

## Advancing Writing, Critical Thinking, and Information Literacy through Undergraduate Scholarship

According to Florida Gulf Coast University's vision and mission, we seek to "achieve national prominence in undergraduate education" through pursuing "academic excellence" and keeping "the advancement of knowledge and pursuit of truth as noble ideals at the heart of the university's purpose." Established at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the university embraces "innovation and a learning-centered spirit." As such, integrating "undergraduate scholarship and research" across the university supports our vision and mission and one of our primary guiding principles, which states that "the University structures interdisciplinary learning experiences throughout the curriculum to endow students with the ability to think in whole systems and to understand the interrelatedness of knowledge across disciplines. Emphasis is placed on the development of teamwork skills through collaborative opportunities."

According to the Council on Undergraduate Research (CUR), the nationally recognized body that organizes work on undergraduate research, the term is defined as "An inquiry or investigation conducted by an undergraduate student that makes an original intellectual or creative contribution to the discipline." At FGCU, we have broadened our understanding of research to include scholarship more generally, using Boyer's *Scholarship Reconsidered*. The inquiry or discovery based mode of teaching and learning, centered around student involvement in research and scholarship, would be used as a locus to advance student abilities in writing, critical thinking, and information literacy. As noted by the CUR, this mode of teaching and learning "develops critical thinking, creativity, problem solving and intellectual independence" as well as "increases retention" and "provides effective career preparation," key indicators of success at Florida Gulf Coast University. The focus of our QEP, then, could be on the development of "FGCU Scholars" through writing, critical thinking, and information literacy.

One model of critical thinking and writing that could be incorporated into the development of FGCU Scholars comes from John Bean's *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Critical Thinking and Active Learning in the Classroom*. Bean notes that "good writing assignments evoke a high level of critical thinking, help students wrestle productively with a course's big questions, and teach disciplinary ways of seeing, knowing, and doing" (1-2). The use of undergraduate scholarship as a methodology for engaging big questions and developing assignments (including especially writing assignments) would simultaneously advance critical thinking. A similar point is made in Dan Berrett's "An Old School Notion: Writing Required," where the author notes that "Writing works exceedingly well as both a way to assess learning and a means of deepening that learning." Several other theorists expand on this idea; Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff in *Being a Writing* and Anne Herrington and Charles Moran in *Writing, Teaching, and Learning in the Disciplines* note that increasing writing in a course, and allowing writing assignments to build towards a larger research project, allows students to become invested in the learning process. Additionally, they suggest that as these types of assignments are integrated into courses in the major they "prepare students for capstone projects their senior year." Along with an emphasis on critical thinking and writing, such a modality would also necessarily include information literacy, which is defined as the ability to "recognize when information is needed and . . . locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information" (ACRL).

Because FGCU includes a Capstone Course or Senior Seminar in all of its undergraduate majors, we would have the opportunity to create a developmental model for, first, introducing students to undergraduate research and scholarship and, then, expecting them to engage an inquiry based project in their capstone or senior seminar.