

Seminars in Critical Inquiry

**A Quality Enhancement Plan*
Prepared for the Commission on Colleges,
Southern Association of Colleges and Schools**

By

New College of Florida

On-Site Review: October 7-9, 2008

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*This document is a nutshell version of our QEP (excerpted and annotated from the original QEP presented to SACS for approval), providing an overview of the plan, the student learning outcomes, and the assessment tools we will be using in each class.

– *Michelle Barton, incoming QEP Director, August 1, 2011.*

I. **Executive Summary: Seminars in Critical Inquiry. An Introduction to Research, Thinking and Writing at the College Level**

New College of Florida's Quality Enhancement Plan institutes rigorous and challenging optional first- and second- year seminars that introduce students to foundational research and writing skills through a focus on evaluation of evidence, argument, and revision. Students in these courses will begin the journey toward successful completion of a senior thesis/capstone project, a graduation requirement for every New College student. This is a demanding journey for which many entering New College Students are not sufficiently well prepared.

The seminars grow from self-determination theory: to support the needs of students, faculty should structure and support students' learning experiences by 1) teaching in such a way that students experience **competence**, 2) teaching in a manner that allows for student **autonomy**, and 3) teaching within a faculty-student relationship and fostering peer support (**relatedness**). This approach supports more internalized and integrated motivation (i.e. internally driven behavior regulation), which in turn has been found to support better academic outcomes (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Regular faculty workshops and QEP Steering Committee meetings will have these goals in mind as the Plan moves forward.

The content of these seminars is drawn from subjects relevant to the millennial student, for example: natural disasters, the science of science fiction, social problems, and connections between music, place and identity. Assignments will model types of writing that scholars in a particular field deem of importance and of high quality. While a set of shared student learning outcomes has been established, the varied content of the courses acknowledges disciplinary differences. The learning outcomes shared by all students in the seminars are the abilities to 1) evaluate and use evidence, 2) create an argument, 3) critique and revise writing, and 4) follow grammatical and mechanical conventions.

These student outcomes will be achieved in each topical seminar through appropriate faculty and staff development activities as well as:

- **Introduction to bibliographic research at the college level.** Reference librarians from the Jane Bancroft Cook (JBC) Library will introduce students to searching and evaluating the quality and appropriateness of digital resources. Emphasis will be placed on the ethical use of scholarly materials (vs. unacceptable appropriation of material). These skills will be reinforced through assignments integrated into each seminar course.
- **Focus on argument, evaluation of evidence, and revision.** This QEP focuses on two main challenges articulated in the scholarly literature: understanding a disciplinary audience (and thus the focus on argument and evidence), and understanding how to revise (i.e., to rethink a project).
- **Integration with the Writing Resource Center (WRC).** WRC staff, in consultation with faculty, will design units on peer review of writing, development of a thesis, argument, revising prose, citing sources, and understanding and correcting grammar and mechanics.

Assessment will include a pre- and post-survey on research practices, course-imbedded assessment processes, and external review.

II. Desired Student Learning Outcomes

The learning objectives (outcomes) for students include common outcomes (defined below) as well as topic-specific outcomes. The common outcomes are the abilities to:

Evaluate and use evidence

- Formulate clear, analyzable question/thesis appropriate to the area of investigation
- Identify and locate appropriate literature, data, and other source materials
- Interpret literature, data, and other source materials
- Use primary evidence to support or refute arguments
- Use secondary evidence to support or refute arguments
- Define and deploy course concepts
- Frame or situate work in the context of work by others
- Use citations appropriately

Create an argument / generate a research question / develop a thesis

- Write a paper with a main idea that is supported throughout
- Articulate one's own ideas clearly and cogently
- Articulate the ideas of others clearly and cogently
- Present ideas within an orderly structure and organization, building on what one has written in previous paragraphs

Revise

- Critique and revise one's own writing and the writing of others

Follow grammatical, mechanical, and usage conventions

- Write grammatically and mechanically correct sentences
- Word usage is correct

Faculty may include course-specific outcomes in their syllabi alongside these general outcomes. The course-specific outcomes will not form part of the larger assessment process for the QEP, but will contribute to the faculty member's evaluation of his or her students as individuals.

III. Assessment Tools

Assessment entails measuring students' knowledge, skills, behaviors, and/or attitudes/values before and after their experiences in our QEP classes in order to determine the degree to which there is change in any of the student learning outcomes listed above. To do this, we are using three main tools:

Faculty Assessment of Writing Skills

- Writing assignments from early, middle, and late in the term are assessed using a rating scale (attached). Each student is tracked in their progress on each of the relevant student learning outcomes over the term. These data are then aggregated for analysis at the end of each term.

Research Practices Survey (RPS)

- Institutional Research will administer this survey in class at the start and end of term to measure student behaviors and knowledge in using library resources and tackling research assignments.

Self-Regulation Questionnaire (SRQ)

- Institutional Research will administer this survey in class at the start and end of term (at same time as the RPS) to measure student reasons for their study behaviors (on scales of autonomous and controlled regulation).

IV. Duties for QEP Faculty

Seminar instructors will have the first responsibility to the assessment process. They will:

Design the syllabus

- This should be done in consultation with the QEP director to develop the classroom activities and the assessment pieces as embedded into the course in the best manner to fit the course objectives as determined by the faculty member.
- The assignments need to include early, mid-term (preferably two), and late term writing assignments that focus on the student learning outcomes.
- This should also include use of library reference services to provide direct instruction related to the writing assignments of the course. These services work best if tailored to your specific assignments and timed to coincide with them. Supplemental activities are also possible.
- Services through the Writing Resource Center should also be included for instruction in the classroom setting. These workshops can be tailored to your needs, and again work best if timed to coincide with specific assignments. Supplemental services and activities are also available.
- Time should be allotted for in-class assessment of the RPS and SRQ (approximately 20-25 minutes once early (about second week) and once late (near 12th-14th week) of term.

Assess Student Learning Outcomes on Writing Assignments

- This should be done in consultation with the QEP director, using the rating system provided. This should be done at the time of each relevant assignment, and is to be completed for an early, mid, and late term writing assignment. These will be due at the end of term.

Collect Electronic Copies of Student Work

- Part of the assessment process will entail external review of student work. To do this requires archiving the student papers for the task at a later date. All student papers will need to be collected in electronic format and copies sent to the QEP director (you can also require students turn in a paper copy to you as well). In addition to filing these with the director, you will be asked to identify from the final papers that are assessed on Student Learning Outcomes, samples of the best work submitted and weakest, yet satisfactory, work submitted. These will be used for another look at the Student Learning Outcomes, noting the range of skills and a reasonable target for the program, as well as being rated by an external committee.

Student Feedback

- The QEP uses a final assessment survey to ask students to reflect on their own learning during the class. These will be tied directly to the Student Learning Outcomes, the class activities, and their own writing behaviors. This survey should be administered at the end of the term.

Faculty Feedback

- The QEP uses a faculty survey to provide feedback on teaching the class. This will be forwarded to you after the completion of the term.