

Improving Critical Thinking: A Plan for Quality Enhancement Bethel College

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Bethel College (enrollment 2,408) was founded in 1842 and is affiliated with the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. Its main campus is in McKenzie, TN, midway between Nashville and Memphis, though it offers courses across the state, many of them at five satellite campuses. Primarily an undergraduate institution, Bethel offers masters degrees in education, business administration, and physician assistant studies. Its main campus focuses on traditional-age undergraduates, and its satellite operations on adult learners.

Bethel's QEP Plan was finalized in September, 2008. Bethel faculty recommended that the College adopt critical thinking (CT) improvement as the subject of its QEP based on results of the MAPP test (formerly Academic Profile), which the College had administered to students for nearly a decade. Bethel's QEP focuses on education across the curriculum: it does not implement CT only in a handful of courses, but rather encourages faculty teaching in all disciplines and at all levels of the undergraduate curriculum to target CT improvement.

A variety of resources have been provided to faculty in helping them to modify their syllabi and instructional practices. In the first year, the Director of QEP offered a series of workshops both at the main campus and at the main satellite campuses; handouts and other materials were subsequently posted to a website. Outside experts will be brought to campus beginning in Spring, 2009. A section of the College library was dedicated to CT instruction, with multiple copies of certain books available for faculty to check out. Faculty were particularly directed to John Bean's *Engaging Ideas* and Barkley, Cross, and Major's *Collaborative Learning Techniques*, as well as Gottschalk and Hjortshoj's *The Elements of Teaching Writing*. A password-protected website is under development to allow faculty to share successful instructional strategies and exercises, and to develop long-term institutional memory relating to CT instruction.

Bethel did not adopt one of the proprietary models of CT produced by, e.g., the Foundation for Critical Thinking or the California Academic Press. Rather, Bethel's QEP is predicated on the idea that the best way to improve student CT skills is by engaging in good pedagogical practices focused on active learning methods. Important literature reviews that we relied on included those by UMUC and Kurfiss.

Assessment of the QEP relies primarily on three measures. Two are standardized tests: the MAPP (produced by ETS), a multiple-choice test that provides subscores in a variety of skills areas including CT, and the CAT (produced by Tennessee Tech University), a primarily short-answer test that focuses specifically on CT. A third measure, to be developed by academic divisions at Bethel College, will be used annually to test students in their major fields of study. The two standardized tests provide comparison with national norms, and the internally-developed assessments specifically target the CT skills that faculty teach in upper-level classes. The combination of three assessments provides triangulation and offers a more nuanced representation of students' CT skills than any one measure would alone. Indirect measures such as surveys will also be used.

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