

Notes of Excellence

from the Center for Teaching Excellence Spring 2011

» Curricular Innovation in the College of Science

The CTE has continued our partnership with the College of Science (COS) to support curricular innovation in undergraduate science courses. After a competitive selection process, 7 faculty participants met regularly over the past academic year to plan and implement their teaching innovations.

The projects have been exciting. Some faculty participants are using wikis to strengthen student note-taking, to foster collaboration and community (across students, across faculty, between faculty and students), and to build records and reflections of class discussions and course and assignment design successes and failures. One faculty member has been using digital imaging in a plant systems laboratory to strengthen assessments of what students are seeing under the microscope. She has discovered that the use of digital imaging has enhanced student engagement; students are working in pairs, and students' conversations with each other have been more lively and relevant to their learning. Another faculty member has integrated his lecture and lab courses in such a way that the entire class is using their lab to analyze data, post their analyses to a public research website, and answer research questions that were generated by the class at the beginning of the semester.

We plan to continue our collaboration with COS next academic year with a cohort of faculty who will be teaching natural science general education classes.

» Scholars of Studying Teaching Collaborative

In fall 2010, twelve Mason faculty from twelve specializations were competitively selected to participate in a multi-semester research project to conduct self-study research of their teaching practice with the support of a faculty collaborative, facilitated by Anastasia Samaras and sponsored by the CTE.

The Collaborative is based on an innovative, cutting-edge research methodology known as self-study research—a scholarly inquiry in which educators systematically and critically examine their beliefs and actions as they undertake a pedagogical inquiry with the critical support of colleagues to improve their teaching and professional practice. Unique to the self-study research methodology is collective knowledge, in which personal insights and the research process must be documented, shared, and critiqued to validate the researcher's interpretations.

Self-study enables faculty to gain agency in their professional development while they work to improve the quality of the programs they work in and the students they teach. The Collaborative positions Mason to be at the forefront in supporting faculty studying their teaching. The projects are ongoing, with data collection and analysis taking place through fall 2011. In particular, participating faculty plan to serve as mentors to an incoming spring 2012 cohort for other faculty interested in studying their practice.

2011 Mason Teaching Excellence Award Winners

The Provost and the CTE are proud to announce the 2011 Teaching Excellence Award winners, who were selected through a competitive process and were honored with a celebration that took place in April at the Center for the Arts. Recipients for this year's awards are:



From left to right:

Mary Kayler (Graduate School of Education), **Kathleen Gaffney** (School of Nursing), **Sufumi So** (Modern & Classical Languages), **Kevin Curtin** (Geography & GeoInformation Science/Teaching with Technology Award), **Marion Deshmukh** (History & Art History/David J. King Award), **Terry Zawacki** (English), **James Willis** (Criminology, Law & Society), and **Padmanabhan Seshaiyer** (Mathematical Sciences/General Education Award).

We are also proud to share that a Mason faculty member has been honored with a statewide Outstanding Faculty Award. Sponsored by the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV), these award winners have been chosen from over 100 candidates from across the state. Mason's 2011 Rising Star Outstanding Faculty Award winner is:



» Dr. Eden King

is an Assistant Professor in Psychology. She earned her Ph.D. in 2006 and joined Mason that same year. Dr. King is an exceptionally prolific scholar and gifted teacher and has developed a national reputation as she pursues a program of research that seeks to help diverse individuals and organizations overcome barriers to equality. She has published 36 journal articles, 11 book chapters, and 1 book, and her work has been cited outside of academia by popular media such as: *The New York Times*, *Good Morning America*, *CBS Evening News*, *The Atlanta Journal Constitution*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Glamour*, *USA Today*, and *Anderson Cooper 360*.

>> Critical Thinking Across the Curriculum (CTAC)

Hugh Sockett (*Public and International Affairs*) and Jason Warren (*Communication*) co-facilitated our spring 2011 CTAC faculty learning community. We asked them to share some thoughts about leading this cohort.

It's funny how one email can lead you to change your entire perspective on teaching. Last spring, I was contacted by the Center for Teaching Excellence and invited to participate in a faculty community on critical thinking in the synthesis courses. Responding 'yes' to that email is one of the best decisions I have ever made at George Mason. As a community, we deliberated what critical thinking was and what it looks like, debated different ways to assess it, and discussed various ways to make critical thinking a central focus, rather than an afterthought, of our teaching. When our learning community ended, I felt like the conversation had just begun.

And I was right.

This semester, I have had the privilege and honor to co-direct a learning community of faculty from Biology and Management to Social Work and Criminology in a highly engaging discussion of how to encourage students to think harder, write more elegantly, and see the world not in a dualistic black and white, but appreciate its many shades of gray. We have tackled this approach from a variety of perspectives—from the general education adjunct navigating university culture to the struggling transfer student adjusting to the rigor of university coursework. From the aspiring academic torn in how to prioritize day-to-day responsibilities to the tenured experts who have been teaching longer than I have been alive. It has been an eye-opening experience thinking from multiple perspectives, to have the opportunity to participate in such an enriching conversation, and to see the evolution in my own thinking on what constitutes critical thinking. As we wrap up our conversation from the spring semester, I await with baited breath to see where the conversation goes from here.

—Jason Warren

Conversations about teaching have a collaborative intimacy often elusive in research presentations or brown bags. Individual passions, commitments, and persuasions are displayed, as teacher talk is also self-disclosure. Anecdotes suddenly become subjective generalizations: invitations to search for improvement crop up and principles or procedures may emerge. Yet if the central character is initially the faculty member, that soon gives way to the student as the central challenge of educational purpose.

Primarily, then, CTAC is an exploration, raising more questions than it answers. Community members' autobiographies and expectations lead, through initial readings, to synthesis courses, their syllabuses, and assignments. The target is to learn and to develop criteria of judgment through Mason's Critical Thinking (CT) Rubric, specifically in its shift to student as critical thinker: not in the abstract, but within the Mason culture and context. Two interesting issues then arise about the Mason student. First, given the heterogeneity of their experiences, political and religious beliefs, do we isolate religious or political ideology from our teaching, whatever the discipline: if so, how can students come to be critical thinkers on matters of central importance in their lives? Second, is there a model of a Mason Student? The CT rubric suggests that critical thinking is a journey. Yet is not Mason a comprehensive university, welcoming the differences between, say, one Criminology major who wants to be a cop and another wanting to become an academic, with manifest implications for their interest and motivation?

The task of improving one's teaching is a primary intent for CTAC participants but, in this framework, that discussion rapidly moves to the relationship between pedagogical matters and institutional purposes and practices, giving the discussions real energy and vitality.

—Hugh Sockett

>> An Update from the QEP Planning Committee

Thank you to all members of the Mason community who have helped make the *Students as Scholars* QEP a success thus far, particularly by helping us prepare for the SACS review team's on-site visit in late March. Your continued support and enthusiasm will be invaluable as we move forward with the implementation of our plan.

This semester, we focused on advertising the QEP to students, faculty, and staff; we hope you have seen the *Students as Scholars* Faculty Guide, video, and other publicity around campus. The QEP Planning Committee is preparing us for fall 2011 implementation by developing the criteria for the Research & Scholarship Intensive courses and Scholarship Development Grants, outlining the new Undergraduate Research Scholars Program, and developing an undergraduate scholarship rubric for faculty use.

While at Mason, the SACS review team commended the *Students as Scholars* QEP for its use of broad-based involvement of the university community, focus on an important topic for the institution, identification of clear and transformative student learning outcomes, incorporation of a well laid-out assessment plan, and commitment to significant resources for ensuring success.

This summer, we will continue our planning and open the Office of Student Scholarship, Creative Activities, and Research (OSCAR), first as a website and then as a physical presence later in the year. Curricular projects will begin piloting during the 2011-2012 academic year.

To learn more about the *Students as Scholars* initiative at Mason, please visit our website at oscar.gmu.edu. There you will find the *Students as Scholars* blog, video, final plan, and Faculty Guide, in addition to ongoing updates and information about the activities that will be implemented.

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