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

A: 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.

2: 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:

A: 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.

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

A: 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.

4: Name and describe briefly the key organizational process(es) that you expect this Action Project to change or improve:

A: 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.

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

A: 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 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. 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.

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

A: 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.

7: 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:
A: 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.

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

A: 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.