



Executive Summary: New College of Florida's Quality Enhancement Plan

**QEP Title: Seminars in Critical Inquiry - An Introduction to Research, Thinking and Writing at the College Level**

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New College of Florida, the honors college of the State University System of Florida, has long emphasized active learning within an undergraduate liberal arts curriculum for its small (c. 800) academically talented student body. Students are expected to take responsibility for their own education, designing their own programs for each semester in conjunction with a faculty sponsor. In addition to coursework, three month-long independent study projects and a year-long senior thesis are required for graduation. **The concept of the QEP Seminars in Critical Inquiry is to intentionally provide New College students with the skills in research, thinking and writing needed to get to the thesis level and to move through the process successfully.** For an institution whose mission is to provide an undergraduate liberal arts education dedicated to developing student intellectual and personal potential, acquisition and discovery of knowledge, the focus on developing students' critical inquiry skills resonates well. Comparative data reveals that New College, like many selective liberal arts colleges admitting high achieving students, generally loses a number of them in the first year for a variety of reasons, but unlike these institutions, New College loses an even larger number of students between the first year and the completion of the degree at the fourth or sixth year. Enhancing students' critical inquiry skills early on may impact this trend.

The critical inquiry concept, along with many others, emerged from nine months of campus-wide discussion and consensus-testing of ideas via computer-generated surveys related to the development of a new Academic Master Plan. The goals articulated in the Academic Plan and incorporated into the College's Strategic Plan demonstrate a strong campus commitment to improving the student learning environment that the QEP rests upon: reaffirming a commitment to the student's development of a capstone project; enhancing opportunities for professional development for faculty and staff; and integrating educational support units into co-curricular learning. The Faculty Education Policy Committee called for QEP ideas from faculty, students, and staff. Taken together, proposals to improve critical thinking, analytical thinking, argument, writing skills and research skills and to provide an academic transition from high school to college – all components of the final QEP – constituted a majority of the responses from all responding constituents.

A QEP Development Committee identified a set of overarching common learning outcomes for all QEP Seminars, open to first- and second-year students. In each seminar, students demonstrate the ability to: (1) evaluate and use evidence; (2) create an argument; (3) revise and critique one's own writing and the writing of others; (4) follow grammatical and mechanically conventions by composing correct sentences. Writing conventions and the nature of evidence vary by discipline, but through a review of institutional data, the literature on integrating research skills, first-year seminars, writing across the curriculum, various models and best practices, a QEP that emphasizes a self-determination theory described by Ryan and Deci (2000) evolved. The theory supports the idea that students who experience competence, are provided autonomy, and who have connections with faculty and peers (relatedness) internalize stronger behavior regulation, which supports greater intrinsic self-motivation, which leads to stronger outcomes. Faculty teaching the QEP seminars will benefit from the professional development sessions provided on techniques of eliciting maximum levels of self-determination and approaches to evidence, argument, and the writing process, as well as training in using the various assessment instruments employed to measure the QEP program's impact on student learning outcomes over time. Course-based assessment will be the primary measure, supplemented by the CLAQWA data and portfolio evaluation.

Institutional capacity to complete a five-year QEP has been certified by the chief financial officer and despite state budget cuts and a reduction in the scope of the program, the core funds to support it are in place. Faculty for the next two years of Critical Inquiry seminars have been identified and a new QEP director will take over in Fall 2009. New College of Florida is excited to be delivering this QEP featuring Seminars in Critical Inquiry.