

POTENTIAL QEP THEME: “Today a Reader, Tomorrow a Leader” —Margaret Fuller

Abstract:

The proposed theme would rejuvenate and re-focus our attention on critical reading skills, which are integral to critically thinking not only about the texts specific to our fields, but about the world outside our classes. This focus is consistent with RU’s 7-17 Strategic Plan. The infrastructure is currently in place on both University and department levels to support this initiative. Adoption of this theme could easily showcase community partnerships already in existence (Beans and Rice, Wesley Foundation), and lead the way for even more literacy initiatives. Student-engaged learning, faculty-student collaboration, and public service seem natural extensions of the theme.

Overview of Theme:

As a faculty we agreed upon few things during the early days of our general education revision save one: our students do not come to us with adequate skills in close-reading, whether of the data we provide in class or of the larger social and cultural contexts they navigate daily. Students themselves complain that they do not have the practical skills necessary to decipher a lease or follow a political debate. Recent research further suggests that while electronic information technologies have increased the amount of information available to our students, they are not making better readers of our students. Indeed, studies as well as anecdotal evidence suggest that critical reading skills are in serious decline.

The proposed theme would rejuvenate and re-focus our attention on the critical reading skills integral to critically thinking not only about texts specific to our fields, but about the world outside our classes. This focus is consistent with RU’s 7-17 Strategic Plan which announces our commitment to “transforming its students into graduates who will be among the most sought after by the nation’s best employers and who will become leaders in their communities and chosen careers in the arts, business, education, health and human services, medical professions, the humanities, the sciences, and technology.” Just as deep reading and deep thinking are critically intertwined, so, too, leadership skills are contingent upon one’s ability to critically read one’s context.

Current Status of Theme at RU:

While it is not possible to summarize here the efforts of every academic department to teach deep reading, we can note the following:

- Currently RU’s College of Education works with the local public school system to encourage reading skills in elementary and middle-school age children through programs such as the Wesley Foundation.
- The College of Education additionally offers certification as reading specialists to education majors.
- University Core A courses already address reading as a skill connected to information literacy and argumentation.

- The past dean of CHBS, Dean Conniff, began discussion of a “Radford Reads” project to be conducted in conjunction with the public schools and to involve the public library system.

Ways Adoption of this Theme Might Move RU Forward:

Increased literacy translates into a better long-term economic forecast for our students, for our region, and thus for our University. Moreover, increased literacy enhances our students' ability to think critically and to value reading, and thus to be better citizens, parents and stewards of the planet, which enriches generations to come. In addition, a focus on reading would allow RU to reaffirm its commitment to the larger Radford community by providing literacy partnership opportunities, thus enhancing our profile and showcasing our leadership in the region.

Who Might be Involved in Implementation of this Theme:

All academic and academic support departments could be involved in this theme. Foregrounding the critical reading already taught in University Core A courses would address incoming freshmen. Retooling or refocusing introductory courses in the majors around critical reading skills could also be done. In addition, the LARC could augment support services that are already being offered. The CITL might also offer faculty development workshops on teaching reading and allow for a campus dialogue on what it means to be a deep reader. Depending on budgetary flexibility, procurement of a literacy grant, and/or the possibility of partnering with a textbook distributor, the campus could undertake a common reading program organized for incoming freshman students, for the entire campus (including support services), or perhaps for the Radford community at-large.

Benefits for RU Students Resulting from the Adoption of this Theme:

The practical and ethical benefits are far reaching. This theme allows us to better prepare students for an age where information is overflowing and where Truth is often sacrificed to glitter and glitz. The single greatest gift we can give our students is a way both of making sense of the world in which they live and of adapting to a shifting economy. Deep reading will be their solace in times of hardship and their means of accessing new opportunities and knowledge. This theme would also provide students with the literacy skills necessary to be leaders in their communities. Further, this theme could capitalize on internship and community outreach possibilities (volunteering with the local schools and/or social service programs, for example), thus allowing us to provide greater opportunities for students to be citizen scholars.