyze areas of needed attention, in the form of an institutional profile.

Objective CL 2: By the end of the spring 2005 semester, VCU will have identified specific institutional interventions to address each profiled need.

In January 2005, VCU will convene a faculty forum, led by the QEP Coordinator and the QEP Steering Committee, to consider the completed institutional profile and identify necessary interventions, along with budgets, action plans, timelines, and administrative support and endorsement. VCU will include as participants in this process teaching faculty and administrative faculty, e.g., those from the VCU Libraries and the Division of Student Affairs and Enrollment Services, as well as students and staff.

Objective CL 3: By the end of the fall 2005 semester, VCU will have designed any needed modifications to strengthen its learning communities.

While decisions about specific modifications await the results of the institutional profile, several changes appear likely. FIGs currently involve limited interaction among faculty members and leave the development of meaningful student interaction to students alone. Therefore, merely expanding the present FIG structure would contribute little to improving student engagement. A consultant on learning communities, Dr. Jodi Levine, Associate Provost at Temple University, will help us consider how to integrate curriculum and community building activities to give students a deeper understanding of course material and more meaningful interaction with faculty and peers. Ideally, learning communities in the form of FIGs introduce students to what it means to be a college student and serve as an effective way to introduce students to the expectations of the academic culture – thus integrating academic *expectations* and academic *community*.

Achievement of Objectives CL1 through CL 3 will provide material for the second part of *The VCU Compact*, a publication describing what VCU expects from students and what students should expect from VCU. Although the work accomplished through the Framework of Expectations part of the QEP will make public the expectations for students and their learning, the Communities of Learners component will make public VCU’s commitment to providing rich opportunities for students to have meaningful engagement experiences.

Communities of Practice – Objectives and Strategies

As has been implied repeatedly in this Plan, strategies for enhancing student engagement are virtually worthless if they remain nothing more than good ideas and noble intentions. Student engagement will depend on the level of faculty engagement, and the VCU retreats described earlier pointed to the quality of faculty engagement as a dominant concern. The general view was that faculty members are often preoccupied with other aspects of their academic work and thus are reluctant to invest significant amounts of scarce discretionary time in designing pedagogical activities which, at least in the short term, require a more substantial time investment.

Yet the belief is that most faculty members want their teaching to be intrinsically rewarding, and nothing is more rewarding to faculty than the knowledge that their students are genuinely engaged in their learning. A sincere interest exists among many VCU faculty for workable student engagement strategies, and the most credible sources of good ideas are their own colleagues. There are, unfortunately, few opportunities for such sharing to take place. Talk about teaching is rare in most academic departments, and forums for sharing ideas across departments are limited as well. VCU's Center for Teaching Excellence (CTE), created in 2000 and directed by Dr. Joseph Marolla, a highly respected senior faculty member, could be the needed catalyst for quality faculty conversations about student engagement.

An additional catalyst is the new Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE), designed to complement the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) by ascertaining what faculty members do to enhance engagement in their classes. VCU will administer the FSSE in tandem with NSSE, beginning in the spring of 2004.

Specific objectives and strategies VCU will undertake to enhance Communities of Practice include:

Objective CP (Communities of Practice) 1: By the end of the spring 2005 semester, VCU will have identified good student engagement practices in all of its Schools and developed means of sharing these practices among the faculty.

VCU will foster quality conversations among the faculty about student engagement and student learning in the following way. Beginning early in the 2004-2005 academic year, each school with an undergraduate program will conduct a one-day all-school retreat to discuss teaching and learning practices. A primary objective of those retreats will be to discuss the national movement of transitioning from "teacher centered" to "learning centered" instruction.

The emphasis at each retreat will be on practices faculty have used or could use to engage students successfully in the classroom. The intent will be to build on what is already happening in many schools, as well as share strategies across disciplines, schools and even other universities. Each retreat will include, in addition

to School faculty, representatives from VCU Libraries, Academic Technology, the Center for Teaching Excellence, and Student Affairs and Enrollment Services. Retreats will conclude with action plans for continuing the conversations in ways most suitable to the cultures and working styles of the individual Schools. The authors anticipate that each school, however, will organize ongoing discussion groups centered on common student learning problems and use these groups to identify solutions based on successful practices.

Although these retreats are in schools with undergraduate programs, in essentially every school the same faculty teach undergraduate and graduate students, ensuring that faculty have opportunities to discuss engagement strategies that work well in graduate school and refocus them so that these strategies also can be used with undergraduates. The assumption is that students in graduate and professional programs are more engaged in their learning than are the majority of undergraduate students. These retreats also will provide opportunities for discussing ways to better prepare undergraduate students for graduate work.

VCU also plans a “school” retreat for VCU Life Sciences, which is VCU’s premier connector between graduate and undergraduate programs. The undergraduate courses offered by VCU Life Sciences (currently LFSC 101 and LFSC 401) are taken by students in a variety of majors and taught by department chairs, leading researchers, and other top faculty from the School of Medicine, other professional schools, and graduate programs.

In addition, VCU plans a “school” retreat that focuses on the Honors Program and the graduate and professional programs that participate in the Guaranteed Admissions Program through the Honors Programs. Since the Guaranteed Admissions Program brings together Honors students with professional and graduate programs, this will be another way in which VCU can connect those programs with undergraduate programs.

Outcomes from the retreats should include:

- Identification of common student problems and suggested strategies for remediation;
- Identification of successful teaching/learning strategies – best practices in the school – and a plan for sharing them both within the school and with other VCU units;
- A specific plan for continuing discussions about improving student engagement.

Objective CP 2: During the fall 2004 semester, VCU will align the Center for Teaching Excellence (CTE) more closely with the new VCU Learning Center to connect identified student learning problems with faculty intervention strategies.

The Director and Assistant Director of the CTE will allocate a percentage of their time to the Title III grant, "Project PRISM," described earlier in this Plan. Further, the CTE will work closely with the instructional designer being hired by the PRISM grant to infuse technology into the gateway courses as well as to increase students' activity and engagement in these courses. The PRISM grant also allows VCU to incorporate a personal response system (PRS) in selected large lecture classes. The principal investigator for the PRISM grant expects that the PRS will increase faculty-to-student interaction, encourage student-to-faculty interaction, increase active learning, and provide prompt feedback. If the experience with this system through the PRISM grant succeeds, VCU will explore ways to incorporate it into a wider set of classes, since fully implementing the PRS will require ongoing training and technical support. And finally, the CTE will incorporate the goals and priorities of the Project PRISM Learning Center into its own priorities for its Small Grant Program.

Objective CP 3: By the end of 2006, VCU will have enlisted a majority of faculty members in all undergraduate departments in the adoption of one or more strategies designed to increase student engagement in their learning.

Throughout the period covered by this Plan, the Center for Teaching Excellence will be a prime resource for facilitating a cultural shift from "teaching centered" to "learning centered" instruction. To accomplish this, the CTE will:

- Work with Project PRISM staff to expand student engagement strategies beyond math and science courses. Because Project PRISM focuses on improving learning through a progressive training program in cooperative learning and instructional technology, most of the activities enumerated under this objective relate directly to initiatives that will be implemented through Project PRISM, albeit with a focus on the math and science areas.
- Search out examples of cooperative and collaborative learning being utilized both within the university and beyond to encourage adapting these strategies throughout the campus. The CTE will offer a progressive certification program to train faculty to incorporate active learning strategies in large classes and to actively engage students in the learning process. This will occur through Project PRISM, and both the director and associate director of the CTE will become certified trainers in three levels of cooperative learning. They will, in turn, develop a progressive training program for faculty to incorporate active learning in their classes.
- Appoint, based on nominations by the Schools, a small number of faculty to work with the Director of the CTE to develop workshops and seminars directed specifically at implementing an active learning model within the entire university community.
- Work closely with Academic Technology's Instructional Development Center to

develop a series of workshops for both new and experienced faculty on the application of new technologies.

- Incorporate “student engagement” as a top priority in its Small Grants Program.
- Emphasize programs for new faculty that support developing teaching philosophies, student learning models, and applications of formative assessment in the classroom.
- Collaborate with the Director of Assessment to help faculty and academic programs develop strategies for enhancing the assessment of student learning.

In addition, the Honors Program is developing strategies for increasing undergraduate research experiences for Honors and other undergraduate students. The Honors Program has proposed the reestablishment of an Undergraduate Research Grant program (that program was discontinued two years ago in response to budget cuts). Undergraduate research programs engage students in learning and help prepare them for graduate and professional education. By working with a group of faculty interested in promoting undergraduate research, the Director of the Honors program will increase interdisciplinary discussions related to student engagement and will work with graduate faculty who mentor undergraduate students in research activities.

Objective CP 4: By the end of the spring 2005 semester, VCU will have implemented a university-wide advisor training program.

Through the current Retention Leadership Council, a University-wide Advisor Training Committee has been formed to establish and implement training activities to improve the quality of academic advising provided at VCU. The committee has initiated development of an advising manual and will develop and implement a Master Advisor Certification Program. During the spring 2004, the Retention Leadership Council will sponsor attendance at the regional NACADA conference by up to 12 advisors and members of the Retention Leadership Council. This committee also is working on development of materials for a faculty advising web site and for better advisor web-based access to student records.

Objective CP 5: By the end of 2005, VCU will adopt, consistent with its Faculty Roles and Rewards policy, a method to reward departments for innovative teaching and mentoring that results in increased student engagement.

The Faculty Roles and Rewards Policy, adopted in 1993 by Virginia Commonwealth University’s Board of Visitors, states in part:

Faculty roles and rewards must be understood within the context of collective work units, because each unit... is a key to change and an important unit of productivity.... Faculty must be fairly and accurately evaluated for excellence within the context of their unit... Both individual and work unit performances

must have incentives and rewards clearly tied to them. (p. 1)

Greater alignment of faculty roles with rewards will be essential for success of this Plan. Surveys of faculty, both young and experienced, frequently indicate that faculty prefer their teaching role above all others. Yet, some faculty members invariably feel that putting too much time into teaching is a dangerous, if not foolish, undertaking. For example, Service-Learning courses are among the most highly evaluated by students, but these courses can double the time commitment from faculty. As long as faculty members believe that they are expected to take on new or different roles while the institutional rewards remain the same, prospects for real change are negligible.

Doctoral/research-extensive universities like VCU must make adjustments to the maintenance and vitality of their teaching missions to remain viable institutions of learning. If faculty are asked to engage in more Service-Learning or to participate more actively in designing and facilitating learning communities but then continue to be rewarded only for funded, published scholarship, a true “community of practice” will be more difficult to develop.

The authors anticipate two major ways to reward departments for increasing student engagement. The first of these is a small-grant program (average of about \$3,000 per grant) to departments to implement strategies to increase engagement. By publicizing the award of these small grants, VCU can give recognition to departments that are working toward increasing student engagement.

VCU plans a second and more visible acknowledgement of departmental expertise in student engagement by giving a departmental “Excellence in Engagement” award at the annual Faculty Convocation ceremony. The Faculty Convocation is VCU’s high-visibility ceremony that annually recognizes four selected faculty for their expertise.

Accomplishment of Objectives CP 1 through CP 4 will lead to the third and final piece of *The VCU Compact*. The *Compact* will describe what we expect from students, what students should expect from us, and how as a faculty we are committed to delivering the best educational practice available.

Implementation Plan

Key Players

A QEP Steering Committee, appointed and charged by the Provost, will provide project oversight. The QEP Coordinator (see responsibilities below) will chair the Committee, which will consist of students, faculty, administrators, and community representatives. Representing stakeholders in the QEP process, the Steering Committee will work with the QEP Coordinator in refining project plans and assessment.

The QEP Coordinator, who is yet to be selected, will be a visible and respected senior faculty member and will oversee the implementation of the QEP. The QEP Coordinator will have reassigned time from normally assigned courses/projects and a summer stipend to work on the QEP. The QEP Coordinator will chair the Steering Committee, provide hands-on implementation management for all three project foci, and most importantly, provide strong intellectual leadership. The QEP Coordinator will report to and work closely with the Vice Provost for Academic Affairs, the chairs of the subcommittees (see below), and the Assistant Vice Provost for Institutional Research, Evaluation, and Planning, all of whom will have major administrative responsibilities in implementing the plan.

Subcommittees of the QEP Steering Committee will be responsible for monitoring the implementation of each of the three major engagement themes (Framework of Expectations, Communities of Learners, and Communities of Practice). Ms. Jean Yerian, VCU's Director of Assessment, will chair the subcommittee on "Framework of Expectations"; Dr. Catherine Howard, Director of the Office of Community Programs, will chair the subcommittee on "Communities of Learners," and Dr. Joseph Marolla, Director of the Center for Teaching Excellence, will chair the subcommittee on "Communities of Practice." An organizational chart for VCU's Quality Enhancement Plan is in Appendix C.

Timetable

Work on *Enhancing Student Engagement in Learning* will commence in spring 2004, with the appointment of the QEP Coordinator and Steering Committee. The principal implementation of the project will begin in the fall of 2004. A tentative timetable, subject to modification by the Steering Committee, follows:

2004 Spring Semester

- Submit QEP to SACS and On-site Review Committee
- Host SACS on-site visit
- Appoint QEP Coordinator
- Identify and charge QEP subcommittees

- Continue administration of NSSE to first-year and senior students (continue biennially)
- Administer the new Faculty Survey of Student Engagement to faculty (continue biennially if modified and its use becomes as widespread as the NSSE)

2004 Fall Semester

- Begin alignment of CTE with the VCU Learning Center (continue through Spring 2005 Semester)
- Create a detailed assessment plan for all project outcomes
- Design small grant program for departmental grants
- Initiate review of learning communities and Service-Learning (to be completed by January 2005)
- Begin *Standards for Success* inquiry in English, mathematical sciences, natural sciences, social sciences, and fine arts; for faculty “communities of practice” for each discipline (note: *Standards for Success* will be revised to become *VCU Standards for Success*)
- Begin holding school retreats on student engagement; retreats will be coordinated by the school’s representative to the QEP Steering Committee, with the QEP Coordinator and subcommittee chairs serving as resources

2005 Spring Semester

- Hold the first Project retreat, an off-campus retreat with representatives from undergraduate departments to review work of the project so far and identify and assign priorities to institutionalization initiatives indicated by the assessment of learning communities and Service-Learning
- Finalize student learning outcomes for general education and produce elements of a *Learning Grid* showing how departmental learning outcomes lead to accomplishment of general education outcomes
- List VCU’s general education learning outcomes to all web sites related to the undergraduate academic programs and schedule the outcomes to appear in all printed documents describing VCU’s undergraduate programs
- Design and implement university-wide advisor training program
- Continue within academic units a discussion of student engagement strategies suggested by the fall retreats and communicate these strategies with the QEP Steering Committee (continue annually)
- Receive departmental responses to *Standards for Success* and the *Learning Grid*; initiate campus review, including the University Undergraduate Curriculum Committee; initiate work to incorporate the revised standards for success in VCU 101 classes
- Complete work on the *Learning Grid*

2005 Summer

- Implement small grant program for departmental grants on engagement initiatives
- Prepare draft for public distribution of document containing both the *VCU Standards for Success* [revised *Standards for Success*] (what students will be responsible for) and the *Learning Grid* (what the institution and its faculty will be responsible for)
- Survey incoming students on self-perceived competencies related to *VCU Standards for Success*
- Include *VCU Standards for Success* in Welcome Week and all VCU 202 classes

2005 Fall Semester

- Distribute for review the draft of *The VCU Compact* (a document detailing mutual expectations of students and the University) to the University community
- Develop criteria for establishment of the Departmental Excellence in Engagement award to be given at the Faculty Convocation
- Hold interdisciplinary retreats directed at sharing best practices in increasing student engagement
- Design modifications needed to strengthen Communities of Learners

2006 Spring Semester

- Hold second Project retreat, with special attention to faculty engagement
- Hold interdisciplinary retreats directed at sharing best practices in increasing student engagement
- Complete *The VCU Compact* based on feedback from the University community

2006-2008

- Continue to implement the Plan, undertake planned assessments, analyze and interpret data, and use results for project improvement

2006 Fall Semester

- Assess increased use by faculty of engagement strategies
- Present Departmental Excellence in Engagement Award

2007 Spring Semester

- Hold third Project retreat

2008 Spring Semester

- Hold fourth Project retreat

2009

Submit Impact Report to SACS

University Resources Committed to the Plan

The challenge of moving from program-building to institutionalization, from innovation to true reform, is daunting in any academic institution, especially one with as complex a mission as an urban research university. Success of this Plan will depend on the extent to which we are able to maintain a sharp focus on a limited number of key leverage points and to create the systemic change needed to sustain the effort. Systemic change will require a strong and consistent message from the academic leadership of VCU and a public recognition of faculty work associated with engagement so that student engagement is seen as the work of the academic unit, not just the responsibility of those who may have an individual interest.

Consistent with incorporating student engagement as an integral part of the institution, the majority of resources needed to implement the plan will come from within the university's current budget. For instance, the existing Center for Teaching Excellence and the new VCU Learning Center will be used to help implement the plan; no additional resources will be needed for these centers' roles in the QEP. Resources recently added to the Community Programs budget will be used to continue to strengthen Service-Learning programs. In addition, resources for student retention, particularly those for advising centers in the schools, also will be used to help implement this plan.

The time of a number of people will be dedicated to the implementation of the QEP. For instance, a portion of the time of the Vice Provost for Academic Affairs; the Assistant Vice Provost for Institutional Research, Evaluation, and Planning; the Director of Assessment; the Director of the Center for Teaching Excellence; and the Director of Community Programs will be dedicated to this project. Faculty who serve on the Steering Committee and other QEP committees and activities will do so as part of their regular on-going responsibilities. The staff person who provides support for VCU's assessment and SACS accreditation processes will provide staff support for the QEP.

VCU will provide some additional resources for the QEP. Annually, these additional resources will include:

QEP Coordinator	\$ 45,000
Departmental grants, 10 @ \$3000	30,000
School, interdisciplinary, and project retreats	20,000
Surveys, evaluation studies	10,000
Participation in major conferences on student engagement	10,000
Materials and supplies	7,500
External consultant	<u>5,000</u>
Total	\$127,500

Funds allocated to school retreats will be redirected toward interdisciplinary retreats in 2005-06. Beginning in 2006-07, \$10,000 of these funds will be used to make the departmental “Excellence in Engagement” award described elsewhere in this narrative.

In 2004-05, \$5,000 of the materials and supply budget will be directed toward purchase of a survey subscription from Teaching, Learning, and Technology’s “Project Flashlight”. Flashlight online is a web-based service for creating, administering, and analyzing surveys of all types. Among Flashlight tools is a survey developed specifically for engagement with educational technology, which will be useful as well for gaining students’ perceptions of engagement more generally in the context of specific courses. (If VCU chooses to continue the use of Flashlight, this budget line continues in subsequent years.)

QEP Coordinator. The QEP Coordinator, whose duties were described above, will be a senior faculty member who will have release time from existing duties and a summer stipend to serve in this position.

Departmental grants. One of the most effective ways of generating faculty buy-in for campus initiatives is through small departmental grants. These grants do not have to be large to focus faculty energy. Ten small grants of approximately \$3,000 each will be made available each year on a competitive basis to assist departments with their plans to enhance student engagement in learning.

School, interdisciplinary, and project retreats. Each of VCU’s schools, VCU Life Sciences, and the Honors Program will hold a one-time faculty retreat, described elsewhere in this Plan, to consider issues of student engagement, share successful engagement strategies, and develop unit-wide plans for enhancing engagement. During the second year of the project, these funds will cover interdisciplinary retreats so that faculty may learn from those in other disciplines the strategies they use to increase student engagements. Funds will also cover an annual Project Retreat, to be held in January each year for four years, beginning in January 2005.

Departmental “Excellence in Engagement” award. Once each year, beginning with the 2006-07 academic year, the University will make an award at Faculty Convocation to an academic department that has done an exemplary job of

enhancing student engagement in learning. This award will be made concurrently with individual faculty awards, and will signal the importance placed by the University on collective efforts to improve student learning. The QEP Steering Committee will select the departmental Excellence in Engagement award recipients.

Surveys, evaluation studies, and assessments. Funds are allocated to pay for survey costs related to the Framework of Expectations and Communities of Learners initiatives, for assessments of incoming students, and for VCU's participation in national surveys such as NSSE and FSSE. Funds also are provided for other assessments designed by the subcommittees.

External consultant. Once each year a consultant will be invited to campus to assist with implementation of the Plan: for example, developing learning standards for the freshman year, interpreting results of the institutionalization study of learning communities, or developing strategies for faculty development. Ideally, the consultant should come from an institution that has a similar mission to VCU, one where significant work has already been done in student engagement. We have already identified a consultant for 2004-2005: Dr. Jodi Levine, Associate Provost at Temple University, who has had considerable experience in initiating and institutionalizing learning communities in an urban university, and she has expressed an interest in working with us on revitalizing the FIGs.

Comprehensiveness of the Plan

While "Enhancing Student Engagement in Learning" is aimed squarely at undergraduates, and most especially first-year students, the project will connect with graduate and professional programs as well. First of all, with the exception of the Schools of Medicine, Dentistry, and Pharmacy, most faculty members at VCU have responsibilities for both undergraduate and graduate instruction. Second, VCU's professional schools, with their practices of student engagement through clinical rotations, field work, and externship experiences, bring a rich history of successful engagement practices to the project. And third, formal links to graduate and professional programs already exist: guaranteed admission to M.D. and other programs through the Honors Program, for example, or the Pre-Health Science Program in the College of Humanities and Sciences. Virtually every constituency at VCU has an interest in enhancing student engagement in learning.

Evaluation

Project evaluation will be overseen by the Steering Committee. The QEP Coordinator will work with the Assistant Vice Provost for Institutional Research, Evaluation, and Planning (IREP), and the Director of Assessment to determine a division of management for the evaluation process. Effectiveness will be assessed at several levels.

- Evaluation of *project implementation* will monitor the Plan as it unfolds, with attention to adherence to projected activities, timelines and budget. Deviations will be noted, along with reasons for any changes to the Plan. Evaluation at this level will also include an annual assessment of Plan implementation by the Steering Committee, which will be responsible for collecting and interpreting attitudinal data from key University constituencies, including students, faculty, administration, and Board of Visitors members. This assessment will be undertaken in early spring of each year beginning in January 2005. Any major changes to the Plan or its timetable will be approved by the Steering Committee.
- Evaluation of *project effects* will assess the accomplishment of major project deliverables and assess changes in both the environment for engagement and engagement itself, including the *VCU Standards for Success*, the *Learning Grid*, and *The VCU Compact*. Project effects also include the establishment of revised general education outcomes; the Project-sponsored faculty forums; results of the assessment of the institutionalization of learning communities/Service-Learning and use of these data to make changes as indicated. Program-specific engagement outcomes will be identified through *WEAVEonline*TM and paired with data from the Flashlight Project's student engagement survey.
- Evaluation of *project impact* will be critical. Assessment at this level will address the extent to which the project has changed how people at VCU work and learn. Project impact also will reflect the interaction of engagement with other related university initiatives, including assessment. The impact evaluation will address questions such as the following (the Steering Committee, in consultation with Assessment and IREP, will determine the exact list of questions and methods):
 - **Impact on students.** How well do entering students understand what will be expected of them academically? To what degree are they willing to commit to that level of engagement? How, if at all, has *The VCU Compact* changed the way they approach their academic work? Their participation in learning communities and Service-Learning? What changes are evident in the NSSE data? Via learning outcomes assessment data available on *WEAVEonline*TM, what evidence is available to indicate changes in student learning, at the course, program, and institutional level?
 - **Impact on faculty.** To what extent do faculty members from the appropriate departments endorse the *Standards for Success* and *The VCU Compact*? How do they use the Standards in their classes? What have faculty and their departments done to align their courses with general education learning outcomes? How, if at all, are faculty members engaging students differently? To what do they attribute

these changes? Are any differences in FSSE data apparent between spring 2004 and 2008?

- **Impact on VCU.** What progress has the institution made on the institutionalization of student engagement? What policies have changed as a result of the Project? To what extent are matters of engagement incorporated into evolving strategic priorities, discussions of institutional mission, and the like? How have documents like *The VCU Compact* affected how the institution markets itself to prospective students and the Richmond community?

Conclusion

The Introduction to this document listed five qualities synthesized from the scholarly literature, qualities that should characterize any institution which takes its learning mission seriously. To reiterate, such a learning-centered institution:

1. Is clear and public about the learning outcomes to which it aspires for its students;
2. Uses learning goals, and knowledge about learning, as drivers for instruction;
3. Provides an environment which signals support for student learning at all levels;
4. Promotes an atmosphere of critical reflection about teaching and learning; and,
5. Insures that its behavior is aligned with its learning mission.

This is how the suitability of our Quality Enhancement Plan should be judged. The following matrix summarizes the relationship between QEP objectives and these five qualities. For the ease of reviewers, the QEP objectives are listed immediately following the matrix.

	Outcome Clarity	Goals as drivers	Supportive Environment	Critical Reflection	Alignment
FE1	‡	‡	‡	‡	‡
FE2		‡		‡	‡
FE3	‡	‡		‡	‡
CL1			‡	‡	‡
CL2			‡	‡	‡
CL3		‡	‡		‡
CP1			‡	‡	‡
CP2			‡		‡
CP3		‡			‡
CP4			‡		‡
CP 5			‡		‡

FE (Framework of Expectations) 1: Prior to summer 2005, the University will have defined and promulgated what students entering VCU should know and be able to do to succeed in their first year of college.

FE (Framework of Expectations) 2: By the end of the spring 2005 semester, VCU will have revised learning outcomes for general education and will have communicated them to students.

FE (Framework of Expectations) 3: During summer 2005, VCU will ask incoming students to assess themselves on competencies related to VCU's *Standards for Success*.

CL (Communities of Learners) 1: By January 2005, we will determine the institutionalization of, and needed support for, current communities-of-learning initiatives, using the following criteria:

- Philosophy and mission;
- Faculty Support and involvement;
- Student Support and involvement;
- Institutional support; and,
- Community Participation (for S-L only).

CL (Communities of Learners) 2: By the end of the spring 2005 semester, VCU will have identified specific institutional interventions to address each profiled need.

CL (Community of Learners) 3: By the end of the fall 2005 semester, VCU will have designed any needed modifications to strengthen its learning communities.

CP (Communities of Practice) 1: By the end of the spring 2005 semester, VCU will have identified good student engagement practices in all of its Schools and developed means of sharing these practices among the faculty.

CP (Communities of Practice) 2: During the fall 2004 semester, VCU will align the Center for Teaching Excellence (CTE) more closely with the new VCU Learning Center in order to connect identified student learning problems with faculty intervention strategies.

CP (Communities of Practice) 3: By the end of 2006, VCU will have enlisted a majority of faculty members in all undergraduate departments in the adoption of one or more strategies designed to increase student engagement in their learning.

CP (Communities of Practice) 4: By the end of the spring 2005 semester, VCU will have implemented a university-wide advisor training program.

CP (Communities of Practice) 5: By the end of 2005, VCU will adopt, consistent with its Faculty Roles and Rewards policy, a method to reward departments for innovative teaching and mentoring that results in increased student engagement.

References

- Astin, A. (1994). *What matters in college*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Astin, A., Vogelgesang, L., Iheda, E., and Yee, J. (2000). *How Service Learning affects students*. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA.
- Barr, R., and Tagg, J. (1995). From teaching to learning: A new paradigm for undergraduate education. *Change*, 27 (6), 12-25.
- Doherty, A., Riordan, T., and Roth, J. (2002). *Student learning: A central focus for Institutions of higher education*. Milwaukee, WI: Alverno Institute.
- Education Commission of the States (1996). *Attributes of quality learning in higher education*. Denver, CO: author.
- Furco, A. (2002). *Self-assessment rubric for the institutionalization of Service-Learning in higher education*. Berkeley: University of California.
- Krakauer, R. (2000). *Criteria for a learning college*. Toronto, ON: Michener Institute for Applied Health Sciences.
- McClenny, K. (2002). *The learning-focused institution*. Washington, DC: The Pew Forum on Undergraduate Learning.
- O'Banion, T. *A learning college for the 21st Century*. Phoenix, AZ: Oryx, 1997.
- Pascarella, E., and Terenzini, P. (1991). *How college affects students*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Schilling, K. (1998). Expectations in the classroom: Are they too low? *Peer Review* 1(1), Fall, 6-7.
- Standards for Success Project (2003). *Understanding university success*. Washington, DC: Association of American Universities and The Pew Charitable Trusts, author.
- Tagg, J. (2003). *The learning paradigm college*. Bolton, MA: Anker.
- Tinto, V. (1995). Learning communities: Collaborative learning and the pedagogy of educational citizenship. *AAHE Bulletin*, March, 11-13.

Appendices

- A: Examples of Current Engagement Strategies Used in the College of Humanities and Sciences and the School of Business
- B: A Hypothetical Assessment of One Institution's Institutionalization of Communities of Learners
- C. Organizational Chart for the Quality Enhancement Plan

Appendix A

Examples of Current Engagement Strategies Used in the

College of Humanities and Sciences and the School of Business

- In PHYS101 (Foundations of Physics), and PHYS101 (Astronomy), both large (300 student) lecture classes, every key point of the lecture is followed by a quiz question that students are encouraged to discuss among themselves. An on-line discussion forum gives students the opportunity to interact with the instructor as well as each other. Synergy of all of the elements of a course is very important. In PHYS101 and PHYS103, the quiz questions are included in the course web sites, thus encouraging students to visit those sites. Missed quizzes can be made up by forum contributions, thus encouraging students to use the online discussion forums. In Fall 2002 the PHYS103 online forum had 13725 contributions of which 1614 were responses from the instructor.

- Among the things that work for me are:

I try to create an active atmosphere by presenting students with very large test files. They are encouraged to "pre-test" themselves with these files shortly before scheduled exams. The result is that they find they have reviewed their notes pretty well without being told to do so.

I spend a significant amount of time (in my core course) telling students how to interact with faculty. In my view, part of a college education is learning quid pro quos and how to get the most out of the system. I discourage egocentrism and encourage effort. In this regard I give regular quizzes that only count if students do very well on them. They are not announced, so students wishing to improve their scores can do so by regular examination of their notes. Again, before they know it, they are ready for regular tests.

Although unpopular, I believe in giving a comprehensive final in serious courses. A big test provides a learning experience valuable to those students with board tests in their future (lots of pre-health students). Some students tell me that they don't take such tests well because they have not taken many (any?). I give a 12-page final in my core course which is graded relative to the best score in the class (normed to 100%) and therefore rarely hurts the student's already established grade. This final makes students remain focused and discourages irregular work habits.

The 492 (student research) courses in our department are very good experiences. I have co-authored papers with about 50 students, and many of these went on to become graduate students both here and at other universities. We cannot encourage hands-on research experiences too much.

- One thing I tried successfully with my students (at all levels) was to involve them in the preparation of Webpages on topics related to my courses. I also encouraged them, whenever possible, to prepare group activities for McKenna Brown's Conference.
- In the English department, we emphasize the following strategies to enhance student engagement:
 1. Academic challenge: with very few exceptions (large lecture classes of general education literature) all our courses involve significant writing assignments (even when they are not described as writing-intensive, extensive reading, class presentations (oral, on-line), complex final exams and researched papers.
 2. Active learning: beginning with our freshman writing class, we emphasize interactive and collaborative learning strategies, encouraging group work in traditional classroom environments and on-line (in Blackboard), sharing of tasks and papers, forum discussions, and tutoring (graduate and senior undergraduate students tutor in the Writing Center). A majority of our undergraduate classes and a number of our graduate classes have significant Blackboard presence. The graduate writing workshop (in composition or creative writing) are structured around interactive learning strategies (peer evaluation, group revision, etc.). We have also designed a number of courses that teach learning (reading and writing) strategies in the undergraduate major (ENGL 301) and the graduate program (ENGL 500 and the two "theory & bibliography courses, ENGL 531, 536).
 3. Significant interaction with faculty: all writing courses have extensive hours of individual conferencing with students; students in all other classes benefit from weekly office hours and various other forms of interaction with teachers: on-line--"synchronic" and "asynchronic" (outside the class period)--, individual conferences, periodic advising. Every major and graduate has an assigned advisor, in addition to the program director.
 4. Enriching educational experiences: we have introduced a "capstone course" (senior seminar) in the major that allows students to apply their learning to ongoing research projects; we also conduct a number of independent studies each semester. Several courses in recent years have had a "service learning" component built into them, for example with the students in a course of writing and editing (taught by Jonathan Silverman) working with high school students on a student magazine. We offer also internships to our majors (several per year). We have an "English Club" where our majors meet with their teachers or other guests to discuss things of interest to their future careers; and we schedule every other week a reading program (the Movable Feast) for the MFA students, where they read from their thesis work (poetry, fiction, plays, essays).

- The course URSP 413: Policy Implementation focuses on policy implementation in a political context. Students learn how the implementation of policy is affected by an assortment of factors including how the policy was initially formulated. As part of their learning experience, students attend committee hearings at the Virginia General Assembly and then write about the legislation that was debated and the action of the committee. Extra points are given to those students who wish to do more than simply observe a hearing, but who decide to participate in a hearing by testifying either in support or opposition to a bill.
- Academic challenge (both amount and type of academic work required)I provide them with a reality quotient for how much they realistically can expect from themselves based on national averages for foreign language acquisition: inflated expectations can lead to frustration. At the same time, I tell them that I expect stellar, high level work as they cover each area and while we are working on it. I explain to them the process of spiraling their proficiency level upwards. I also tell them what I was capable of at their level and how I got to be as proficient as I am today. I require a learning journal that begins with a learner profile and continues with students being made responsible for previewing what is going to be learned, activating prior knowledge by noting what they already know or recognize, predicting types of learning behavior and scheduling that will be necessary to successfully complete the unit, reviewing feedback (quizzes, workbook, etc.) to either ask me questions/clarifications or to re-learn on their own.

I also provide them with ancillary web documents based on what the majority of weaker students tell me they need. I give them web quizzes that they can take multiple times to help them on chapter quizzes and before the midterm and final. I always include some of those questions on the test, usually up front where it builds confidence and reminds them of major points.

I use the BlackBoard testing summary to target those pre-quiz quiz questions that pose the greatest difficulties: we go over them together in class (I make an overhead). It really helps to go over these before the quiz. Active learning see above

Also I routinely get them to relate the course material to their real life situations. Much work is done in small groups. We use peer editing. Significant interaction with faculty. We interact in class, on line, on the phone. I get numerous emails from students every day, especially if they've been ill.

For the midterm, the class set up a chat to see what would work best educationally and logistically for students. From their responses, I have been able to create a flexible structure that responds to a variety of needs. They are very satisfied (and test anxiety has dwindled to nil).

Enriching educational experiences (such as internships, capstone courses, service learning) We have the internship program in FL but now that I am in the service learning associates program, I am very concerned that the department's

new tack on it will lead to a less than viable academic experience for the students. I would like to take it up again as a full course now that I'm learning how it can be bettered and more integrated into student learning (ie, it needs serious revamping). My 201-202 students have to attend the French Film Festival: it is THE best French learning experience outside a francophone country that can be had.

- I work to facilitate active learning in all of my classes with Internet technology, using online discussions. In some courses the discussions are "live," and in others they take an asynchronous format. When they are "live," every student in the class is involved for an hour at a time, usually once a week, in discussing course themes and questions that I give them before the discussions begin. In these one-hour sessions, each student usually posts three or four messages of three or so paragraphs each, some of which are responses to other students' postings -- far more interaction than would be possible in a face-to-face classroom setting, whatever the class size. Asynchronous discussions, on the other hand, give students a chance to post longer essays and then to reflect for awhile on their classmates' postings before responding to them. I've learned that each of these approaches has advantages, and both help to solidify student learning while providing vehicles for innovative thinking and original contributions that center on key subjects in the course.
- Using Blackboard to get groups of students to respond to the literature they are reading. Setting-up the groups and forums is time-consuming for teachers, and it can be difficult to deal with the results. I ask my students to turn in "Reading Portfolios" twice in the semester, in which they collect the more or less informal writing they have done on Blackboard. As our students become more familiar with using Blackboard, they are using it better, taking more responsibility. I allow some time in class, but not a lot, for the groups to do a bit of work together, to get acquainted. I am generally dealing with classes of 40 or fewer students. I do not see how large classes in English can cope with this sort of use of Blackboard. It would generate pretty large amounts of reading for the teacher, who generally has minimal help from teaching assistants. But in smaller classes, it is working better with each passing year. Note: students will not do work that they do not believe will be evaluated and "counted" toward their work for the course.
- Reading aloud in class. Most students aren't really very good at reading aloud, but some of them will practice just a bit before class, if they had the assignment. They like doing this, and it is an especially effective assignment for classes in dramatic literature. They feel good about each other when they do such a joint project, or at least they usually do.
- Small classes. These are becoming a luxury. My students are quite eager to figure out how to tell which classes will begin or soon become small. Classes that demand quite a lot of writing and set the standards high, allowing for rewriting, will drive out the students who are not serious--works a treat, if we are serious about benefiting the students most eager for an education, as opposed to

those who will always be with us, who just want a degree, pretty much any way they can get it--short answers, computer quizzes suit them fine. Or at least, comparatively speaking, computer quizzes suit them a lot better than writing papers. Students sometimes sign up for more than they can possibly do, given the number of hours they work to support themselves; such students might wish to participate in demanding classes, but find they cannot and keep up with all their obligations to themselves, to work for money, and to work for other classes.

- Some thoughts by topic: Academic challenge: the level of courses is assessed by using standardized American Chemical Society Exams that have national norms. Active learning: apart from the usual Socratic process in class, laboratories provide excellent experience for students significant interaction with faculty. Open interactions are encouraged during office hours, active use of email exchanges, doing research in a faculty member's laboratory, a formal system for academic advising that requires all majors to see their advisor on a semester basis (registration is blocked until they see their advisor). Enriching educational experiences: students take advantage of courses in Chemistry Internships (we are working well with Ms Cheryl Melton of the Campus Career Counseling Center), Independent Study (laboratory research with a faculty member), and they give talks on their work at sessions for students, Dr. Vallarino takes her class in Advanced Inorganic Chemistry, CHEM 406, to such a student conference at UVA each year. Supportive campus climate.

- My strategies include:

Using Q-and-A's at the beginning of each lecture (to foreshadow the topic) and at the end of each lecture (to summarize what we have learned).

Having students teach each other. Even in a large lecture, an instructor can break the students into groups and have them discuss an issue. (In my Communications Technology course, for example, students pair up and come up with, say, "3 advantages and 3 disadvantages of online newspapers.")

Having students write about important class issues **every week**, and share their writing with their classmates. In my classes, we do this using Blackboard's online discussion groups. The Comm Tech students are divided into online groups of about 15 members. Each week, students enter their Blackboard group, answer four questions I have posed, read the other postings and reply to at least two of the postings. (Fortunately, I have TA's to grade the six postings every student files each week.) This ensures that every student must engage in class discussions every week; no one can stay below the radar.

- I am offering two sentences that summarize two recent developments in my teaching that, I believe, foster student engagement in large (125 to 300 student) lecture classes. 1) I require students to make 4 (next term, the number will be 8) entries in the "discussion board" area of the course Blackboard site ,thus encouraging them to encounter other students' reactions to the course materials

and lectures, and to share their own responses. 2) I require students to prepare "Web site Reviews" in which they identify and evaluate specific web sites as research resources for information on various texts and topics, thus (I hope) encouraging them to see the creative possibilities of the Web for preparation, storage, and dissemination of information and interpretation.

- Some things that have been successful for me regarding student engagement include 1) learning and using students' names, 2) holding group study sessions outside of class, 3) giving weekly graded homework and weekly (or biweekly) quizzes, 4) demonstrations, and 5) always agreeing to write letters of recommendation. When the opportunity arises, I also ask students what they major in and what they plan to do upon completion of their college studies.
- Two teaching methods have been most successful for me in engaging students. The first is assigning students to explain to the class theorems and examples from the text. Such assignments generally seem to motivate the student presenter to achieve a deeper understanding than is the case when she can depend on me to explain the details and nuances that often escape notice in a more cursory reading. The second method is the submission of homework via email. The resulting student work is often more carefully thought out, and free of errors, than when submitting written homework. The student retains a clean copy, and I retain her original, while at the same time I am able to comment more fully (and, I hope, effectively) on the student's work. The student, in return, can then reformulate and rework her answers more effectively, since she can modify an existing file rather than rewriting everything from scratch.
- Introductory anthropology 103. Students do several written assignments, most of them with "cultural consultants" who are English Language Program students who are also doing assignments for their ELP classes. This causes a great deal of interaction and challenge, as you might imagine. We do a number of interactive and/or written assignments in class such as role playing and mock Jeopardy games. The classes are large so I wouldn't say that I interact too much with them individually, but they do email me through Blackboard and I generally know their names.

Upper level courses. All are Writing Intensive with research papers, which means a good deal of contact and feedback with me, as well as active learning and challenge. We also do "library day" where we learn how to search academic data bases, etc. in the library with a research librarian in the computer room.

ANTH 348, 349, 425. In addition to research papers, students read 5 - 6 ethnographies, spend one class period discussing each (in turn) in small groups of 3. We spend another class period discussing them in large group with me directing the discussion as needed. They then write a 2-3 page essay on each ethnography and the discussion. Finally, each student presents his or her research at the end of the semester to the class.

ANTH 315. We do ten projects based on different field method techniques and debrief them in class through group discussion of the various findings. We also prepare a real research grant (like a Fulbright) and the students read each others grant proposals, rank them, and interview the "candidates." We sometimes do field trips.

Primatology. Students run the class with the structure provided by me. Last primatology class, the students taught themselves PowerPoint in order to do all their class presentations in that format. They rotated the chapters among themselves, wrote their own exam questions, and devised clever content games. Very fun.

ANTH 301 - human evolution course. Standard lecture course, not much interaction but the students (mostly) love it.

Dr. Bennett and I (on our own time) run volunteer CV/grad school/resume/work prep seminars as well as a GRE preparation course. We also maintain an email alias for all majors, have annual parties, and interact with majors on a daily basis. We are sponsors for a new anthropology club.

In addition, we have a small group of volunteer TAs and RAs that work with us for the experience it affords them. In return, we take them to lunch and teach them things to which they would ordinarily not have access (such as learning Dreamweaver or working in the Historical Society archives).

We have our own assessment plan in place and working, both qualitative and quantitative. You can access additional information on my web page (see signature) as all courses are linked here. While I am at it, it is no accident that Anthropology has some of the best students in the College!

- Student engagement is clearly a key ingredient in the Virginia Capital Semester. I think it is a program that can be considered in the SACS context. VCU along with students from other colleges and universities participate. The core of the program is an internship in the legislative or executive branch of state government during the General Assembly session along with a seminar that features key leaders as guest speakers.
- I teach PSYC 101. Near the end of each semester that I teach the course, I offer, in class, to meet with people 5-6 pm one afternoon to answer any questions about becoming a PSYC major. I did this prior to being Chair as well as now. I pass out a handout each semester that begins, "If you liked this course, here are other courses in the Department of Psychology that you might like: .." I list and describe those courses.
- Engaging Students in Creative Writing. The sleeping student learns nothing--so I do whatever I can to raise questions and problems that are alive, that are inescapable, that matter. I also allow students to see that I care about them and

that I am passionate about the art of writing and their involvement with that art, which allows them to care about themselves, and to dare to be passionate about their own writing; it is then that they may take up the challenge and put in the effort it takes to make writing that matters, not for the sake of a grade, and certainly not for money or fame, but because they want to see if they can do the best that can be done. The demands of the art itself keep us all awake.

- I am delighted to share some thoughts on this matter. In my capacity as serving as the undergraduate adviser for the department, I not only provide students for academic advice, but also career advice. Further, as a way of gaining a good relationship with my students, I take them on appropriate field trips, either to the State Capitol or to Washington. I provide each student that I advise, my business card, so that they have ready access to me, either personally, through the phone, or E-Mail. Hope these thoughts help.
- The Religious Studies Division is a small, efficient, and important portion of the College of Humanities and Sciences. We have just about a hundred majors at any time, who often express their appreciation for the measure of access they have to Religious Studies faculty. I guess, if you are looking for just a brief note on my main techniques for "student engagement," I would point to my practices of personal engagement and mixed testing.
- By "personal engagement," I mean that I make an effort in every class (whether 15 students or a hundred) to make it personal. It is a fundamental principle of polite and professional society to make introductions, and on the first day of every new course, that is one thing I do. More than anything I have ever discovered, this serves to break down the barriers between faculty and student. They feel they have access to me. We all have a sense of who we are together, and this augments communication and discussion in class and out of class. This reflects my premise that education must be student-based, not material-based.

The second technique I would point to is mixed testing, meaning essay tests, multiple-choice tests, fill-in-the-blank questions, short response, oral testing, and even the dreaded pop quizzes. Life is not like an assembly line on which we perform the same repetitive tasks, and students are simply not all the same. So review of acquired knowledge and skills cannot reasonably be the same for every person and every lesson.

I hope this response is something like what you were looking for. In the style of most professors, I am certainly willing to talk about these topics more, if that would be helpful.

- Here is the response from the Women's Studies Program. The Women's Studies Program prides itself at being student centered. To the best of our limited ability, we attempt to engage students in a number of ways. One way is through the Senior Seminar, our capstone course for Women's Studies majors, where students receive intensive one on one attention within the collegial atmosphere of

a seminar. Another way we attempt to engage students is by providing opportunities for them to attend national and international women's studies conferences as observers and as active participants. Two recent examples of this was attendance at the Eighth International Interdisciplinary Congress on Women at Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda and the National Women's Studies Association Conference in New Orleans this June where several students will give papers related to their Africa experience. Beyond this, we try to make students feel they are an important part of the Program by holding social events aimed at them. An example of this is the women's studies spring potluck party for majors and faculty and significant others which I host at my house each year.

- In my opinion, I think that the relevance of the material learned should be stressed. Relevance in this context has both short- and long-term meanings. In the short term, the instructional experiences should be tied in to current and other recent materials--students should understand why the material is important. A well-rounded education consists not merely of facts, but organized concepts knit together in a larger structure. Long-term learning should emphasize that, even if the student has no immediate need for the material, it will fit into a more articulated network. A collection of factoids is not an education. Organized information is education. Carefully evaluated information is wisdom.
- The Psychology Department is working to increase the degree to which students, both graduate and undergraduate, experience "engagement" in their learning. These efforts are guided by the Center for Postsecondary Research and Planning's National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) project. The project identifies a set of effective practices teaching/learning practices, but shifts the focus from the specific class to the department, college, and university as a whole. Rather than asking "What are the key ingredients to include in an effective course?" the NSSE asks "What are the key ingredients to include in an effective college or university?" The NSSE is based on the idea that a course, and a university as a whole, will succeed if, knowledgeable instructor, readings and lectures brimming with information, cutting-edge online resources, and carefully designed practical experiences will all be naught if the students do not devote time and energy to their learning (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Pace, 1980). The NSSE's five benchmarks for student engagement are based, in part, on prior analyses of effective educational practice, including Bloom's (1956) taxonomy and Chickering and Gamson's (1987) Seven Principles.
- The Psychology Department's graduate programs, by their basic nature, require considerable engagement from students. Classes are small, standards are very high, and students must work hard to complete their training. Students collaborate in research teams, work closely with a faculty mentor, experience a wide range of educational and professional experiences, and are provided with considerable socio-emotional support during their studies. The Psychology

Department's undergraduate program, although far larger in size, also includes components that are designed to increase engagement. Specifically:

1. Level of academic challenge: the department has sought to (a) maintain high standards of academic rigor in its classes; (b) stress critical thinking and problem solving over the memorization of factual information; and (c) require, when possible, that students have the opportunity to express their understanding of material in their own words. For example, traditionally much of the assessment of psychology has taken place through choice-type measures, such as multiple choice examinations. This year the department faculty approved the standard that all "small courses" (n = 35) will include writing assignments.

2. Active collaboration: the department faculty, working within their classes, rely primarily on a lecture method, but they also make use of a variety of collaborative methods, including guided discussion, group activities, and team based approaches. One core course, for example, requires that students develop a research presentation, and all presentations are delivered in the final week of the class in a "scientific forum." Members of the department's academic honor society are encouraged to serve as tutors for other psychology majors. The department also offers students opportunities in service learning and community-based learning projects. This semester the Psychology 101 course provides students with the opportunity to join study groups.

3. Student interactions with faculty members: All faculty are required to hold office hours, but in many cases students do not take advantage of them. This year all faculty were invited to workshops dealing with Blackboard, and were encouraged to use email to communicate directly with their students. The department also developed a Blackboard Community, which is used to provide information directly to all the department's majors. This web-based resource includes a forum area where students can share concerns and ideas with faculty. The department also instituted an undergraduate colloquium series this year, whereby members of the faculty present their work to both graduate and undergraduate students. The department also has a staff of graduate student advisors who, as part of their studies in counseling and clinical psychology, are trained to help students make career choices. Faculty also involve a substantial number of students in their research projects.

4. Enriching educational experiences: The psychology department relies heavily on student-based learning experiences, including service learning, field work, independent study, and internships. Advanced students can complete an honors project, which is a 3 semester research based learning experience. Students also are able to interact with people from a variety of ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds, and most faculty rely heavily on electronic media in their teaching.

5. Supportive campus environment: The Department supports students by providing them with the information they need to plan their academic futures. These resources include walk-in curriculum advising, electronic archives of

information, and skilled referral to campus resources for psychological or personal problems. The Department does not, for the most part, differ from VCU's overall orientation to its students. Students are viewed as adults who are responsible for their learning.

- There are three things that I will mention that you may want to include: 1). In the large lecture classes of STAT 210, I attempt to gain and retain student attention by using examples that are modern, entertaining, and, most importantly, hopefully of some interest to the students. I can incorporate pictures, etc into the PowerPoint presentations and relate the statistical calculation or conclusion to something that (most) students are familiar with. 2). STAT 210 is a general education course, and one requirement is a weekly homework assignment that I refer to as focus exercises. On these students work together (if they choose) on a problem or group of problems, which they turn in for a grade. They then receive comments from their instructor, and have the opportunity to learn from their mistakes, correct their papers, and submit a second response. Many students have indicated that this encourages them to do the work and gives them a method of learning what they do and do not understand and learning from their mistakes without their mistakes affecting their grade. 3). We often include group-oriented activities in the labs, providing the students with collaborative activities where they learn and apply the statistical topics being discussed.
- I have not taught a survey class in many years, and my undergraduate courses are all 300 or 400 level, but I think the best learning (at least in my classes) is when I can get a good give-and-take going, and this requires that (a) there be good material that the students read ahead of time; (b) that the subject is one on which there can be many "right" positions; and (c) that the teacher be as engaged as the students in the discussion. I also think that challenging assignments in the forms of substantial research papers, so they can get the feel of what research entails, is also very important, and if completed successfully, gives students a good sense of accomplishment.
- The CHS Advising Office engages undeclared students by teaching decision making processes and self-assessment strategies to define their educational goals and to select appropriate fields of study. The CHS Advising Office engages first year students who are experiencing academic difficulty by identifying barriers to success and formulating strategies to improve their classroom performance. The CHS Advising Office engages incoming students in an on-going academic orientation process to assist them to become fully conversant with University and College curricular programs. The College Transition Program engages at-risk provisionally admitted freshmen through intrusive academic counseling, mentoring, and learning support program.
- My best example of student engagement comes from the new Biology of Cancer course (BIOL 491). In this course the lectures are team taught by expert cancer biologists (researchers and clinicians) in an interactive manner to a relatively small group of 30 students. The exams are discussion based, open-ended in

format. Finally, the second semester allows the students to work in research labs and participate in a journal club/discussion group. The students seem to get a lot out of it.

- In my Basic Human Anatomy, I have a preceptor who attends lectures, sets up review sessions for both lab and lecture. I also send out long practice exams (with old exam questions and other practice questions) for each unit, through both Blackboard and Listserv. I give out an extensive packet of handouts, including expectations and assignments, review questions, review lists, illustrations for each unit. I give them practice questions at the beginning of most lectures, and two practice practicals for each unit, for review prior to the exam. In Comparative Vertebrate Anatomy, I have a preceptor. I set up Listserv and Blackboard for announcements, etc.
- This is in response to your request for a couple of sentences about what individual faculty do in order to enhance the educational experience. I notice the five points you listed in your message, and I want to say to that "all of the above." So, within this context, I will pick out one very little thing, and - at the risk of appearing foolish - I will note it here. I take all opportunities that I can to talk with, and to listen to, individual students. I do that at breaks, after class, before class - bumping into them at the library - and at other times.
- Give students early and frequent grade feedback so there is no false illusion of where they stand academically. For large sections, have at least one review section a week conducted by the professor.
- Intersperse short exercises, quick self-quizzes, and the like into lectures. I encourage students to work with other students on these (even in classes of 140 students) and I walk through the classroom assisting students who have questions. These breaks last anywhere from 2-6 minutes, and I try to do at least two in a 75-minute class. Then we go over answers before continuing the lecture.
- I provide all notes in the form of PowerPoint files and encourage students to print them out ahead of time and use these printouts to take their additional notes in class. I think this allows students to concentrate on the point of the lecture rather than be so worried that they can't write stuff down fast enough.
- Devote one class period to a learned guest speaker in the relevant subject area, when time permits. This can not only "perk" student interest, but it also exposes them to that something extra which they deserve.
- I use my experiences teaching abroad. These "real-life" stories seem to incite interest beyond that of the more mundane (and usually hypothetical) printed word, each of us has his/her own "war stories" which are relevant to what we teach.

Appendix B

A Hypothetical Assessment of One Institution's Institutionalization of

Communities of Learners

Philosophy and mission: There is an operationalized definition for Service-Learning and learning communities on campus, but there is some variance and inconsistency in the application of the term (Stage 2). The campus does not have an official strategic plan for advancing these programs on campus (Stage 1). While these programs complement many aspects of the mission, they remain on the periphery of the campus and are rarely included in larger efforts that focus on the core mission (Stage 1). Programs are tied loosely or informally to other important, high profile efforts on campus (Stage 2).

Faculty support and involvement: Few faculty members know what Service-Learning or learning communities are or understand how they differ from other experiential learning activities (Stage 1). While a satisfactory number of faculty are supportive of these programs, few advocate infusing them in the mission of their units and/or their own professional work. An inadequate number of key faculty are engaged in these activities (Stage 2). Only one or two influential faculty members provide leadership to the campus' efforts (Stage 2). Although faculty members are encouraged and are provided various incentives to pursue student engagement, their work is not always recognized during their review, tenure, and promotion process (Stage 2).

Student support and involvement. Campus-wide, coordinated mechanisms help students become aware of the various communities of learning opportunities available to them (Stage 3). Opportunities are available to students in many areas throughout the institution, regardless of major, year, or academic and social interests (Stage 3). There are, however, limited opportunities available for students to take on leadership roles in advancing communities of learning in their departments or throughout the campus (Stage 2) and the campus has neither formal nor informal mechanisms that encourage or reward students for participating in communities of learners (Stage 1).

Institutional support. Official institutional policy does not recognize such strategies for student engagement as Service-Learning as an essential educational goal (Stage 1). A coordinating entity does exist on campus, but it does not coordinate communities of learning activities exclusively (Stage 2). However, the campus funds an appropriate number of permanent staff members who understand student engagement and who hold appropriate titles to influence its advancement and institutionalization (Stage 3). Activities are supported by both grants and the E&G budget (Stage 2). Despite the lack of formal policies, administrators understand and support student engagement and actively cooperate to make it a visible and

important part of the campus' work (Stage 3). Several departments participate in communities of learning, but these courses typically are not part of their formal academic program and are not supported by departmental funds (Stage 2), and there exists no organized, campus-wide effort to account for the number and quality of student engagement activities taking place (Stage 1).

Community participation and awareness. Few, if any, community agencies that partner with VCU are aware of the campus' goals for student engagement and the full range of opportunities available to students (Stage 1). There exists, however, some understanding between the campus and various community representatives regarding mutual needs and goals (Stage 2); and a limited number of opportunities are available for community representatives to take on campus leadership roles (Stage 2).

Appendix C

Quality Enhancement Plan

Organizational Chart

