Fostering a Culture of Student Scholarship  
Quality Enhancement Plan: Executive Summary

To develop leaders who can address the complex challenges of the 21st century, Mason students must develop critical skills in acquiring, analyzing, evaluating, integrating and applying knowledge to generate and develop new ideas and tools. This QEP proposal focuses on creating and nurturing a culture of scholarship, creativity, and research that stretches beyond disciplinary boundaries and permeates Mason. Mason has a strong emphasis on faculty-driven research and creative activity, but a culture of student scholarship remains to be created across the university. In this context, student scholarship is taken to mean research and creative activities that require active student participation to generate new knowledge or create new works. Examples of such activities might include creative discovery and expression in one’s discipline, one-on-one research with a faculty member, or group projects where students work with faculty and community members to address local problems or bring arts and sciences to a wider audience. The goal of this initiative is to create a pervasive culture of student scholarship, beginning in the first year and continuing through graduation. This will make it evident to all members of the Mason community that students are actively engaged in scholarship and will invigorate and excite faculty and students, leading to deeper engagement in research and creative activity institution-wide.

The significance of this proposal is underscored by responses for the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). A self-comparison between seniors in these cohorts revealed that 2006 seniors reported a significantly lower level of academic challenge during their time at Mason. Specifically, fewer seniors in 2006 thought their coursework emphasized analytical skills, they had fewer required reading assignments, and they spent significantly less time preparing for class. When these data were compared with other institutions in the NSSE, Mason students report being more engaged in active and collaborative learning in classroom settings, but much less outside the classroom compared to peer institutions. The 2006 Benchmark report concluded, "Mason seniors are less likely to say they have worked with faculty members on activities other than coursework; they are less likely to have worked on a research project with a faculty member outside of course or program requirements; [and] they talk about their career plans with a faculty member or advisor less often.”

As a result of the activities proposed in this QEP, the following learning outcomes can be expected:

1. Students will recognize the features of critical thinking in disciplinary contexts in order to develop their understanding of research methodologies and scholarly and creative processes in specific disciplines.
2. Students will be able to write competently within their discipline.
3. Students will be able to identify, locate, evaluate, and manage information resources in their field with critical rigor.
4. Students will be able to apply the ideas of their discipline/field to communities outside their classrooms.
5. Students will be able to create an original work in any appropriate format about a topic in their field demonstrating evidence of critical review, analysis, and synthesis of others’ works, as evaluated by those knowledgeable in the content area.
6. Students will understand, adopt, and develop appropriate means of argument through the use of rhetoric, source materials, and conventions of citation in the area of their scholarship, should their scholarship lend itself to evaluation in these areas.
7. Students will be able to communicate about their scholarly or creative work through experiences that encourage one or more of the following: a) collaboration with other
student-authors; b) collaboration with and/or outreach to groups or communities outside the university; c) integration of cross-disciplinary information; and d) communication across cultural and/or national borders.

8. Students will be able to identify and assess the validity of key assumptions and ethical dimensions of a research/creative project in their field/discipline.

The most essential elements for this proposal are 1) the need to enhance faculty-student interactions through increased scholarship funding and development of faculty mentoring programs, 2) establishment of a position of QEP coordinator within an existing Office (such as the Center for Teaching Excellence), 3) development of an Introduction to Scholarship course, and 4) increased publicity of student scholarship through a Scholarship Day and on-line / print repositories of scholarship activities. Additional possible elements of this QEP include:

- Expansion of the Undergraduate Apprenticeship Program coordinated by the Office of Postgraduate Fellowships and Scholarships in the Honors College.
- Expansion of the Innovations research symposium to include research and creative activities from all levels and departments in the university.
- Inclusion of exhibits of scholarship, creative activity, and research during Family Weekend and invitation of parents and alumni to view these exhibits.
- Encouragement of collaborative opportunities among students, faculty, and academic units to foster more dynamic research and creative activities in areas that cross several fields.
- Encouragement of collaborative opportunities among students, faculty, and the community in order to use the ingenuity and enthusiasm of students to solve problems close to home.
- Development of living-learning communities that support a culture of student scholarship.
- Setting aside a single day each spring semester where student scholarship is displayed and lauded by the entire university.
- Creation of student clubs that promote scholarship activities within their department or discipline.
- Expansion of support for scholarship through the Writing Center, Learning Support Services, and University Libraries.
- Creation of a year-long social entrepreneurship challenge to the entire university community that would involve students from multiple disciplines working together to move towards a solution for a local or international problem.

Expected results from the implementation of this proposal would include, but are not limited to (1) an increased number of students enrolling in departmental independent credit to pursue scholarly activity, (2) an increased number of senior theses, (3) greater disciplinary and interdisciplinary diversity of projects supported by the Undergraduate Apprenticeship Program, (4) an increased number of student-authored publications or conference presentations/awards, (5) an increased number of students who have exhibited their creative work, (6) better preparation for advanced study as measured by more acceptances to professional and graduate programs and scholarship awards, (7) an increased number of projects involving inter-unit collaboration or with scholars at other institutions, (8) an increased number of active internships offered by the University, and (9) an increased satisfaction of students with their education.