A. Give this Action Project a short title in 10 words or fewer:

Enhancing Academic Quality through Critical Thinking

B. Describe this Action Project's goal in 100 words or fewer:

Western seeks to increase its graduates’ abilities to think critically (questioning, interpreting, analyzing, synthesizing, and problem solving). Critical thinking is a part of our identified general education outcomes and is broadly valued in the major disciplines and by faculty. As presented in Western’s 2006 AQIP Systems Portfolio, and as measured by ETS Academic Profile and Collegiate Learning Assessment outcomes (CLA), Western graduates need to improve their levels of proficiency in critical thinking. To accomplish this improvement, Western will implement a systematic, cross-curricular initiative to create a more coherent approach to the learning and practice of critical thinking.

C. Identify the single AQIP Category which the Action Project will most affect or impact:

Primary Category: Helping Students Learn

D. Describe briefly your institution's reasons for taking on this Action Project now -- why the project and its goals are high among your current priorities:

Western has a statewide mission in applied learning wherein students take theoretical knowledge and apply that knowledge to authentic settings and experiences. Critical thinking and applied learning are inextricably related. Enhancing Academic Quality through Critical Thinking has been identified as a part of one of seven opportunity areas in the Five-Year Strategic Plan (2007-2012), Building the New American Regional University.

E. List the organizational areas - -institutional departments, programs, divisions, or units -- most affected by or involved in this Action Project:

The departments and units most affected by this project include: all academic departments and academic student support services (including the Western Center for the Advancement of Learning and Teaching), faculty, students, staff, and administration.

F. Name and describe briefly the key organizational process(es) that you expect this Action Project to change or...
This Action Project, Enhancing Academic Quality Through Critical Thinking, affects most of the processes identified in Category One including for example: Determining Common Students Learning Goals, Specific program Learning Objectives, Determining Required Student Preparation, Communicating Expectations to Students, Determining and Documenting Effective Teaching and Learning, and Measuring Student Performance and the processes in Category Two related to applied learning.

G. Explain the rationale for the length of time planned for this Action Project (from kickoff to target completion):

The development of the infrastructure to support Enhancing Academic Quality through Critical Thinking requires at least three years for initial implementation. Western funds AQIP Action Projects at the level of $100,000 per year through its Strategic Planning Implementation Funds (SPIF); at the end of the Project, Western puts the funding into base and moves the Project to a Strategic Planning Opportunity entitled Maintaining Institutional Accreditation Priorities. An extended timeline will be needed to see full student learning outcome effects (approximately five to seven years). Western expects to continue to monitor critical thinking outcomes after the project has been retired. Project Timeframe (April 2007 – September 2009).

- Spring/Summer 2007
  1. Establish an institutional Western Critical Thinking Steering Committee to oversee a multi-year critical thinking initiative.
  2. Create student learning benchmarks and goals for critical thinking.
  3. Create an assessment plan to evaluate the implementation and effectiveness of critical thinking activities and student learning.
  5. Create a web site for the Critical Thinking Project.
  6. Develop the Center for Advancement in Learning and Teaching (CALP) with the intent that this Center will play a central role in faculty and curricular development in critical thinking.
  7. Hold a faculty professional development workshop for critical thinking (during the last days of the August 2007 plan days).
  8. Modify Western’s Freshman Seminar to serve as the introduction to the terms and key concepts of critical thinking.

- September 2007/September 2008
  9. Develop a required parallel seminar for non-first-year students who transfer to Western.
  10. Expand the number of regular faculty teaching the Freshman Seminar for the Fall 2008 semester.
  11. Work with departments and faculty for the integration of critical thinking into general studies and the majors programs. Create a curricular plan that makes critical thinking a part of Western’s four-year degree requirements.
  12. Revise the annual faculty evaluation process to emphasize participation and contributions to the University’s critical thinking initiative.
  13. Assess the new curriculum for Freshman Seminar in selected sections for Fall semester. Evaluate and revise curriculum as needed (Spring Semester 2008).

- September 2008 – September 2009
  14. Provide ongoing critical thinking professional development seminars during the year.
  15. All first year and transfer students will take the new Freshman Seminar course.
  16. Integration of critical thinking knowledge and skills into general education and the major programs is under way in all academic departments.
  17. Continue faculty professional development on critical thinking.
  18. Assess student critical thinking outcomes for students completing Freshman Seminar and in the major programs.
  19. Publicize faculty and student demonstrations of their ability to think critically.

Although the AQIP Action Project of
Enhancing Academic Quality through Critical Thinking would be concluded for AQIP purposes by September 2009, the University is making a long term commitment to improving critical thinking skills and outcomes.

H. Describe how you plan to monitor how successfully your efforts on this Action Project are progressing:

An Enhancing Academic Quality Team (EAQT) has been established to monitor and report progress on action items for the goals in Western’s strategic plan. The Critical Thinking Steering Committee (CTSC) will work with the Western Center for the Advancement of Learning and Teaching to assist departments and faculty in developing and refining critical thinking curricula and instructional skills. University departments will make annual reports on goal achievement progress which will be reviewed by the administrative units, EAQT and the CTSC. Further, progress toward project implementation will be communicated to Western’s administrative structure and published in an annual Strategic Planning Progress Report disseminated widely across the University and region. These data are also key to updating Western’s Systems Portfolio.

I. Describe the overall "outcome" measures or indicators that will tell you whether this Action Project has been success or failure in achieving its goals:

Project success will be measured against current baseline data on graduates’ critical thinking skills collected from the MAPP and Collegiate Learning Assessment, both nationally normed assessment instruments. In addition, Western departments will develop and administer unique critical thinking skills assessments appropriate to their discipline.

J. Other information (e.g., publicity, sponsor or champion, etc.):

Western maintains a strategic planning webpage to disseminate strategic plan goals and to follow the implementation of specific action accomplishments. In addition, annual printed progress reports, community forums and University meetings provide for feedback and dissemination. Critical thinking pedagogical resources and tools will be available on the Critical Thinking Project website. Western representatives attended the Making a Difference in Student Learning: Assessment as a Core Strategy workshop (March 21-23, 2007) and received perspective and feedback from our workshop mentor and team relative to this Action Project.

K. Project Leader and contact person:

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Annual Update: 2007-09-04

A. Describe the past year's accomplishments and the current status of this Action Project.

The Critical Thinking Action Project was adopted in April 2007 with seven action items to be completed by September 2007. 1. Establish an institutional Western Critical Thinking Steering Committee to oversee a multi-year critical thinking initiative. This committee with 20 faculty and staff with representatives from all academic departments was organized, met, and has divided into subcommittees with agreed upon subcommittee objectives. 2. Create student learning benchmarks
and goals for critical thinking. 3. Create an assessment plan to evaluate the implementation and effectiveness of critical thinking activities and student learning. These two items are still in process with the expectation that they will be completed in AY 2007/08. Conduct Spring 2007 and August 2007 faculty development symposiums on the theory and practice of critical thinking and pedagogical practices. These workshops (actions 4, 5) were held, fifty people attended the June and over 200 faculty and staff attended the August workshops.

6. Create a web site for the Critical Thinking Project. The website has been established and is under continuing development. 7. Develop the Center for Advancement in Learning and Teaching (CALT) with the intent that this Center will play a central role in faculty and curricular development in critical thinking. The Center is still under development with plans for it to be up and running by spring 2009.

Review (09-23-07):
This update provides and clear description of the 7 stepwise actions and definition of current status. However, to avoid confusion, it is suggested that the corresponding sections of the plan be carried over to the report ---the statement that "These workshops (actions 4,5) were held .... and subsequent description of numbered actions in this update differ from that of Section G "Rationale" where action number 5 is the web page and in this section the web page is numbered "6.". The following actions are described: Establish Steering committee with defined objectives, creating benchmarks/goals for critical thinking, development of a plan to evaluate effectiveness of program output, creation of a website providing visibility for the project, development of a home for the program "Center for Advancement in Learning and Teaching". All of these accomplishments and planned activities will greatly enhance the program and embody the AQIP Principles for high performance organizations.

B. Describe how the institution involved people in work on this Action Project.

An ad hoc committee (composed of 10 faculty and administrators) working on our 2006 AQIP Portfolio Category Helping Students Learn identified critical thinking as needing careful institutional attention. In the process of developing Western’s 2007-2012 Strategic Plan, critical thinking was identified as a strategic objective, and later, it was identified as one of our three AQIP Action Projects. The strategic planning process at Western involved over 400 individuals from campus and from the region. Over twenty faculty, staff and administrators serve on the Improving Academic Quality Strategic Plan Implementation Team, and these individuals created action items for critical thinking which were subsequently adopted by the institution. In AY 2007/08, the Critical Thinking Steering Committee will be heavily involved in this project.

Review (09-23-07):
Involvement of faculty, staff, and Administration in this project and the numbers of participants is well described and is appropriate for the size of the project. Has there been consideration of including representatives of the population affected by this program, the students? This addition might provide some valuable insight into the successful outcome of the implemented steps in the process.

C. Describe your planned next steps for this Action Project.
The planned next steps for this Action Project for September 2007 through August 2008 include the following: 1. Modify Western’s Freshman Seminar to serve as the introduction to the terms and key concepts of critical thinking (September 2007/September 2008). 2. Develop a required parallel seminar for non-first-year students who transfer to Western. 3. Expand the number of regular faculty teaching the Freshman Seminar for the Fall 2008 semester. 4. Work with departments and faculty for the integration of critical thinking into general studies and the majors programs. Create a curricular plan that makes critical thinking a part of Western’s four-year degree requirements. 5. Revise the annual faculty evaluation process to emphasize participation and contributions to the University’s critical thinking initiative. 6. Assess the new curriculum for Freshman Seminar in selected sections for Fall semester. Evaluate and revise curriculum as needed (Spring Semester 2008). 7. Complete development of assessment plans to assess student learning outcomes in critical thinking at the course, general education, and academic major levels.

**Review (09-23-07):**
The planned next steps involve modification of the freshman seminar and development of a parallel seminar for transfer students which are the main output of this project in that the introduction of critical thinking concepts would be delivered to the student population. This, in combination with the integration of critical thinking concepts into various programs is expected to capture the continued exposure to these concepts to students throughout their time at the university and as they develop.

D. Describe any "effective practice(s)" that resulted from your work on this Action Project.

The process of identifying and selecting critical thinking exemplifies an “effective practice.” It began with the evaluation and recommendation processes of the AQIP Accreditation Portfolio. This information was discussed by faculty and administration and informed the new strategic plan. Hundreds of individuals contributed to that plan. The institution has committed significant financial resources to accomplishing the identified critical thinking strategic goals, objectives, and action items. As we proceed through implementation, it is anticipated that relevant data on goal outcomes will inform modification of goals and implementation strategies. In addition, stockholders in this effort will have the opportunity to give input and to participate in the decision making process.

**Review (09-23-07):**
Effectiveness is defined here with regard to involvement and commitment. Has there also been consideration of involvement of the student population in this process? Are these the "stakeholders"? If so, additional discussion of how the student population is involved in the effectiveness evaluation would have been helpful in evaluating this section of the write-up. Also, if the goal is to change critical thinking capabilities of the student population, it is suggested that the university consider developing an effectiveness evaluation of the output of this project by comparing pre and post implementation behavior or similar comparative analysis to determine success.

E. What challenges, if any, are you still facing in regards to this Action Project?
This Action Project involves large numbers of faculty, all academic departments, and major academic administrators. We have much work to do to expand acceptance of the project. Full implementation will require faculty to consider and modify curriculum and teaching practices. The institution needs to identify incentives to encourage participation and change. We must provide the support services (Center for Advancement of Learning and Teaching, professional development workshops, etc.) to assist faculty in integrating critical thinking vocabulary and processes into their teaching and the curriculum. Identifying and creating assessment instruments and processes will require much discussion and continuing evaluation.

Review (09-23-07):
The authors discuss acceptance of the project as a potential challenge, the identification of incentives is an innovative method to discover how to "sell" the project. Consider other methods, perhaps involvement of students in part of the instruction (peer training), communication of examples of how critical thinking has been used successfully, and more extensive communication of the program across campus.

F. If you would like to discuss the possibility of AQIP providing you help to stimulate progress on this action project, explain your need(s) here and tell us who to contact and when?

Review (09-23-07):