

2.6 Addressing Significant Needs Related to Student Learning

When in 1998 the Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates in the Research University recommended – and its 2001 follow-up report reaffirmed – that major universities could address some of their most persistent and profound problems through “research-based learning” (p. 4), it provided a leading voice in an ongoing dialogue about the state of American higher education and how it can be improved. By providing opportunities and resources to support research-based learning, our QEP will encourage ethical behavior and improve student competencies in critical thinking, information literacy, and communication skills. Recent studies have highlighted these competencies as major areas of focus for universities:

- **Critical Thinking Skills** – The definition of critical thinking established by the National Council for Excellence in Critical Thinking Instruction indicates how central it is to the research endeavor:

Critical thinking is the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action. (Scriven & Paul, 2007, para. 1)

The Greater Expectations National Panel (2002) called for “higher education to help college students become intentional learners who can adapt to new environments, integrate knowledge from different sources, and continue learning throughout their lives” (p. xi).

- **Information Literacy** – The Association of College and Research Librarians (2000) defines information literacy as “a set of abilities requiring individuals to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information.” (p. 2). The ACRL report highlights faculty’s key role in establishing the context for learning. The ACRL further emphasizes that collaboration between faculty, librarians, and administrators is required to effectively incorporate information literacy across curricula and in all programs and services. (p.4).
- **Research Ethics** – Recent national and international scandals of scientific misconduct demonstrate the need to educate students about responsible research in areas such as data acquisition, management, sharing and ownership; human subjects and animal welfare protection; and other areas of potential misconduct. Research misconduct also frequently arises in the form of plagiarism – defined by the ACRL as “taking someone else’s work and passing it off as one’s own without proper acknowledgment or documentation” (Simmonds, 2003, para. 4). Plagiarism is pervasive in academia, a reality underscored in a 2003 study surveying 18,000 undergraduates at 23 campuses throughout the country. Forty percent of the students surveyed admitted to plagiarizing written sources within the last twelve months, and, like Internet plagiarists also identified by the study, viewed their practices to be inconsequential (Rimer).
- **Written Communication Skills** – Calling their 2004 report on writing “Writing: A Ticket to Work...or a Ticket Out,” the National Commission on Writing, a panel established by the College Board to study the impact of written communication in the workplace, found employers frustrated with their employees’ writing skills. The report surveyed CEOs of 120 major corporations who collectively spent over \$3.1 billion annually on remedial writing training for their employees (p. 4). A

major point of consensus was that good, clear writing is a sign of clear thinking. The roundtable of business leaders urged educators to encourage writing as an activity “calling for extended preparation across the disciplines...so that students can later connect the dots in their careers” (p. 20).

- **Oral Communication Skills** – In 2001, the Boyer Commission’s follow-up to its 1998 report on undergraduate education found that “although faculty and administrators as well as potential employers express concern about students’ lack of good oral communication skills, few universities have implemented campus-wide requirements to develop these skills” (p. 20). In addition, the 2004 report of the National Commission on Writing identified oral presentations as one of the most common forms of communication in the workplace, reinforcing the need to equip college graduates with strong oral communication skills.

The strong positive interrelationships between these competencies in the practice and dissemination of research mean that our QEP has the potential to successfully address multiple areas of significant demonstrable needs related to student learning.

2.6.1 Strategic Assessment of Core Competencies at UH

As part of our institutional effectiveness practices, UH has begun strategic, purposeful assessments to determine the status of our students’ core competencies and how our faculty, administration, and staff can be directed to ensure that we make progress toward achieving our general education student learning outcomes. One of these assessments, the “[Undergraduate Writing Assessment](#)” (UWA) provided us with an appropriate starting point for developing our Quality Enhancement Plan.

The Undergraduate Council at UH is committed to assessing student learning in the core competencies (reading, writing, and critical thinking) on a regular basis. In 2004, this process commissioned the UWA, which was completed in 2006. Subsequently, the planning process for the assessment of critical thinking has begun, and the rating of student work will commence in early 2008.



2.6.2 The UH Undergraduate Writing Assessment (UWA)

The UWA included a review of writing from 419 students in junior-level classes in 23 departments, and also incorporated survey data from 187 faculty members and 523 students. Based on analysis of the data, the UWA assessment team identified three areas for improvement.

- *Help students understand more clearly and address more effectively what is expected of them on writing assignments.* The data suggest that when students understand both the assignment and the rhetorical situation, they produce higher quality written work.
- *Help students develop knowledge and strategies for effective editing and improving writing quality.* Quality writing employs technical skills in accomplishing the larger task of communicating what the writer knows.
- *Help faculty communicate assignment expectations to students clearly.* While students need more highly developed skills for understanding expectations, their chances of success are enhanced when the assignment is suitably explicit about what and how to write.

These recommendations can be effectively addressed in our QEP focused on undergraduate research and its culmination in communication, publication, presentation, and performance.

