

SACS Facts, September 2009

Quality Enhancement Plan Focus: Improving Student Critical Thinking

Our campus data and a review of best practices on college campuses strongly suggest that our QEP focus on “critical thinking.” During the 2008-09 academic year, the Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) Committee reviewed data and gathered input from faculty, staff and students to determine the focus for our plan for our upcoming SACS reaffirmation. The QEP, a five-year plan specific to each institution, should improve learning outcomes and student engagement to accomplish the mission of the institution. Development of a QEP is required for the SACS reaffirmation. The data reviewed at UTC included the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE) and the CAAP (Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency). Input from faculty, staff and students at scheduled focus group sessions along with comments from the blog on the SACS website were also utilized as a means to determine the focus of the QEP.

The University at Tennessee at Chattanooga (UTC) must prepare critical thinkers who can connect and synthesize information from a wide variety of sources. Highly sought after in society and the workforce, critical thinking is generally defined as the ability to apply knowledge, use information in new ways, analyze situations and concepts, and evaluate decisions through justification. Thus, UTC's definition of critical thinking is based on our students achieving the higher levels of Bloom's taxonomy – application, analysis, evaluation, and creation (http://www.odu.edu/educ/roverbau/Bloom/blooms_taxonomy.htm).

Improving critical thinking aligns with UTC's mission, which is the commitment to excellence in teaching, research and service and also our dedication to meeting the diverse needs of the region through strategic partnerships and community involvement. Two of the core values within the strategic plan are education and engagement. Critical thinkers will create stronger bonds within the campus community and create new ties between the university and surrounding communities.

Other universities that have worked to improve student critical thinking have implemented variations on the following programs.

Learning communities, academic partnerships and freshman programs

“Well-designed learning communities emphasizing collaborative learning result in improved GPA, retention, and satisfaction for undergraduate students” (Stevenson, Duran 51) not only help prepare students for practical real-world application of knowledge and understanding outside the classroom, but also fulfill UTC's strategic plan to increase connectivity between students, faculty, and the community. These programs can allow students to move into other interdisciplinary programs ranging from linked courses to learning clusters or service learning partnerships. Learning communities should be diverse enough to appeal to all majors, yet flexible enough to allow students to “engage in different ways, depending on their interest and the flexibility of their

degree plan” (Gilbert 46). Freshman interest groups (FIGs) establish a University’s values and expectations while helping students become “integrated both socially and academically” (Stevenson, Duran 1). This increased engagement has shown to improve student’s critical thinking by helping them connect and learn from others.

Capstone seminars, senior theses, portfolios of academic work, or journals that chronicle the college experience gauge critical thinking and scholarly success outside the traditional confines of the GPA system

Students nearing graduation can benefit from evaluative academic experiences designed on common standards and assessment rubrics as a means for students to self-reflect, self-evaluate, and synthesize their college experience into a meaningful project. These capstone experiences could also include service or applied learning opportunities that will engage students within the disciplines within our region and community.

Faculty development programs on teaching and pedagogy

The way content is taught can greatly impact the ability of students to connect and apply new knowledge and understanding (Bonwell, Eison). Active and collaborative learning teaching strategies allow students to actively participate in the learning process and to take responsibility for their learning (Bonwell, Eison). These teaching strategies put an emphasis on student-directed learning and can create more aware, motivated learners, and cut down on isolation within departments and disciplines. In addition, faculty often benefit from cross-campus dialogue with colleagues on methods of teaching critical thinking and ways to further incorporate such strategies in the classroom.

During the 2009-2010 academic year the QEP committee will need to determine the programs and support necessary to help the campus improve students' critical thinking and ways this important initiative can be accomplished and implemented based on available or new resources. We welcome input from all areas of the campus. In particular, what can faculty and staff do to make a difference in students’ critical thinking and what help do they need to increase student engagement with the college content? What current methods are used to teach and assess students’ application, analysis, evaluation, and creation skills within the disciplines? What teaching strategies work and don’t work for UTC students? What administrative structures should be in place to help faculty create better learning environments for students? What administrative structures are already on place to support the implementation of new pedagogies, learning communities, and service and applied learning opportunities for our students?

We invite you to participate in these discussions as we further refine our QEP topic and the programs to support our efforts. The dates and times for these sessions are listed below. NO pre-registration is necessary to attend.

Tuesday, September 15, 2009, 12:00 - 1:00 pm, Heritage Room, UC
Thursday, September 24, 2009, 2:00 - 3:00 pm, Heritage Room, UC
Wednesday, October 7, 2009, 10:00 - 11:00 am, Heritage Room, UC
Friday, October 16, 2009, 1:00 - 2:00 pm, Heritage Room, UC
Tuesday, November 10, 2009, 12:00 - 1:00 pm, Heritage Room, UC
Friday, November 20, 2009, 9:00 - 10:00 am, Heritage Room, UC

Works Consulted

- Barnes, Cynthia A. "Critical Thinking Revisited: Its Past, Present, and Future." *New Directions for Community Colleges* 130 (2005).
- Bonwell, Charles C., and James A. Eison. "Active Learning: Creating Excitement in the Classroom." 1991 ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Reports. ERIC. H. W. Wilson. Lupton Library, Chattanooga, Tennessee. 18 Aug. 2009 <<http://vnweb.hwwilsonweb.com/>>.
- Elder, Linda. "Critical Thinking as the Key to the Learning College: A Professional Development Model." *New Directions for Community Colleges* 130 (2005).
- Huber Hutchings. "Integrative Learning: Mapping the Terrain." *Association of American Colleges and Universities* (2004).
- Gilbert, Lucia Albino, Paige E. Schilt, and Sheldon Ekland-Olson. "Integrated Learning and Research Across Disciplinary Boundaries." *Liberal Education* (June 2005).
- Lenning, Oscar T. and Larry H. Ebbers. "The Powerful Potential of Learning Communities: Improving Education for the Future." *Association for the Study of Higher Education*. 26.6 (1999).
- Stevenson, Catherine B., Robert L. Duran, Karen A. Barrett, and Guy C. Colarulli. "Fostering Faculty Collaboration in Learning Communities: A Developmental Approach." *Innovative Higher Education* 30.1 (2005).