

## Executive Summary

### Investigating Our Community within Our World

#### Proposed Quality Enhancement Plan for Valdosta State University

This proposed Quality Enhancement Plan for Valdosta State University relies on the central theme “Investigating Our Community within Our World.” Consistent with VSU’s mission statement and strategic plan, this QEP promotes interdisciplinary learning and community involvement through reading engagement, service learning, critical thinking and research, and faculty development. This plan responds to the need—expressed in responses to the Spring 2008 Needs Assessment Survey of VSU students, staff, and faculty—for a learning program that builds community awareness, service learning opportunities, and critical thinking skills.

The four components of this proposed Quality Enhancement Plan include:

- (1) The **Common Reading Program** to select a book that introduces a theme for learning and extracurricular activities throughout each academic year;
- (2) **Service Learning** courses and volunteer opportunities to address issues raised by the year’s theme and book;
- (3) **Undergraduate Research** opportunities for students to work closely with faculty in conducting laboratory, ethnographic, creative, qualitative, quantitative, or library-based research projects related to the yearly theme and stored in the VSU Archives;
- (4) **Faculty Development** through pedagogical training and curriculum support that encourage faculty to volunteer to adapt course plans to address the QEP themes.

Through this QEP, students will demonstrate enhanced understanding of the individual’s role in society, awareness of diverse cultures and perspectives, abilities to conduct research, solve problems, and communicate information, and skills in critical thinking and analysis. The common reading program will help students become aware of other perspectives by reading selected books and engaging in campus events and course activities. Service learning opportunities will increase awareness of and critical engagement with community issues. Research opportunities will help students develop research and analysis skills while learning about the environment, the economy, social institutions, health issues, and other topics suggested by each year’s theme.

Such ambitious goals affirm VSU’s mission, yet can present challenges for assessment. Faculty review of students’ written work against a standard rubric, combined with freshman- and senior-level scores on critical thinking assessment tools, will offer rich information about students’ year-to-year learning progress. Over five years this QEP for interdisciplinary/ community involvement can enhance student learning, reach a broad range of campus citizens, and help fulfill VSU’s commitment to provide life-long learning and service to the community and region.

## Investigating Our Community within Our World:

### A Proposal for a Quality Enhancement Plan for Valdosta State University

**1. Explanation of Topic.** This proposal describes a Quality Enhancement Plan that can fulfill primary parts of Valdosta State University’s mission statement and five-year strategic plan. VSU’s mission statement envisions excellent teaching and learning that will “prepare our students to meet global opportunities and challenges,” excellent scholarship and creative endeavors that will expand “current knowledge, and explore the practical applications of that knowledge,” and service outreach that will enable the “economic, cultural, and educational progress of our community and of our region.” The QEP for VSU should therefore promote interdisciplinary learning and community involvement that offer opportunities to increase the sense of campus traditions and culture; introduce diversity into the curriculum; and increase team-teaching across the disciplines, cohort groups, and service learning opportunities for students.

This QEP proposes four components that offer opportunities for community engagement, service learning, critical thinking and research, and faculty development:

- **Component One** offers a **common reading program** that will introduce a theme for each year’s QEP-related courses and activities and provide opportunities for all members of the campus to participate in discussion groups and related activities.
- **Component Two** focuses on opportunities for students to engage in **service learning** and/or volunteer work that addresses issues raised by the year’s theme and book. Students responding to the QEP Needs Assessment Survey expressed the desire for more service learning opportunities at VSU.
- With **Component Three**, students will be able to work closely with faculty members in **conducting research**—laboratory, ethnographic, creative, qualitative,

quantitative, or library-based—that will relate to each year’s theme and be stored through the VSU Archives as part of a VSU institutional repository.

- Finally, **Component Four** provides opportunities for **faculty development** by offering pedagogical training, assistance with curriculum development, and stipends or course reductions to reward active participation in one of the first three components.

The Spring 2008 Phase One Task Force discussions noted the need for a student learning program that incorporates several core values: collaboration, global awareness, service learning, and critical thinking. By its organization around a yearly theme, this QEP over five years can address these values, reach a broad range of members of the campus community, and help fulfill VSU’s commitment to provide life-long learning and service to the community and larger region. It likewise offers ways for a regional university rapidly increasing in size and enrollment to maintain some of its best features: relatively low student-to-teacher ratios and a close sense of community that an annual cross-campus theme will enhance.

The QEP for Interdisciplinary/Community Involvement can draw on the success of current and past programs such as the Freshman Year Experience and its learning cohorts, Living Learning Communities, the Council on Undergraduate Research, International Programs, the Honors Program, Perspectives courses, the South Georgia Institute, the 2007 Big Read through Odum Library and the Dewar College of Education, the VSU Center for Economic Education, and the Office of Leadership Development. Campus organizations ranging from student groups such as Students in Free Enterprise (SIFE) and Students Against Violating the Environment (SAVE), employee resources such as the Faculty Senate and the Council on Staff Affairs, and campus-wide resources such as Odum Library

and the HUB Learning Cooperative all can help support this QEP. Furthermore, elements of this QEP, such as the common reading program and service learning, can be developed in combination with programs such as the Council for Undergraduate Research or the Sophomore Year Experience.

**2. Best Practices.** While this QEP for Interdisciplinary/Community Involvement will uniquely fit VSU's strengths and needs, QEP proposals and initiatives on other campuses offer guidance. Common reading programs have often been part of new student orientation and freshman experience programs. Campuses that have incorporated a common reading program into their QEP have linked the common reading selection themes to academics and student activities, at times including community service, critical thinking, and/or undergraduate research in their plans.

For instance, Loyola University of New Orleans expanded its first year common reading program as part of its "Thinking Critically, Acting Justly" QEP designed to enact the school's Jesuit service mission. Activities include lectures, meet-the-author events, a community service day, a freshman team-building exercise, and an executive mentoring program. To assess student learning for "thinking critically," Loyola is relying on the California Critical Thinking Skills Test and the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) and longitudinal assessment of a large random sample of incoming freshmen and of graduating seniors in 2006-2007. To assess "acting justly," Loyola will depend on "written reflection papers or journaling" with rubrics "developed and tested to establish a university-wide metric," with students tracked from freshman through senior years. Additional indirect assessments include course evaluations, senior exit surveys, an alumni

survey, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), and the NSSE Jesuit Consortium set of additional questions on social justice issues (42-43).

On the other hand, some campuses have struggled to assess learning outcomes for common reading programs included in their QEPs. One example is Louisiana State University, which includes a summer reading program as well as service learning and undergraduate research opportunities as parts of its QEP. LSU named national instruments such as the NSSE, the Cooperative Institutional Research Project (CIRP), and the Your First College Year (YFCY) survey, as well as local surveys of incoming freshmen and graduating seniors, as measures to help the university to articulate university-wide learning outcomes (LSU, Enhancing Students). After its site visit, SACS applauded LSU's "ambitious plan to enhance the quality of student learning," but called for a stronger focus, clearer plans for implementing and financing the QEP, and more specific student learning assessment (LSU, "Report Response" 16-17).

LSU convened a University Assessment Council and created an On-Line Assessment Matrix to monitor the learning of representative samples of students across their LSU careers. The response names such possible assessment tools as the English Writing On-line Challenge, local surveys of students, the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) Project (which includes a critical thinking component), and review of digital portfolios from students. The Response Report still does not directly address assessment of learning outcomes for the summer reading program, but instead focuses learning assessment on its communication across the curriculum program, also part of LSU's QEP, and other initiatives. Assessment of the summer reading program concentrates on participation surveys and attendance (Response Report 19-29, 58-63). Similarly, The

Citadel includes a summer reading program in its QEP, but focuses on faculty and student perceptions of the value of the program. One specific measure connects a learning outcome to the summer reading program: “at least eighty percent of fourth class cadets taking a test of the Cadet Honor Code will be able satisfactorily to relate the values of The Citadel to themes and characters in the book,” Michael Shaara’s *The Killer Angels* (30-32).

For examples of best practices for campuses with QEPs that link collaboration, critical thinking, and student engagement, VSU can look to Western Carolina University, Eastern Kentucky University, Mercer University, and the University of Texas-Arlington. Outcomes assessment measures cited by these plans include a combination of standard instruments such as the NSSE, the CLA, or the Assessment of Critical Thinking (Project CAT) along with faculty evaluations of participating students’ work such as reflection and writing activities. At EKU, for instance, local faculty developed rubrics for critical thinking and written communication; common writing prompts are administered for entering freshmen and for seniors, with faculty trained to apply the rubric to samples of written work for comparison purposes (33-39). While a common reading program is not part of its QEP, the University of Texas-Arlington does propose a variety of measures of active learning, student engagement, and student and faculty satisfaction at the course, program, and university levels. Assessments include the VARK Inventory of Learning Styles, instructor-designed Modified Knowledge Surveys, student data including SAT or ACT scores and GPA, portfolio assessment based on the Washington State University critical thinking rubric, and the Active Learning Inventory Tool.

Common reading programs at other campuses have provided ways to improve community discussion and student engagement. Andi Twiton’s online survey of 130

campus reading programs names “developing a sense of community” as the most common goal, for 88 percent of respondents. Other customary goals for common reading programs are to model intellectual engagement, to increase student-faculty interaction, and to encourage reading.

A 2006 monograph by Jodi Laufgraben, the lone comprehensive survey of common reading programs, offers guidelines for establishing reading programs, selecting books, and implementing and promoting programs; chapters on course applications and assessment offer tips for engaging students’ attention and using reading selections for discussions and writing prompts. Campus reading programs also receive special attention from the University of South Carolina’s National Resource Center for the First-year Student and Students in Transition. One of the longest running undergraduate common reading programs occurs at Gustavus Adolphus College, where librarian Barbara Fister has compiled a Web site listing common reading programs on campuses and links to further research on such programs. Other campuses with model common reading programs include Iowa State University, Appalachian State University, and the University of North Carolina. Literature on common reading programs advises having clear goals that articulate the “vision” for the program and its community impact (Laufgraben 1-9; Ferguson 8-10).

**3. Student Learning Outcomes.** While VSU in its position as a state-supported regional university differs from many of the schools mentioned above, the VSU Mission Statement and Core Characteristics similarly call for “a commitment to public service, continuing education, technical assistance, and economic development activities that addresses the needs, improves the quality of life, and raises the educational level within the university’s scope of influence,” both within and beyond the region. The QEP for Interdisciplinary/

Community Involvement will rely on the five-year theme “Investigating Our Community within Our World.” The following proposed student learning outcomes for the QEP will help fulfill VSU’s General Education Outcomes as well as the Association of American Colleges and Universities’ Essential Learning Outcomes:

- Students will demonstrate understanding of connections between the individual and social institutions in order to act as responsible members of the VSU community and the larger world.
- Students will demonstrate awareness of diverse cultures and perspectives in order to engage critically and compassionately as global citizens.
- Students will demonstrate abilities to conduct research and to analyze and communicate information as means of understanding and potentially solving problems.
- Students will demonstrate skills in critical thinking and analysis.

These broad learning outcomes help express the five-year QEP theme as fulfilled by the first three components of the QEP. The common reading program will offer ways for students to become aware of other cultures and perspectives in part by reading the selected books and in part by engaging in book discussions, course activities, and related campus events. Book discussions also offer an informal forum for communicating information and exploring potential solutions for community and global problems. Service learning and other volunteer opportunities will reinforce connections between the individual and the larger community as well as increase awareness of and critical engagement with unfamiliar perspectives. Undergraduates who work closely with faculty on research projects will develop research and critical thinking skills as they learn more about the natural world, the economy, social institutions, health issues, oral and traditional print history, and other

topics, in part determined by each year's theme. Class discussions and reflective writing will be common means for students to engage with issues raised by each year's theme.

As one means of establishing a baseline, VSU can administer a critical thinking measure such as the Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal, with its focus on reading comprehension, to incoming VSU students during the first QEP year. Administering the test later to a sample of students participating in QEP courses and a control group of non-participating students should help demonstrate the impact of QEP participation on critical thinking skills. In addition, instructors involved in QEP courses should compile portfolios of representative student written work, including examples from book-related assignments, service learning activities, and research projects. Trained faculty reviewers can apply a standard such as the critical thinking rubric from WSU to assess students' abilities to state problems, consider contexts and assumptions, articulate positions supported by evidence, apply other disciplinary perspectives, and identify potential conclusions and implications. Local surveys and interviews can ask questions about learning outcomes to students who have been through a QEP class, for example, to record perceived ability to approach a social problem from more than one disciplinary approach. Interviews with faculty teaching QEP courses will also prove valuable by focusing on instructors' perceptions of changes in students' critical thinking and social engagement. In addition, NSSE responses over time can help document students' perceptions of changes in areas such as awareness of current issues and community service.

4. **Resources.** Available resources at VSU include the resources unique to VSU listed on pages 2 and 3 of this proposal; ample campus spaces for meetings, book discussions,

lectures, and performances; and support from Odum Library with book discussion groups (hosting as well as training discussion leaders), library instruction, subject guides, and existing collections. Additional resources needed for this QEP will include:

- Annual salary with benefits for an administrative/faculty position in charge of faculty development (Component Four) offering pedagogical training and curricular support; also to teach at least one QEP course per semester, assist with assessment and archiving of student work, and maintain a central web site that will compile evidence from faculty-submitted portfolios of student work to help demonstrate how learning outcomes are achieved (\$45,000-\$63,000 salary range plus \$22,000 for benefits annually plus approximately \$3,500 for one-time office setup).
- Annual funding for outside assessment instruments, to include tests such as the Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal, to be administered to incoming students and later to control groups of participating and non-participating students (cost to be determined).
- Annual funding designated for Odum Library to build collections in support of QEP themes (\$5,000 per year).
- Annual funding for stipends for faculty workshops, training, and review of faculty-submitted portfolios (\$10,000).
- One-time funding of \$2,000 stipend or a course reduction for each faculty member piloting a QEP course (20 stipends @ \$2,000 each to equal \$40,000).
- One-time funding for VSU archives to purchase digital equipment for archiving student work including oral histories (approximately \$3,000 for 10 tripods, 10 60-minute camcorders, 10 digital voice recorders, 2 external hard drives for storage and backup, and 6 sets of cables).
- Annual funding for VSU student assistant to work 20 hours a week with digitizing and archiving student QEP projects (\$5,500).
- Annual funding for extracurricular activities such as lectures, faculty roundtable discussions, and performances in support of the year's theme (\$30,000).

**5. Possible Implementation and Assessments.** As one implementation, a campus committee representing students, staff, and faculty in both Student Affairs and Academic Affairs and from each college on campus will be responsible each year for selecting the theme and book. The book will be available for voluntary adoption in VSU courses, offering both classroom and extracurricular opportunities for students to engage with the book and issues it raises. Six to twelve months between selection and programming will allow time for faculty to include the book in their courses and to schedule special events.

The selected book introduces and helps focus a theme for learning and social activities throughout that academic year. The book could serve as a focus for first-year or second-year experience, Perspectives, and ENGL 1101 or 1102 courses, but also be available for courses such as introductory and capstone courses in majors, and allow for courses to be team-taught in order to provide many students and faculty the chance to participate and critically investigate issues. Related programs can include films, essay contests, lectures, tours, and student performances such as interpretive dance or theatre. It is also possible to connect the book selection to other campus events, such as upcoming theatre department productions to occur on campus. For instance, the plays *Wit* and *The Vagina Monologues*, recent productions by VSU's Theatre Department, offer rich opportunities for discussion and civic engagement such as participating in Relay for Life for the American Cancer Society or fundraisers for women's health and safety organizations such as the Haven. Appendices one, two, and three describe three potential book selections: *The Lost Boys of Sudan* by Mark Bixler; *Freakonomics* by Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner; and *Deep Economy* by Bill McKibben. These books are

merely examples to demonstrate how a common reading program at VSU might find applications across the curriculum.

This proposal for VSU envisions the common reading program as the focus for a QEP further implemented through service learning and volunteer opportunities, undergraduate research projects that develop research and critical thinking skills, and faculty development through curricular support and teaching workshops. Even though other common reading programs often focus on participation and satisfaction measures, student responses to writing and discussion prompts judged against rubrics offer valuable ways to document development of critical thinking skills and understanding of global events, the university's mission, or ways the book relates to students' lives (Laufgraben 65-71).

Clearly the QEP for Interdisciplinary/Community Involvement must include ways to measure student performance and progress toward learning outcomes. Although labor intensive, faculty review of students' written work against a standard rubric, combined with freshman- and senior-level scores on critical thinking assessment tools, will offer the richest data for year-to-year comparison over the QEP's time span. Finally, program evaluation should also monitor numbers of participants, the extent to which the numbers of QEP classes and participating students increase over the five-year timeframe, and perception surveys of those participating in QEP-related activities such as extracurricular book groups, lectures, and faculty roundtable discussions. All of these tools in combination will give an accurate view of the impact of this QEP.

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## Appendix One: Common Reading Program Example One

Bixler, Mark. *The Lost Boys of Sudan: An American Story of the Refugee Experience*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006. 261 pages. [Paperback price, Fall 2008: \$16.95]

In July 2001 four young men arrived in Atlanta as part of the resettlement of almost 4,000 refugees from civil war in Africa. These “Lost Boys,” orphaned or lost from their families in Sudan, came to the United States in search of what many other immigrants have sought for several hundred years: safety, peace, lodging, work, education. From a story that started as an *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* report, author Mark Bixler introduces us to Jacob, Peter, Daniel, and Marko, four of about 150 young men who came to Atlanta. Their histories, both in war-damaged Africa and in contemporary America, are representative of the experiences the Lost Boys had as they overcame disorientation, post-911 animosity toward immigrants, and other challenges to self-sufficiency. In telling their stories, Bixler also relates the history of Sudan, background in international aid policy, and profiles of the many professionals and volunteers involved in the new lives of the Lost Boys.

This nonfiction work can engage students on topics including global political and social issues, international policy, labor, and education. Because these four young men are resettling in Georgia, their stories are not remote; students will recognize places and situations in this work even as they are intrigued by how “foreign” their familiar American culture is to newcomers. Students who are new to college life and away from home for the first time can also relate to some of the disorientation the Lost Boys express.

Potential yearly QEP theme: Identity and Transition

Possible course adoptions, especially suitable for courses in cross-cultural perspectives: ENG 1101 and 1102, BUSA 2106, HONS 1990, HONS 2010, PERS 2140, PERS 2230, PERS 2310, PERS 2550, PERS 2660, PERS 2690, special topics PERS courses, INTL 3170, JOUR 3520, POLS 2401, POLS 4330, SOCI 1160, SOCI 3060, MGNT 4800, GEOG 1103, GEOG 3410, GEOG 3610, HIST 3050H, HIST/AFAM 4512, ECON 3600, EDUC 2120, JOUR 3540, COMM 3500, ANTH 3040, ANTH 3090, VSU 1101, GENS 2000.

## Appendix Two: Common Reading Program Example Two

Levitt, Steven D., and Stephen J. Dubner. *Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything*. Rev. ed. New York: HarperCollins, 2007. [Hardback price: \$27.95; paperback ed. forthcoming]

*Freakonomics* has become a cultural phenomenon. This lively book doesn't seek to prove a central thesis; instead, it investigates a series of unrelated questions in its chapters, demonstrating how economics, which it defines as "the science of measurement" (13), intersects with public morality.

Each chapter starts with a question, some unlikely, as in the first chapter ("What Do Schoolteachers and Sumo Wrestlers Gave in Common?"). The answers to these questions are often equally surprising: in particular circumstances, the book demonstrates, both schoolteachers and sumo wrestlers cheat. Chapter 3 argues that gang structures mirror corporate structures; Chapter 4 argues that the drop in crime rates over the last fifteen years can be attributed to liberalization of abortion laws; Chapter 5 argues that parents' efforts to provide children with every opportunity have little to do with their children's educational success. The final, more lighthearted chapter examines how children are named, and asks how and whether a child's name affects her life.

This book makes sense as a campus adoption because it teaches and embodies principles of critical thinking on every page. It shows the value of not settling for a first impression or superficial analysis. It presents clear explanations of how to think about and use statistical data. Topics are relevant to many disciplines and courses on campus, and one ENGL 1102 class at VSU has already used the book successfully.

The book is supported by a free ongoing web site Column topics for the month of May 2008, as an example, range from asking how to predict winners on *American Idol* to questions about the marginal utility of greeting cards to questions about the value of a work of art.

Potential yearly QEP Theme: Measurements and Meaning in Our Communities

Campus research and service learning projects could turn to city and county statistics on poverty, education, and crime to identify community problems. Projects might also augment quantitative information by using ethnographic methods to solicit and publish narratives of personal experience from community residents.

Possible course adoptions: ANTH 3510, BUSA 2100, BUSA 3100, ECON 1500, ECON 3000, ENGL 1101 and 1102, MGNT 3250, MGMT 4650, PERS 2720, PHIL 2020, POLS 3100, SOCI 3000, SOCI 3510, VSU 1101, GENS 2000.

### **Appendix Three: Common Reading Program Example Three**

McKibben, Bill. *Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future*. New York: Holt, 2007. [Paperback price: \$14.00]

*Deep Economy* argues that national and global economic policies devoted solely to growth now face three fundamental challenges: 1) Growth “is producing more inequality than prosperity,” so that only a few enjoy its benefits; 2) We lack the energy resources to continue growth-oriented economic practices, and concentration on growth has created environmental catastrophes we can just barely escape; 3) Growth no longer creates happiness for people of relative means in economically-developed nations (11). Most of this book explores the environmental consequences of a global economy that relies on carbon-based fuel technology, questions the value, in terms of happiness, of relentless consumption, and posits locally-developed economies (cooperative food alliances and farmers’ markets, local groups around the world devoted to renewable energy, innovations in small-scale agriculture, and the like) as the necessary alternative to current economic policy.

*Deep Economies* is an appealing choice for several reasons. It is teachable in many disciplines, including courses in business and economics, sociology, psychology, geosciences, political science, and history. Its topics also lend themselves well to the research papers required in English 1102. Global warming and the soaring costs of oil are likely to dominate national and global attention in the foreseeable future. Ethnographic and community-based research projects based on the book are easily imaginable: Why doesn’t Valdosta have a farmers’ market? What is the rationale for the current community recycling program, and what will its savings be? How can VSU plan for a “green” campus in future years? How might the larger community develop renewable energy programs?

Potential yearly QEP theme: Conserving Our Community and World

Possible course adoptions: BIOL 1080, BIOL 1952H, BIOL 3300, BUSA 2106, ECON 3800, ENGL 1101 and 1102, GENS 2000, GEOG 1110, GEOG 1125, GEOG 3020, GEOL 1110, INTL 2090, PERS 2130, PERS 2420, PERS 2450, PHIL 3180, VSU 1101.