

Engaging Students to Think Critically

Pfeiffer University

Quality Enhancement Plan

The Pfeiffer University Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP), *Engaging Students to Think Critically*, is a composite of both engaged learning and critical thinking. Engaged learning involves student engagement in the learning process, with their object of study, with other disciplines and in the world around them. Likewise, critical thinking involves an “intellectually disciplined process” of active and skillful application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation of information gathered through observation, experiences, reflection, reasoning, or communication (all of which are activities of engaged learning). The QEP is designed such that each dimension of engaged learning can serve an additional goal, that of enhancing the critical thinking skills of students. Therefore, the overall goal of the QEP is to enhance student learning in the area of critical thinking through increased engagement across the curriculum.

The selected QEP topic reflects the views of the university’s four primary constituency groups (students, faculty, staff and alumni) and supports Pfeiffer’s mission and strong commitment to *educational excellence, service and scholarship*. The institutional data on academic performance also shows that critical thinking remains an area in need of considerable improvement.

The implementation of the QEP will include an increased focus on critical thinking throughout the general education and discipline specific undergraduate curriculum. The implementation process will include five phases. The *Information* phase (2011-2012) focuses on helping each of the university constituencies better understand the overall goals and nature of the QEP. The *Innovation* year will begin the incremental training of a select group of ten faculty members in the pedagogy of engaged learning and critical thinking. However, within five years we will increase faculty participation such that all faculty will begin to incorporate the critical thinking student learning outcomes into their classes and become fluent in the use of individual rubrics for developing and evaluating course assignments and student learning.

The *Implementation* phase (2013-2015) involves an overall increase in activities and courses across the University, including spreading the focus of the QEP to include the Graduate and Adult Studies programs in Charlotte and the Research Triangle campuses. The plan includes a goal of increasing the number of courses which intentionally promote critical thinking to 50% by the end of year five. In year four, the *Institutionalization* year, the notion of engagement and critical thinking will permeate the university’s work, creating an institutionalization of the concepts. Finally, in year five, while on-going assessment has occurred, the overall *impact* of the QEP will be determined.

In addition to the faculty development and changes within individual courses, the QEP encourages faculty and students to participate in ongoing forums, such as the annual Spring Academic Showcase, for sharing and reflecting on the products of their critical and creative thinking.

As a result of the QEP we will see a measureable increase in the students’ critical thinking skills, including the student’s ability to:

- Effectively evaluate information;
- Use human creativity to help solve problems;
- Use problem-solving techniques recognized by various disciplines; and
- Communicate the process and content of learning effectively.

These learning outcomes will be assessed using The Critical Thinking Assessment Test (CAT), the critical thinking skills portion of the ETS Proficiency Profile, selected items from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and individual rubrics specifically designed to assess student learning outcomes on individual projects and assignments.

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