

Clemson Thinks² Prepare to Engage

Clemson University

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One of the most important benefits that a university education affords students is the ability to think critically. While most teachers claim to teach critical thinking, and while many do, few can articulate precisely how it happens. *Clemson Thinks²*, Clemson University's Quality enhancement Plan (QEP), is an ambitious experiment in critical thinking that aspires to transform student learning and faculty teaching across the curriculum and in the disciplines. The foundation of this effort will be a series of second-year critical thinking (*CT²*) Seminars, a cohort of *CT²* Faculty Scholars, a faculty development program, a rigorous assessment plan, and a scholarly research program.

Clemson is a land-grant university that cultivates the intimate atmosphere of a smaller school. *Clemson Thinks²* capitalizes on this unique combination by leveraging the resources of a major research university to create a classroom environment more typical of a liberal arts college. At a time when terms such as "massive" and "online" are used to describe pedagogical innovations, *Clemson Thinks²* proposes small, engaged learning experiences to promote careful reading, thoughtful exchange, effective writing, and above all critical thinking. Modeled in part on courses taught in Clemson's Calhoun Honors College, *CT²* seminars will offer an honors experience to all Clemson students.

After soliciting proposals from the university community, analyzing assessment data pertaining to student learning outcomes, and thoroughly reviewing the literature, the QEP steering Committee made two determinations: (1) the QEP will enhance critical thinking, and (2) the QEP will target second-year students. The committee drew on elements from various QEP pre-proposals – submitted by students, faculty, and staff – in order to formulate a plan that enhances teaching and learning at Clemson. *CT²* seminars will be taught both in the general education curriculum and, when possible, in various major curricula. Faculty will have significant flexibility in determining the content of each seminar, though all seminars will be open to all students regardless of major. The seminars will enroll fewer than 20 students and conduct pre- and post-seminar assessment using a nationally validated assessment of critical thinking such as the Critical Thinking assessment Test (CAT) or the California Critical Thinking Skills Test (CCTST). In addition, the *CT²* Seminars will be communication-intensive, involving significant written assignments and in-class discussions, thereby advancing Clemson's award-winning Writing Across the Curriculum initiative.

Clemson Thinks² has the potential to transform student learning at Clemson through all four years of college. However, the QEP itself targets the second year. Because this transitional time falls between first-year experiences and general education courses, on the one side, and engaged learning opportunities and major courses, on the other, it often receives less focused attention. For those same reasons, however, the second year presents students with an ideal opportunity to build on their foundational courses by enhancing the critical thinking skills that will prepare them to engage at a higher level in the classroom, in the community, and in their careers.

Clemson Thinks² advances the university's strategic plan, laid out in the "2020 Road Map": to become a top-20 Public University, to recruit a top-15 freshman class, and to create an engaged learning environment and honors college experience for all students. Above all, it accepts as a challenge President James Barker's remark to the May 2012 General faculty meeting "Our plan needs to have a strong, clear focus on the core of the core – the heart of the heart – which is the classroom experience."