

Enhancing Students' Critical Thinking Skills ("Dare to Think!") Alabama A&M University

Executive Summary

The Alabama A&M University QEP was developed based on the need to enhance student performance in their collegiate courses. The topic selection process occurred during the spring 2012 semester with the Steering Committee focused on engaging the campus community in a conversation about student achievement through surveys, reviews of student performance, focus groups, and input from faculty.

Emerging from this process the University developed a QEP whose purpose is to enhance students' critical thinking (CT) skills by improving higher order thinking in targeted general education courses using effective learning strategies. Students will receive CT instruction at the freshman and sophomore levels which will increase academic success by supporting and advancing their performance as they matriculate.

To improve students' CT skills, three (3) goals were identified along with four (4) student learning outcomes (SLOs):

Goal 1: To enhance students' ability to analyze information

SLO 1.1: Students will be able to identify the significant issue, concept, problem, or argument in information.

SLO 1.2: Students will be able to differentiate between implicit and explicit assumptions.

Goal 2: To enhance students' ability to evaluate information

SLO 2.1: Students will be able to distinguish whether information reaches a logical conclusion.

Goal 3: To enhance students' ability to synthesize information

SLO 3.1: Students will be able to formulate a position and support it with evidence from multiple sources.

In addition to the student goals, a faculty goal was identified along with three (3) outcomes:

Goal 4: To enhance faculty use of critical thinking pedagogy through the design of instructional approaches and assessments.

Outcome 4.1: Faculty can define critical thinking in general and as it applies to their discipline.

Outcome 4.2: Faculty will teach and model critical thinking in class lectures and discussions.

Outcome 4.3: Faculty will use assessment techniques that measure different forms/levels of critical thinking.

A selected group of faculty in the targeted disciplines of the general education curriculum will be trained to teach CT for the first time whereas other faculty will gain a better understanding of how to continue teaching and improving CT skills through methodology, pedagogy and effective assessment. This professional development will help faculty to develop students' CT skills. Faculty surveys will be administered to allow them to share challenges, effective teaching strategies, and improvements needed at the end of each semester. Faculty will be observed and evaluated by their peers to measure their effectiveness in teaching CT strategies through peer-to-peer evaluations.

Diagnostic assessment will be administered prior to the implementation of the QEP to determine the students' knowledge of CT. Formative assessments will be conducted throughout the courses to provide immediate feedback to be used in improving student learning (instructional strategies and student learning) at the course level. Summative assessments (pre, mid, and post) will be used to evaluate student learning outcomes at the end of the course.

Other direct and indirect assessment methods will be utilized to provide a multivariate evaluation of the status and performance of CT implementation. Direct methods will involve assessing student learning in the courses through objective tests, essays, research projects, and other classroom assignments using internally developed rubrics. Indirect methods will entail student reflections in which learners will be tasked to consider and think about their own learning and cognitive abilities through surveys and self-assessment of improved critical thinking skills.

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