



# Making Sense of a College Education

by Joseph Marolla, Vice Provost for Instruction

In September 1966, I attended a mid-sized research university as an entering freshman. I was filled with the usual initial feelings- excitement, anxiety and anticipation. Earlier that summer, I had received my course schedule, so I knew I would be enrolled in a composition class, a foreign language class, a "finite" math class, a world history class and a biology class. Over the next two years, I would enroll in similar classes in totally different content areas. Classes of 300 to 500 students were rather typical even in 1966. For the first time in my academic life, I would learn the value of multiple choice tests and the techniques one could use to survive them. But more than anything else, I would learn that navigating an undergraduate curriculum was nothing more than determining the number of boxes that needed to be checked and then choosing courses that would result in an X in the box.

The problem was this experience did not match any of my expectations regarding what college would be like. I had naively expected that college was a place where intellectual curiosity would be supported, if not required. I had anticipated having discussions both inside and outside of class that would explore the biggest questions of our time and maybe of all times. But none of this actually happened.

Little did I realize, for most of the 20th century, higher education had been moving away from broad and general courses toward a more technical, segmented and bureaucratized education for the masses, and this process would accelerate after WWII and the post baby boom generation. This movement placed the emphasis on various areas of specific content, with no one in particular being responsible for the key competencies and skill areas that are necessary to survival and success in today's very competitive marketplace.

Employers today are asking for students who can communicate, think, work with others and

understand the emerging significance of the digital world. It is time we integrated such skill development into our curriculum and made these skills a priority for all those teaching our students.

**"We will provide all our entering freshmen the opportunity to work on a highly valued skill set from the moment they enter the institution until they leave in their senior year."**

Dr. Joseph Marolla, Vice Provost for Instruction

Here at Virginia Commonwealth University, we have declared a pledge to all our students and their parents. We will provide all our entering freshmen the opportunity to work on a highly valued skill set from the moment they enter the institution until they leave in their senior year. Furthermore, we will do this with full-time faculty whose primary goal is to further the learning of each and every student regardless of his or her entering skill level. This pledge is called the VCU Compact, and we began implementing it in the Fall of 2006.

One of our first initiatives was to create the University College, which houses all first-year advising, learning support programs, such as tutoring and the writing center, first-year programs and the core curriculum. Students now know where they need to go to get help for almost any learning-related issue. All our freshmen are assigned to advisors who are housed in University College and trained to assist students in their curriculum choices, as well as choices that may affect their lives after college.

The second initiative was to establish a summer reading program, which aims to raise the level of expectations for all entering students, engage the students in both a social and intellectual exercise and incorporate the entire university in a collective

experience. Every first-year student receives the same book during summer orientation. We then organize discussion sections led by people throughout the university community, including faculty, administrators, graduate students, and advanced undergraduate students. In the first year, more than 1,500 freshmen participated in the discussion sections. In the second year, more than 2,000 students participated out of a class of 3,850.

Focused Inquiry is the third major initiative - a two semester course sequence required of all freshmen. Focused Inquiry I and II is a small, year-long class with a maximum enrollment of 22. The class targets six skill areas that we feel form the foundation of college success as well as success after college: oral and written communication, critical thinking, collaboration, information fluency, and ethical and civic responsibility.

A fourth major initiative is the creation of our core curriculum. For the first time in 40 years, VCU has an agreement to provide students with a common curriculum regardless of their chosen majors. The Core Curriculum consists of 21 credits and includes the Focused Inquiry Program, a researched writing course, a quantitative literacy course, and three learning-centered courses in science, social science and the humanities. Integrated in all these courses are the skill areas of the VCU Compact. The final component of the Core is a capstone or senior experience within the major.

In the end, we envision an education in which students are well aware of the meaning and intent of all the coursework that they have done and also experience the joy of making significant progress in each of the skill areas. The entire program will be assessed and modified based on our ability to deliver what we think students need to be lifelong learners and successful citizens in the 21st century.

For more information, call (804) 827-4020 or visit [www.vcu.edu/uc](http://www.vcu.edu/uc).

## Foreign Language Conversation Groups Offered

The University College Campus Learning Center is now hosting Foreign Language Conversation Groups for students interested in gaining extra practice while learning a new language.

"The groups were created to provide an opportunity for students to build their speaking vocabulary and their confidence in a non-threatening environment," said

Kimberly Matthews, CLC tutoring coordinator.

During the fall semester, one-hour Spanish and French conversation groups were held one to two times per week, attracting about 10 students each session.

"I knew I was not the only student who needed more opportunities to practice my speaking abilities

in these languages," said Rachel Harris, a senior majoring in Psychology and Women's Studies, who suggested the conversation group idea. "These groups are designed for students at all levels so that the more fluent speakers can help the less-experienced students, while having the opportunity to speak with others at their level."

During the spring semester, Spanish conversation groups will be held Thursdays from 4 to 6 p.m. and French conversation groups will be held Tuesdays from 4 to 6 p.m. Both groups will meet in the Campus Learning Center on the first floor of Hibbs Hall.

For more information, contact the Campus Learning Center at (804) 827-8108 or visit [www.vcu.edu/uc](http://www.vcu.edu/uc).



## Q & A with a Focused Inquiry Associate

The Focused Inquiry Associates (FIA) program provides active learning support for first-year students, building on curriculum in the Focused Inquiry (FI) courses. Each year, outstanding FI students are given the opportunity to participate in the FIA program as associates. The Buzz sat down with FI Associate Jon Ward, who is double majoring in Political Science and Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness.

**How did you get involved in the FIA program?** After taking the FI Pilot Course, I knew that anything that followed along the FI curriculum's goals would be interesting and helpful. I also wanted a chance to help others think critically about the world around them, while honing my own critical thinking abilities.



Jon Ward

**In your opinion, what is the mission of the FIA program?** I believe the FIA's mission is to reach freshmen on a peer-to-peer level that instructors may not be able to do in a class setting.

**What session topics have you worked on?** In past workshops, my cohort has

engaged students in the topics of stripping away stereotypes that are generalized on ethnic and cultural groups, homelessness and trying to define our unique "American identity."

**Describe the flow and atmosphere of an FIA session.** FIA workshops are designed to be fun and interactive! We begin with atypical introductions of the participants and associates and then, as we like to say, we get down and dirty with the topics of the hour.

**What do you hope participants get out of the FIA sessions?** I hope that the participants leave with the feeling that they have a FULL understanding of how the FI program can help them foster ideas that can contribute to other aspects of their education - here at VCU and in life.

## Congratulations to our students!

**683** first-year students made the Fall 2007 Dean's List, earning a minimum GPA of 3.5 with 12 credits.



The UC Buzz is published quarterly by VCU's University College. The UC enhances student engagement and success by providing a central home for academic support services and the core curriculum.



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