**Action Project**

**Institution:** Missouri Western State University

**Submitted:** 2007-04-13

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**Timeline:**
- Planned project kickoff date: 04-12-2007
- Target completion date: 09-14-2009
- Actual completion date: --

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 evolve:

[continues]
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). This Action Project is designed for a three year implementation with annual goals. At that point, Western will sustain continuous improvement with special effort to establish critical thinking throughout the curriculum following the initial three years of implementing this Action Project. Spring/Summer 2007 (Through September 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. 4. Conduct a Spring 2007 faculty development symposium on the theory and practice of critical thinking and pedagogical practices. 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 on-going 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. 20. 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 a 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: 2008-08-27**

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

This past year we focused considerable time familiarizing the Western faculty with the Critical Thinking Action Project and providing professional development training in the critical thinking vocabulary, processes and instructional methods which improve student critical thinking learning outcomes. Eighteen critical thinking action items were identified for AY 2007/08. Fifteen of these items were either completed or achieved significant progress. A number of faculty has begun
implementing critical thinking teaching strategies and improved evaluation of student critical thinking learning outcomes. The Western Curriculum Committee approved two courses for first-year students with significant critical thinking components. It is anticipated that 700 first-year students will enroll in these courses in Fall 2008. A Western Critical Thinking Website has been developed which describes the Action Project, includes minutes of the Critical Thinking Steering Committee, and electronic Poster Presentations of faculty integration of critical thinking into teaching methods and curriculum.

http://www.missouriwestern.edu/CriticalThinking/ Critical thinking, and the action items related to this Action Project, was the main agenda item for a number of meetings this year: three major faculty development colloquia, five meetings of the Critical Thinking Steering Committee and numerous email conversations between committee members. There were five meetings of the Western Strategic Planning Committee which heard and discussed reports of Action Project progress. The Action Project was discussed in the annual meetings of the academic colleges and in a number of sessions of the Western Curriculum Committee. The Strategic Planning Implementation Fund (SPIF) provided $100,000 this year to the Critical Thinking Action Project with the intention an additional $200,000 in the next years and then to provide funding in the base to continue the Project after it becomes officially retired as an Action Project but remains an institutional priority.

**Review (09-22-08):**
The “Enhancing Quality through Critical Thinking” project is an important quality Action Project that will prove to be far reaching throughout the curriculum. This extensive project connects especially well with AQIP Categories (1) Helping Students Learn, (5) Leading and Communicating, and (6) Measuring Effectiveness. As the last annual update (2007-09-04) reported, and as is repeated here, several goals (1-8) had been accomplished or were in the initial stages of implementation. Goals for Sept. 2007 – Sept. 2008 are well defined. From the update, the progress is not well defined on goals 9-13. It is unclear if some may be in the implementation phase (e.g. #11 appears to be in process since “a number of faculty has begun implementing critical thinking teaching strategies and improved evaluation” and this fall there are two courses with anticipated enrollment of 700). There is an opportunity here to review the goals and the timeframe of the 3 year plan and focus on the critical elements that would help achieve the integration of critical thinking skills into the curriculum, an enormous undertaking. This can also incorporate the 2007 systems appraisal feedback regarding Category 1 (1R1).

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

We involved a large number of individuals in a variety of activities. Over 320 faculty and academic administrators attended one or more of three faculty development colloquia (June, August, and November). Each was led by Dr. Gerald Nosich, representing the Foundation for Critical Thinking, who is a national figure in the critical thinking improvement effort. Throughout the academic year we held five meetings of the Critical Thinking Steering Committee (20 members representing all academic departments) to discuss the action project and curricular issues. There are representatives from all academic departments on this committee. There were five meetings of the Western Strategic Planning
Committee which heard and discussed reports of Action Project progress. The annual academic college meetings (attended by approximately 220 faculty and staff) discussed critical thinking as did a number of College Department Chairperson Meetings. Faculty and departments discussed issues of interest and concern regarding the Western Critical Thinking Initiative. There was significant and ongoing communication to focus on critical thinking in the curriculum and teaching methodology. We saw significant progress in a number of areas; however, continuing efforts are necessary to maintain momentum and the continued expansion of this effort.

**Review (09-22-08):**
All academic departments are represented on the CTSC and a large number of faculty and academic administrators attended Colloquia. Efforts at communicating were wide spread within the Division of Academic Affairs via multiple committee meetings, departmental discussions and colloquia (AQIP Category 5, Leading and Communicating). To further integrate this Action Project within your college community, the addition of members from support services (e.g. departments responsible for advising and orientation) as well as student input via participation on committees or in open forums could enhance your progress.

C. Describe your planned next steps for this Action Project.

The next critical steps (action items) include the following: 1. Create student learning benchmarks and goals for critical thinking relative to national standards. 2. Create a critical thinking assessment plan to evaluate the process of improving student critical thinking. 3. Continue the development of the Western Critical Thinking Web Site and on-line journal. 4. Create and staff a Center for the Advancement of Learning and Teaching. Personnel searches ongoing. 5. Continue the refinement of critical thinking courses for first-year students. 6. Work with departments to continue to incorporate a common critical thinking model into Western’s curriculum. 7. Maintain efforts to publicize the critical thinking effort and recognize and reward accomplishments. 8. Implement assessment activities and use these data to inform continued improvement in the teaching and learning of critical thinking.

**Review (09-22-08):**
The 8 goals listed do not match the original goals in the Action Project description. There is no description of the rationale for the change in goals or an explanation regarding the completion or status of previous goals from 2007-08 (see above #1). It may be of benefit to the committees to review the original 3 year plan, determine if some of the previous accomplishments as well as some of these steps can be incorporated into routine operations and monitoring, allowing the team to focus on several critical steps and their timelines.

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

This Spring we held two activities that were very effective in bringing critical thinking to the attention of students and highlighted faculty involvement in critical thinking. In March we announced a Student Critical Thinking Essay Contest and invited students to send responses to a set of newspaper opinion pieces. We received 60 student responses to this invitation. Twenty award
winners selected and given $250 in bookstore credit. Faculty were requested to submit descriptions of current or planned efforts to improve student critical thinking (including student outcomes data if available). Faculty and departments identified as showing excellence were to receive a plaque and a faculty development award of $2,000 (one award), $1,000 (ten awards), or one departmental award ($3,000). Nineteen individual faculty and one department submitted materials for consideration. The number and quality of these submissions exceeded our expectations. In addition to the 12 awards previously listed, we gave eight honorable mention awards of $250. In April the two academic deans invited all faculty to a Deans Colloquium to recognize critical thinking award winning students and faculty. Approximately 100 people attended. Faculty gave poster presentations of their work and at dinner discussed how to improve teaching methods. After dinner students and faculty were given their awards.

Review (09-22-08):
The provision of recognition, including monetary awards, is an exemplary practice which could be shared with other institutions and as a conference presentation (AQIP Category #4, Valuing People). The financial resources being allocated are extraordinary considering fiscal restraints being recognized in the educational arena and demonstrate leadership’s commitment to continuous improvement and to this Action Project (AQIP Category 8, Planning Continuous Improvement). As mentioned in the previous update feedback, giving attention to evaluating the “effectiveness” of the output of this project would be a significant contribution to helping students learn (AQIP Category 1).

E. What challenges, if any, are you still facing in regards to this Action Project?

1. Create and staff a Center for the Advancement of Learning and Teaching. This Center is to take responsibility for coordinating and giving leadership to the critical thinking effort at the retirement of the LAS Dean who retired 6/30/2008 and who had taken a major responsibility for this effort. Efforts to select a qualified Director are continuing. 2. Continual development of faculty understanding and commitment to a coordinated plan in accomplishing improvements in student critical thinking learning outcomes. 3. An orientation to college course has been modified to focus on critical thinking. The curriculum (the common vocabulary and processes of critical thinking) in this course needs to be applied broadly in the curriculum. Current progress in doing this must be maintained and increased. 4. The institution must refine the assessment of student critical thinking assessment. We currently use recognized national assessment measures of critical thinking. Additional measures applicable to individual majors need development. Increased numbers of students tested and promoting greater student motivation to do well on these assessment measures are of vital importance to improved assessment and confidence in the data collected.

Review (09-22-08):
The challenges are well stated. The loss of the LAS Dean, who had taken a major responsibility for leading this effort, is very significant. There seems to be a waning of momentum in this project, as noted above related to goal achievement. The infusion of Critical Thinking throughout
the curriculum and the institution is an enormous undertaking and will take time. This may be an opportunity to review and revise the plan. Based on the update, it appears that one of the challenges has been the difficulty in focusing activity at a reasonable scale and timeline, because of the large scope of the project. Retiring this Action Project and initiating a new Action Project focused on a few critical goals could make it more manageable within a short time frame, based on the foundational work already accomplished. The support shown by faculty and administration will continue to move the institution towards attainment of this project.

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 (09-22-08):
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