The Use of High Impact Practices to Increase Critical Thinking in Undergraduate Students

Recently, there has been a shift in higher education policy to focus on student persistence and completion, sometimes referred to as the Completion Agenda (Hatch, 2012). This agenda is grounded in growing concerns inside and outside of the academy over low retention rates amidst mounting student debt. The 2012 Critical Skills Survey, a whitepaper from the American Management Association stated that nearly 75% of managers believe critical thinking will become more necessary to their organization in the next 3-5 years. That study also reported a 10% increase in respondents who indicated their newest employees were below average on critical thinking (which was up nearly 4 points from a 2010 study).

To address this concern, many institutions have pursued initiatives that foster engagement and success. Research has demonstrated that engagement is positively correlated with academic success and persistence and that institutional policies and practices have an influential effect on student engagement (Baker, Fisher, & Johnson, 2012).

This concept paper advocates for the use of high-impact practices (HIPs) that engage students in deeper learning with a particular focus on the development of critical thinking skills. HIPs have been positively associated with gains in critical thinking, as well as satisfaction, persistence, academic achievement, graduation, and social engagement (Hatch, 2012).

The USM QEP could assess the degree to which students demonstrate improved critical thinking through involvement in high-impact learning experiences (that result from the implementation of HIPs). For example, a student who participates in an internship, field experience, collaborative research project, or study abroad might be asked to reflect critically on that experience.