

## Writing Assessment at Mason

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### Overview

This *In-Focus* provides the Mason community information about activities related to the assessment of student writing, results from the “Graduating Senior Survey” and the “Faculty Survey on Student Writing,” activities in the School of Management, and Mason supports for student writing.

Writing Requirements Mason faculty historically value student writing and the university has in place a number of requirements --- English 100/101, English 302, Writing Intensive Requirement --- to ensure that Mason students develop writing competence. Additionally the new general education requirements emphasize student’s writing competence, particularly through the synthesis requirement.

Assessment of Writing at Mason Annually, the “Graduating Senior Survey” asks students questions about their writing experience and about the extent to which writing has helped to develop a variety of skills. To further develop assessment of student writing, in fall 2000 the Office of the Provost and the Office of

Institutional Assessment convened the Writing Assessment Group, which has representation from academic units. In spring 2000, the group recommended a writing assessment process that emphasizes faculty-developed and faculty-lead assessment of student writing. In March 2001 Mason deans identified faculty departmental writing representatives. In fall 2001 selected writing representatives attended the first writing assessment workshop lead by Terry Zawacki, Ruth Fisher, Chris Thaiss, and Ruth Green. These representatives are currently providing leadership in their departments for assessing student writing. In spring 2001, the “Faculty Survey on Student Writing” was administered to gather information about faculty perceptions, practices, and needs related to student writing. Preliminary results are reported on pages 3 -5.

Mandate from State Council on Higher Education in Virginia (SCHEV) In late fall 2000, the State Council on Higher Education in Virginia (SCHEV) notified Virginia colleges and universities that by March 15, 2001 each institution would need to submit a plan for assessing student writing competence (i.e., identify criteria for good writing and use those criteria to evaluate student writing). In response George Mason submitted the plan recommended by the Writing Assessment Group. The Mason plan calls for Mason colleges to report in 2001-02 (College of Nursing and Health Science, School of Management), 2002-03 (College of Arts and Sciences selected units, Graduate School of Education), and 2003-04 (College of Arts and Sciences selected units, College of Visual and Performing Arts, School of Information Technology and Engineering). A copy of the plan submitted to SCHEV is provided on page 6 and additional information about writing assessment and report formats are available on the Office of Institutional Assessment website.

### Graduating Senior Survey

Introduction The following tables provide information from the 1997-98, 1998-99, 1999-00, and 2000-01 Mason “Graduating Senior Surveys” on the number of courses in a major field requiring a written paper, project or assignment. Because of rounding percents may not equal 100%.

Table 1 shows that on average between 1997-98 and 2000-01, 45% of graduating students reported having 5 or more Mason classes in the major field that required revisions; while approximately 10% of students reported having 4 classes, 9% reported having 3 classes, 14% reported having 2 classes, 9% reported having 1 class, and 8% reported having no (0) classes in the major field that “required you to revise a written paper, project or assignment.”

**Table 1.**  
**Number of courses in major field that required revisions to a written paper, project or assignment**

| Number of Courses | 1997-1998 | 1998-1999 | 1999-2000 | 2000-2001 | Mean |
|-------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|------|
| 0                 | 8%        | 7%        | 10%       | 7%        | 8%   |
| 1                 | 8%        | 11%       | 9%        | 9%        | 9%   |
| 2                 | 12%       | 17%       | 15%       | 13%       | 14%  |
| 3                 | 15%       | 15%       | 14%       | 13%       | 14%  |
| 4                 | 11%       | 7%        | 9%        | 12%       | 10%  |
| 5+                | 46%       | 44%       | 43%       | 47%       | 45%  |

Table 2 shows that slightly less than half of the seniors judge that the major courses that require revisions “help to improve writing” “very much” (mean 48%). There were notable improvements between 1997-98 and 1998-99 in that a larger percent of students responded that these courses helped to improve writing “somewhat” (increased from 31% to 38%).

**Table 2.**  
**Extent courses in the major helped to improve writing**

| Extent Improvement | 1997-1998 | 1998-1999 | 1999-2000 | Mean |
|--------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|------|
| Very much          | 46%       | 48%       | 49%       | 48%  |
| Somewhat           | 31%       | 38%       | 38%       | 36%  |
| A little           | 19%       | 11%       | 10%       | 13%  |
| Not at all         | 4%        | 4%        | 3%        | 4%   |

Table 3 shows student responses to another question that asked about the extent to which the GMU writing experience helped to improve a variety of other skills. On average nearly two-thirds of the graduating seniors reported that their writing experience helped “very much” to improve “Research and analysis” (65%) skills, while approximately half reported that the Mason writing experience had helped “very much” to improve skills in “Organization” (54%), “Critical thinking” (54%), “Confidence in completing a writing assignment” (48%), and “Overall quality of writing” (48%). Approximately one-third of the students indicated that the Mason writing experience helped “very much” to improve: “Creativity” (32%), “Problem solving” (35%), “Grammar” (36%), and “Self-awareness” (38%). Forty two percent felt they had “very much” improved their ability to “Argue a position.”

**Table 3.**  
**Extent Mason writing experience helped improve skills**

| Extent Improvement  | 1997-1998 |          |                    | 1998-1999 |          |                    | 1999-2000 |          |                    | Mean      |          |                    |
|---------------------|-----------|----------|--------------------|-----------|----------|--------------------|-----------|----------|--------------------|-----------|----------|--------------------|
|                     | Very much | Somewhat | Little/ Not at all | Very much | Somewhat | Little/ Not at all | Very much | Somewhat | Little/ Not at all | Very much | Somewhat | Little/ Not at all |
| Creativity          | 31%       | 48%      | 21%                | 32%       | 46%      | 22%                | 34%       | 47%      | 19%                | 32%       | 47%      | 21%                |
| Grammar             | 37%       | 42%      | 21%                | 34%       | 43%      | 23%                | 36%       | 44%      | 20%                | 36%       | 43%      | 21%                |
| Organization        | 53%       | 36%      | 12%                | 54%       | 34%      | 11%                | 56%       | 34%      | 10%                | 54%       | 35%      | 11%                |
| Critical thinking   | 51%       | 39%      | 10%                | 54%       | 36%      | 9%                 | 56%       | 36%      | 9%                 | 54%       | 37%      | 9%                 |
| Self-awareness      | 36%       | 43%      | 21%                | 38%       | 40%      | 22%                | 39%       | 39%      | 22%                | 38%       | 41%      | 22%                |
| Problem-solving     | 33%       | 48%      | 19%                | 34%       | 47%      | 20%                | 38%       | 45%      | 18%                | 35%       | 47%      | 19%                |
| Research & analysis | 58%       | 34%      | 8%                 | 67%       | 27%      | 6%                 | 69%       | 25%      | 6%                 | 65%       | 29%      | 7%                 |
| Argue a position    | 41%       | 45%      | 14%                | 42%       | 43%      | 15%                | 44%       | 42%      | 14%                | 42%       | 43%      | 14%                |

**Table 3. (Continued)**

| Extent Improvement                          | 1997-1998 |           |                   | 1998-1999 |           |                   | 1999-2000 |           |                   | Mean      |           |                   |
|---|-----------|-----------|-------------------|-----------|-----------|-------------------|-----------|-----------|-------------------|-----------|-----------|-------------------|
|   | Very much | Some-what | Little/Not at all | Very much | Some-what | Little/Not at all | Very much | Some-what | Little/Not at all | Very much | Some-what | Little/Not at all |
| Confidence in completing writing assignment | 47%       | 38%       | 15%               | 48%       | 37%       | 14%               | 50%       | 37%       | 13%               | 48%       | 37%       | 14%               |
| Overall quality of writing                  | 47%       | 44%       | 9%                | 47%       | 44%       | 10%               | 50%       | 42%       | 8%                | 48%       | 43%       | 9%                |

Table 4 shows four sources of feedback that 1998 graduating students reported using to revise written assignments.

**Table 4.**  
Sources of feedback students use to revise writing

| 1997-1998            |                      |              |
|----------------------|----------------------|--------------|
| Source of Feedback   | Frequently/Sometimes | Rarely/Never |
| Instructor           | 80%                  | 20%          |
| Self Only            | 79%                  | 22%          |
| Peers - Out of Class | 67%                  | 33%          |
| Peers - In Class     | 61%                  | 39%          |

## Faculty Survey on Student Writing

Introduction In fall 2000 the “Faculty Survey on Student Writing” was distributed to all Mason faculty by the Writing Assessment Group. The initial faculty response to the survey was low (n=228). Thus the results reported below should be considered preliminary. A number of units (Biology, College of Nursing and Health Sciences, Computer Science, Electrical and Computer Engineering, English, New Century College, Public and International Affairs, School of Management) had high response rates (40% or higher) and consequently have useful information from their faculty. (NOTE: If your unit would like to re-administer the survey contact the Office of Institutional Assessment.)

Table 5 shows that responding faculty perceive that a large percent of “Entering” and “Transfer” students write “Poorly” (58% and 40% respectively) or “Adequately” (20% and 29% respectively). They perceive that less than 1% of “Entering” and “Transfer” students write “Very Well/Well.” In terms of graduating Mason students, faculty perceive that 23% write “Very Well/Well,” 52% “Adequately,” and 12% “Poorly.” Between 13% and 30% of faculty indicate they “Don’t Know” how well students write. It seems likely that this percent reflects faculty who do not teach entering, transfer and/or graduating seniors and/or they teach courses that do not require writing (e.g., large introductory courses, lab courses, etc.).

**Table 5.**  
Writing ability of entering, transfer, and graduating students

| Student Group                            | Very Well/Well | Adequately | Poorly | Don’t Know |
|--|----------------|------------|--------|------------|
| Entering students (1 <sup>st</sup> year) | <1%            | 20%        | 58%    | 21%        |
| Transfer students                        | <1%            | 29%        | 40%    | 30%        |
| Graduating students                      | 23%            | 52%        | 12%    | 13%        |

Table 6 provides responses to a more detailed question about seniors’ writing abilities. The majority of responding faculty indicate that they are “Very/Somewhat” satisfied with 13 of the 16 writing abilities (range 62% - 50%). There were three writing abilities --- “Integrate ideas” (48%), “Accurately cite sources” (48%), and “Paraphrase appropriately” (48%) --- with which less than half of the faculty reported being “Very/Somewhat” satisfied.

**Table 6.**  
**Faculty satisfaction with seniors' writing abilities**

| <b>Writing Ability</b>                  | <b>Very/Somewhat Satisfied</b> | <b>Very/Somewhat Dissatisfied</b> | <b>Don't Know</b> |
|---|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------|
| Identify main idea                      | 62%                            | 23%                               | 14%               |
| Develop main idea                       | 59%                            | 26%                               | 14%               |
| Use paragraphs                          | 59%                            | 27%                               | 14%               |
| Write for different purposes            | 58%                            | 19%                               | 23%               |
| Use appropriate voice for purpose       | 56%                            | 27%                               | 17%               |
| Analyze data                            | 56%                            | 31%                               | 14%               |
| Record data/appropriate level of detail | 56%                            | 24%                               | 19%               |
| Use correct grammar/syntax              | 55%                            | 33%                               | 12%               |
| Synthesize information                  | 54%                            | 30%                               | 16%               |
| Use correct mechanics/punctuation       | 53%                            | 35%                               | 12%               |
| Separate fact, opinion, judgment        | 53%                            | 32%                               | 15%               |
| Write for different audiences           | 51%                            | 21%                               | 28%               |
| Quote appropriately                     | 50%                            | 32%                               | 18%               |
| Integrate ideas                         | 48%                            | 34%                               | 17%               |
| Accurately cite sources                 | 48%                            | 36%                               | 17%               |
| Paraphrase appropriately                | 48%                            | 36%                               | 16%               |

### **Most Important Types of Writing Assignments**

Faculty identified the following 11 types of writing in response to a question that asked them to identify the 2-3 “most important” writing tasks that they assign their students.

- Research paper (57%)
- Critiques or reviews (39%)
- Journals and other reflection papers (34%)
- Position/issue paper (22%)
- Reaction paper (22%)
- Case studies and narratives (19%)
- Summaries and abstracts (18%)
- Lab reports (16%)
- Impromptu in-class writing (15%)
- Outline (9%)
- Professional letters (4%)

### **Practices/Resources that Help Improve Writing**

Faculty also identified the following four “most important” practices or resources that help to improve student writing.

- Departmental supports (38% - smaller class size, release time, workshops, TAs)
- Assignment and grading models and rubrics (35%)
- Consultations with other faculty (25%)
- Departmental writing tutors for students (8%)

Table 7 shows faculty responses to a question about the extent to which practices/policies associated with improved student writing are used in their department --- in general, and in Writing Intensive (WI) courses. A larger percent of faculty indicate that 9 of the 13 policies and practices are “Always” more used in WI than in general courses. Only four of the practices and policies are “Always” used approximately equally (10% or less difference) in WI and in general courses --- Provide written descriptions of assignments, Provide criteria for writing grades, Provide models for good writing, and Provide reference books and websites).

**Table 7.**  
**Extent to which your department uses each policy/practice**

| <b>Policy/Practice</b>                          | <b>Always</b> | <b>Sometimes</b> | <b>Never</b> | <b>Don't Know</b> |
|---|---------------|------------------|--------------|-------------------|
| Require multiple drafts                         |               |                  |              |                   |
| In general                                      | 17%           | 58%              | 12%          | 14%               |
| In WI courses                                   | 54%           | 19%              | 3%           | 24%               |
| Give written feedback on early drafts           |               |                  |              |                   |
| In general                                      | 28%           | 46%              | 12%          | 14%               |
| In WI courses                                   | 60%           | 13%              | 2%           | 25%               |
| Hold conferences on papers in process           |               |                  |              |                   |
| In general                                      | 10%           | 47%              | 24%          | 20%               |
| In WI courses                                   | 34%           | 29%              | 7%           | 30%               |
| Have students respond to student writing        |               |                  |              |                   |
| In general                                      | 10%           | 39%              | 31%          | 20%               |
| In WI courses                                   | 25%           | 24%              | 15%          | 36%               |
| Provide written descriptions of assignments     |               |                  |              |                   |
| In general                                      | 51%           | 25%              | 10%          | 15%               |
| In WI courses                                   | 55%           | 12%              | 3%           | 29%               |
| Provide criteria for writing grades             |               |                  |              |                   |
| In general                                      | 44%           | 30%              | 11%          | 16%               |
| In WI courses                                   | 44%           | 18%              | 6%           | 31%               |
| Give opportunities for informal writing         |               |                  |              |                   |
| In general                                      | 16%           | 38%              | 23%          | 23%               |
| In WI courses                                   | 26%           | 22%              | 13%          | 39%               |
| Provide models for good writing                 |               |                  |              |                   |
| In general                                      | 20%           | 45%              | 15%          | 20%               |
| In WI courses                                   | 36%           | 22%              | 9%           | 34%               |
| Discuss writing assignments in class            |               |                  |              |                   |
| In general                                      | 38%           | 38%              | 7%           | 16%               |
| In WI courses                                   | 52%           | 15%              | 3%           | 31%               |
| Provide checklists, rubrics                     |               |                  |              |                   |
| In general                                      | 32%           | 37%              | 12%          | 20%               |
| In WI courses                                   | 43%           | 20%              | 5%           | 33%               |
| Provide references books, websites              |               |                  |              |                   |
| In general                                      | 37%           | 38%              | 10%          | 16%               |
| In WI courses                                   | 47%           | 16%              | 7%           | 31%               |
| Have students reflect on & evaluate own writing |               |                  |              |                   |
| In general                                      | 16%           | 38%              | 26%          | 21%               |
| In WI courses                                   | 34%           | 22%              | 8%           | 35%               |
| Direct students to university supports          |               |                  |              |                   |
| In general                                      | 42%           | 33%              | 10%          | 15%               |
| In WI courses                                   | 45%           | 21%              | 6%           | 28%               |

**Update on Writing Assessment in Academic Units**  
**by Terry Zawacki – reprinted from the WAC Newsletter, Spring 2002**

In response to both internal and external mandates (synthesis course, BOV, SCHEV) for assessment of our students' writing competency, a number of departments and colleges have been holding scoring workshops and are preparing to report to the Writing Assessment Group on their findings. In turn, the Assessment Group will synthesize the findings and report them to SHEV. At the bottom of this article, I've included abbreviated formats for both the departmental reports and the report that will be sent to SHEV. While mandates may be driving our assessment efforts, I continue to be impressed by the way our discussions about student writing competence lead directly into conversations about the need to rethink assignments and even course design related to writing instruction.

The School of Management and the College of Nursing and Health Sciences were the first units to collect samples of student writing and hold scoring workshops. Approximately ten faculty members participated in each of these workshops, which involved a morning session--that is, reading, rating, and discussing four writing samples as a group—in order to “norm” subsequent scoring and also to develop and refine criteria for scoring. For scoring purposes, SOM chose to look at a 4-6 page introduction to a business proposal students develop in SOM 301, a writing-intensive course. Nursing looked at selected samples from a “best works” portfolio of writing that students submit as part of their degree requirements. While the intent of the workshops was to assess student writing competency, both colleges developed criteria that will be used to inform and refine course content and assignment design. Leading these efforts have been David Beach and Karen Hallows in SOM and Sue Durham and Georgine Redmond in CNHS.

Several departments in CAS are at different points in the writing assessment process. New Century College held a “preview” workshop in order to ascertain what the evaluative issues might be for scoring writing from integrative courses, which are often team taught as well. Public and International Affairs, English, Communication, and the French division of Modern and Classical Languages are in the process of identifying and/or developing a uniform assignment to be given in upper-division, writing-intensive courses. Papers written in response to that assignment will then be collected and scored in workshops similar to the ones I described above. Betsy Gunn, Ashley Williams, Pris Regan, Winnie Keaney, Anita Taylor and Janine Ricouart are among the faculty leading efforts in these departments.

Of the CAS departments, Psychology is by far the farthest along in the reporting process, thanks to the efforts of Jim Sanford and the Undergraduate Committee. I’m going to describe their process here as an example of the kind of work that has been accomplished in the workshops and might occur in future workshops. I joined the Psychology group for a half-day workshop in January at which we read four sample lab reports written by students in Psych 301, a writing-intensive course. Together we read, rated, and ranked the four samples. As we discussed our rankings, I filled the board with the reasons faculty gave for their scores (“lack of flow,” “clear hypothesis,” “good use of academic language,” “worked in references in the right places,” “didn’t synthesize the research,” “shouldn’t use contractions,” and so on). Next we looked at the list of criteria the Undergraduate Committee had previously developed for this assignment to determine how many of these reasons were captured in the list. With further discussion, we added to and refined the criteria, which Jim Sanford subsequently developed into a checklist to be marked “More than satisfactory,” “Satisfactory,” and “Unacceptable.” Jim distributed the criteria checklist to pairs of readers from the committee and they scored 32 randomly selected student papers. Jim is currently writing a report of their findings. He also sent a copy of the checklist to faculty teaching 301 and other lab-based courses, suggesting that they may want to use these criteria as a guideline when they grade students’ reports.

Below I’ve abbreviated formats for reporting findings internally and to SCHEV. (The full reporting formats, as well as other assessment information, can be found at <http://assessment.gmu.edu/cmte/writing/index.shtml>.) Finally, I want to recognize the efforts of Ruth Green, Assistant Director of Institutional Assessment, who attends all the workshops and writes up comprehensive notes to capture the rich conversations and valuable data that result when faculty get together to discuss student writing meaningfully and systematically.

### **SCHEV Reporting Format**

- 1. Definition of Writing Competency**
- 2. Standards for Competency**
- 3. Description of Methodology Used to Gather Evidence of Writing Competency**
- 4. Results:**

This section of the report will include a grid with findings synthesized from reporting academic units along with samples of satisfactory and unsatisfactory student papers.

- 5. Recommendations:**

Description of the steps that will be taken to improve student writing, based on the findings of departmental readers. If applicable, this section includes a description of changes to be made in the assessment process.

### **Internal Reporting Format**

#### **What departments are reporting to the Writing Assessment Group**

**(Note: This information will be useful for course and assignment design, for arguing for resources, and for assisting students in improving their written communication.)**

## 1. Departmental Writing Requirements

## 2. Departmental Writing Assessment:

- a. Writing Assessment Process
- b. Assignment(s) (used to generate student writing samples)
- c. Scoring Rubric
- d. Samples of Student Writing

## 3. Findings:

This section summarizes findings on students' strengths and weaknesses, based on the faculty generated criteria and as evidenced in the randomly-selected sample of student papers. The number and percent of student writing samples that fall in the satisfactory/unsatisfactory categories are also indicated.

## 4. Recommendations:

Description of the steps that will be taken to improve student writing, based on the findings of departmental readers. If applicable, this section includes a description of changes to be made in the assessment process.

## Spotlight on Writing in School of Management

The School of Management (SOM) has worked diligently this year on improving student writing and writing assessment. For questions or further information about writing in the School of Management, contact Karen Hallows (khallovs@gmu.edu).

### I. Goals for Undergraduate Writing

- A. Overall Goal: To prepare students for life-long learning and the job market by improving their ability to communicate orally and in writing
- B. Student Outcomes
  1. Students will present ideas both verbally and in writing in an organized, logical, concise, grammatically correct, and professional manner
  2. Students will be able to communicate specifically in a business context
  3. SOM goals will support American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) accreditation standards (general education should be 50% of the undergraduate curriculum, oral and written communication will be an important characteristic of the business curriculum)

### II. Processes and Activities Related to Goals

- A. Processes
  1. Incorporate more communication in the synthesis course (Business Models: A Communications Approach)
  2. Revise English 301 in collaboration with English Department
  3. Encourage more inter-disciplinary teaching and increase student writing
  4. Increase faculty involvement in writing and writing assessment (via Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) and Writing Assessment Group (WAG) committees, collaboration with English Department and Writing Center)
- B. Activities - logic for inclusion of more writing and assessment of writing in the overall curriculum.
  1. SOM 301 (keystone and synthesis course) and SOM 498 (capstone course) are both writing intensive courses.
  2. Business communications textbook is used in all sections of SOM 301.
  3. Writing assignments in the 6 core business courses provide further practice in writing and presentations skills.

### III. Assessment Activities

- A. Current Assessments
  1. Accuplacer Assessment (online writing assessment in SOM 301 and SOM 498)
  2. Senior survey administered by the School of Management Career Services Office
  3. Faculty holistic scoring of student writing
- B. Next Steps - develop Student Skills Portfolio and evaluate in SOM 498, integrate other basic skills assessments into the curriculum, develop multiple assessment measures

## Support for Writing

### Writing Assessment Group

<http://assessment.gmu.edu>

Many Mason faculty and staff have worked to implement writing assessment. Provost Peter Stearns, Associate Provost Sheryl Beach, and the Office of Institutional Assessment extend a special thanks to the Writing Assessment Group (below) and other Mason faculty for their efforts and contributions. You may contact Writing Assessment Group members for more information.

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Chris Thaiss, Department of English, CAS  
Mohan Vanigalla, IT&E - Civil, Environmental & Infrastructure Engineering  
Ashley Williams, New Century College, CAS  
Terry Zawacki, Writing Center, Writing Across the Curriculum

### Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC)

<http://wac.gmu.edu>

The WAC Program at Mason is realized in curricular requirements, teaching practices, and a variety of faculty development activities, including the writing-intensive requirement in the major and the advanced composition in the disciplines (English 302) requirement--as well as the writing-infused, integrative curricula of New Century College and the Honors Program. Less visible, but no less important, are the teaching practices faculty across the disciplines employ to work with writers and writing in their courses. Good teaching practice is reinforced by the Writing Center, a WAC/Writing Center publication, faculty development workshops and brown bag discussions, and the University Writing Center.

### University Writing Center

<http://writingcenter.gmu.edu>

The University Writing Center is a free writing resource open to everyone involved in the George Mason community. Individual, group, and online tutoring sessions are provided in a comfortable, supportive environment. Trained graduate and undergraduate tutors from a variety of majors are eager to assist students at any stage of the writing process on any type of writing assignment. The Writing Center will not proofread work; they will work with students to develop revision and editing strategies. Tutors emphasize positive attitudes and helpful ways of thinking about writing. The goal is to assist students to become more confident and effective writers. The center provides free tutoring in three locations --- Writing Center (Robinson A114), Johnson Center Library (room 134H), and online (Online Writing Lab - OWL).

**This *In Focus* and earlier issues of this publication can be found at our website,**

**<http://assessment.gmu.edu>**

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# George Mason University