

## POTENTIAL QEP THEME: CULTURAL AWARENESS

### **Abstract:**

Humans fear what they do not understand, and this lack of understanding, awareness, and respect of other cultures has, throughout human history, been the flashpoint that has inevitably led to conflict. It would be beneficial for the personal and intellectual growth of our students (and, in fact, to the future of our society) to provide them with a fundamental understanding of the genuine diversity of the human experience. Our genetics show that people are all pretty much the same. Their distinguishing characteristics reside in how they spend the days of their lives: which is to say, their culture. It is hard to imagine a QEP topic that would have a more important and lasting effect than diminishing this lack of awareness, lack of understanding, and often, lack of respect that is still prevalent in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Overview of Theme:**

Faculty often lament that typical students have little notion of anything beyond their immediate surroundings and the general youth culture they experience through television and the internet. “Cultural awareness” could mean a number of things, two of which are especially valid:

1. An acquaintance with (and development of taste in) fine arts, humanities, and the broad aspects of science acquired by intellectual and aesthetic training; and
2. Knowledge of the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of racial, religious, or social groups. Or put more broadly, the characteristic features of everyday existence (as diversions or as a way of life) shared by people.

These two sorts of cultural awareness have often created the synergy to form new and progressive expressions. For example, Picasso, a Spaniard, was deeply affected by African art, and the French Art Nouveau movement had antecedents in Japanese woodblock prints and was itself deeply influenced by an artist from Moravia, in the Czech Republic. The world is shrinking, and our students’ awareness of cultural influence – as well as the benefit (and challenge) of that influence – will better prepare them for a future in which humanity is more directly inter-connected than ever.

### **Current Status of Theme at RU:**

The *7-17 Strategic Plan* includes a strategy to “[create] a campus environment where diversity of thought and personal background are highly respected and where the campus culture values and models inclusiveness in all that we do.” The Core Curriculum includes goals that foster the connection of arts to culture and lead to an appreciation of cross-cultural perspectives. In addition, RU has long been known for its promotion of the arts in the region; RU students are encouraged to attend concerts, performances and exhibitions; and the Appalachian Regional Studies Center (among other University bodies) promotes cross-cultural understanding. However, there has never been an attempt to make cultural awareness a focal point for the University or to highlight the real benefits of that understanding.

**Ways Adoption of this Theme Might Move RU Forward:**

No other Virginia state institution claims cultural awareness as a cornerstone of their curriculum. Such a foundation at Radford would be striking, since broad awareness of culture (both aesthetic and diverse) is more often expected at institutions located in larger urban centers rather than our still somewhat rural southwestern part of the state. Promoting a brand identity of Cultural Awareness here in Southwest Virginia will differentiate our institution and enhance its reputation beyond the region, potentially opening a new market for not only students who care about such things, but also faculty and leaders who value culture and cultural awareness as part of their everyday lives.

Positioning RU as culturally-aware would of course give the University a boost with individuals who are interested in diversity and arts awareness – particularly those who may not be inclined to live or work in an urban environment, and the retention of those individuals should be enhanced due to the understanding and respect generated by this emphasis on culture.

And through this holistic awareness of culture, all of our students will be better able to personally integrate a broad range of outlooks and interests.

**Who Might be Involved in the Implementation of this Theme:**

This theme should generate wide interest in implementation both within the academic curriculum and in non-academic settings. Every individual has a cultural experience or cultural expression to bring to his or her classroom, whether it be growing up in Appalachia, being a member of the Muslim faith, or having a relative who was once a Black Panther. True cultural awareness does not discriminate among cultures, and everyone will genuinely have something to add to the dialogue.

**Benefits from RU Students Resulting from the Implementation of this Theme:**

All RU students can potentially benefit from the implementation of this theme. Cultural awareness gives the individual a broader and more thorough base of knowledge – essentially, more “arrows in the quiver” – when they move into the workforce and life-after-college. This awareness will be characterized in their personal interactions as well as in the ideas and concepts they bring to their life and their work.