

Promoting Student Success through Critical Thinking Quality Enhancement Plan

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Section 1: Vision

Share your vision of how your proposed topic has the potential to transform an issue related to student learning at the institutional level. Consider your audience of the Mason community members—why should we embrace this topic and how will it enhance student learning at Mason?

All colleges and universities face the contemporary challenge of educating students for rapidly accelerating change in the choices and decisions they will face in professional, social, political, cultural, and personal settings in the 21st century. Leaders from business, education, government/public policy, and nonprofit organizations call for students who can think reflectively, flexibly, and imaginatively, about unprecedented challenges in our society and in the larger global community. Successful professionals and citizens of the future will develop new capacities for educating themselves throughout their lives, building upon the foundational experiences gained during their undergraduate years. The successful professional of the future will first experience success as a student in the broad set of abilities known as critical thinking, which will empower him/her to assume responsibility for self-directed learning throughout all stages of his/her life.

According to the recently approved University Mission Statement (August 2008), George Mason University will “educate the new generation of leaders for the 21st century—men and women capable of shaping a new economy in a global community with vision, justice, and clarity.” The new leaders who will be educated at Mason in the future must experience opportunities for sustained growth in their ability to think critically and creatively, in the curriculum and the co-curriculum, about the broad-gauged set of challenges and opportunities facing our society within its global setting. Critical thinking is therefore the key to student leadership capacities and to student success at all levels and in all disciplines because, when guided by talented faculty and mentors, it creates an environment in which students increasingly become responsible for their own learning. Student growth in critical thinking, through concomitant faculty and staff development initiatives creates an energized university community marked by engagement, questioning, respect for diversity, awareness of interdisciplinary connections, and amplified connections between the classroom and external communities.

Critical Thinking: Building on Previous Successes

The University has already made progress in focusing on critical thinking as a change initiative and as a key to student success. Since 2005, faculty members have participated in the

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assessment of critical thinking for our undergraduates, as required by the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV). These discussions resulted in the development of standards and rubrics that, while continually evolving, are being used to examine the development of critical thinking skills.

These efforts also informed the Critical Thinking Across the Curriculum (CTAC) program, a Provost-sponsored initiative that is co-sponsored by the Office of Institutional Assessment (OIA) and the Center for Teaching Excellence (CTE). The CTAC program goal is to support faculty and staff as they work to strengthen students' critical thinking skills. At present, a small group of faculty members are awarded a stipend each semester to develop or redesign assignments, projects, and/or courses that develop students' use of and fluency in critical thinking.

Critical Thinking: The Core Elements

In addition to disseminating the results of faculty projects to the Mason community, OIA and CTE collaborate to co-sponsor workshops and activities to support faculty innovation regarding critical thinking. In these workshop offerings, critical thinking has been defined as "Purposeful, self regulatory judgment which results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference, as well as explanation of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, criteriological, or contextual consideration upon which that judgment is based" (1988090 American Philosophical Association Delphi Report).

Section 2: Congruence with Mission and Goals

Demonstrate how your proposed topic is consistent with Mason's mission and 2014 Strategic Plan.

Critical Thinking Core to the University's Mission and Goals

Educating for critical thinking is central to the mission of George Mason University. The university's mission statement indicates our commitment to "provide undergraduate, graduate, and professional courses of study that enable students to exercise analytical and imaginative thinking and make well-founded ethical decisions." Moreover, Mason's Strategic Goals 2014 articulates the need to "respond to the region's changing demands for continuing and professional lifelong learning thereby contributing to its ongoing intellectual, economic, and community development," which certainly includes the skills developed by improving critical thinking. Expansion of cross-curricular initiatives, including Critical Thinking Across the Curriculum (CTAC), are strategic initiatives explicitly called for in the 2014 Strategic Goals.

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Section 3: Student Learning Outcomes

Identify at least four measurable student learning outcomes that your proposed topic expects to address. Specifically, if you plan were to be adopted, what would students know and be able to do as a result?

1. Learners will recognize the features of critical thinking in disciplinary contexts in order to develop their understanding of research methodologies and scholarly processes in specific disciplines; they will be able to analyze research or theoretical articles in their field as evaluated by those knowledgeable in the content area.
2. Learners will be able to synthesize two or more points of view on a topic as evaluated by those knowledgeable in the content area.
3. Learners will be able to create an original work (in any appropriate format) about a topic in their field demonstrating evidence of critical review, analysis, and synthesis of others' works as evaluated by those knowledgeable in the content area.
4. Learners will be able to identify their strengths and weaknesses in their learning and thinking approaches in order to become more aware of themselves as learners.
5. Learners will be able to integrate their learning experiences with faculty, mentors, and peers across the co-curriculum and curriculum in order to extend interpretive, analytical, evaluative, and imaginative skills learned in academic courses into larger societal contexts.
6. Learners will be able to identify the features of critical thinking that progressively expand their abilities to master new content, organize complex learning strategies, complete courses and programs successfully, plan and allocate time carefully, and collaborate with peers and others on both curricular and co-curricular projects.

Section 4: Possible Avenues for Implementation

Describe how your proposed QEP topic relates to an issue where there is momentum building on campus or an issue that would be significantly strengthened through added attention and resources. Include your ideas about possible strategies for implementing this topic so that we could obtain meaningful results. Where possible, highlight opportunities to build on current institutional initiatives and resources.

As a foundational skill, there is the opportunity to embed practices of teaching for critical thinking into the general education program. Thus, we might develop a common set of critical thinking learning outcomes for those courses, including the synthesis course, which provides a framework for students to understand the interconnectedness of knowledge and the disciplines. Each academic unit might also embrace teaching for critical thinking through developing capstone courses with discipline-specific student learning outcomes. Finally, we could identify teaching and learning best practices that would strengthen students' critical

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thinking capacities through the integration of their curricular and co-curricular experiences. Assessing the impact of critical thinking in all of these ways will involve data collected both from students and faculty. For example, student surveys of faculty teaching could include prompts and questions that address some of the key elements of a “critical thinking” classroom and the practices associated with it, and with the various assignments and experiences given to students to develop the rigor and academic challenge of their courses. In addition, faculty could conduct faculty cohort-based studies of improved educational environments supporting critical thinking learning outcomes; such faculty-led studies would be invaluable as faculty development tools.

At the moment, the CTAC initiative receives modest funding from the Provost Office (\$25,000 annually). Looking forward, the 2014 Strategic Goals articulates a need for Foundation to focus on specific teaching initiatives, such as critical thinking, as part of the strategy for future capital campaigns. In addition to financial resources, however, due to the many stakeholders interested in developing critical thinking skills (e.g., across academic units, University Life, University Libraries, and our Living Learning Community initiatives in Residence Life), there are a number of institutional resources that might be levered in support of focusing our attention on strengthening students’ critical thinking skills.