

As part of changes to how it issues re-accreditation, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) now requires its member institutions to collaborate in the creation and implementation of a campus-wide initiative to improve the educational processes at their schools. This program is called a Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP).

About two years ago the QEP Committee was created. The Committee facilitated scores of hours of deliberation and debate at innumerable roundtables, faculty discussions, and student forums. After considering input from all these stakeholders, the QEP committee decided strengthening our students' critical thinking (CT) skills to be a noble goal, worthy of all our dedicated effort. Nurturing CT is consistent with the University's mission statement, addresses students' needs across academic disciplines, and encompasses essential skills for the complex, information-rich world in which we live. Committee members then spent many more hours researching critical thinking and how it might be assessed, and making plans for the strengthening of CT skills on our campus. This plan is marked by our fingerprints and has our DNA. Most of us have had a role in creating it. All of us have a stake in it. It is University of the Cumberlands' QEP.

*The QEP is a multistep, recursive process designed to nurture critical thinking at
University of the Cumberlands*

Most conceptualizations of CT share common elements: revealing assumptions, assessing the credibility of sources, evaluating the relevance of data, projecting possibilities and implications of information or theory, creative endeavors, and, significantly, thinking about and analyzing one's own thinking processes or developing metacognitive skills. Because so many skills fall under the concept of "critical thinking," the QEP Committee determined that it would be beneficial to focus on three standards: Clarity, Discernment, and Integration, and defined them thusly:

- **Clarity:** the ability to identify information specifically and accurately. Clarity addresses questions such as -*What do I believe (unambiguously)? What are good sources of information? Precisely, what is it that I want to communicate? What are the beliefs and propositions that are being presented here?*
- **Discernment:** the ability to analyze information with insight and judgment. Discernment concerns issues of credibility. - *Is this information reliable? What are the assumptions being made in this presentation? Is this presentation coherent; does it make sense? How can I present my ideas in a logical way that makes sense?*
- **Integration:** the ability to evaluate and synthesize information efficiently and effectively. *Integration requires a person to ask - How can I take what I have learned here and apply it to this other problem? What do these two perspectives have in common, and how are they different from one another? What do I believe, particularly when faced with other supported and reasoned points of view. What are the ethics of what I believe? That is, is this position fair to all affected?*

These standards will be assessed in four performance areas where the abilities of students can be readily observed:

Reading comprehension - *Does the student understand the details, the perspective of the author, and how disparate views complement and contrast with one another?*

Written communication - *How well can the student precisely articulate their views on an issue, and contrast their views with others?*

Oral communication - *How effectively does the student use clear language and sound reasoning to articulate their views?*

Information literacy - *How effectively does the student marshal unbiased and trustworthy information to support their views?*

The questions listed above are only exemplars and are far from exhaustive.

Our QEP will unfold as a broad-based, cross-curricular, multistep process.

Because research on CT in education supports nurturing CT **across** the curriculum, rather than isolating it in a single course, the QEP Committee determined that the optimal vehicle through which to nurture our students' CT skills would be the intentional teaching of these skills and nurturing of these dispositions in the General Education Curriculum encountered by all first-year UC students.

Although all of us are in agreement about the importance of CT, research and educational observers concur on this point: we are not doing it well (p. 21, QEP). The QEP Committee decided that before our *students'* CT abilities could be fostered our own skills could benefit from strengthening.

To accomplish this, successive groups of faculty, the Cadre, will experience intensive professional development in CT and related classroom issues. The first Cadre will begin meeting in the spring of 2006 to read about and discuss CT and refine aspects of the QEP pertaining to implementation. During June the Cadre will participate in approximately six days of study and practice on focusing more intentionally on CT in our classroom pedagogy. Our Critical Thinking Across the Curriculum program (CTAC), will begin in the spring and summer of 2006 as members of the Cadre strengthen their skills in CT, facilitating CT and assessing CT in the performance areas of **reading comprehension** and **written communication**, with **oral communication** and **information literacy** being added in subsequent years.

Implementation of CTAC in the General Education Curriculum will formally begin this fall (2006) as the nine Cadre members, representing seven different disciplines, purposefully cultivate their students' abilities to think with clarity, discernment, and integration within the courses they teach. Throughout the academic year, the Cadre will meet to add to their understanding of CT, discuss CTAC implementation as they are experiencing it, and support one another. Further, Cadre members will regularly provide assessment and feedback to one another, which will be used to guide the unfolding implementation of CTAC in their classroom. Each year a new group of ~8 faculty will be selected, so that by the fifth year, approximately half the faculty will have been cadre members.

At the same time, though less intensively, *all* the University community will learn about CT through newsletters and emailings, faculty meetings and presentations, and provoked to reflection by public displays in the arts.

This plan is marked by our fingerprints and has our DNA.

Our QEP is a recursive process, creating change and responding to feedback about that change.

Our QEP involves many different measurements to assess its effectiveness. The member of the Cadre will receive feedback from one another about their teaching. The Cadre will also receive feedback from students about the extent to which the aims of CTAC are being accomplished. The Cadre will also create and embed assessments in which students demonstrate their ability to read and write with clarity, discernment, and integration.

Our success in nurturing critical thinking will be externally validated by several nationally normed and standardized instruments.

- **The ETS Academic Profile (AP), to be replaced but correlated with the Measure of Academic Proficiency and Progress (MAPP) measures... higher order thinking and reading comprehension

- The ACT Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP)

- **The California Critical Thinking Skills Test (CCTSTS) measures... analysis----inference-----evaluation-----induction-----deduction

- **The California Critical Thinking Disposition Inventory (CCTDI) measures... truth-seeking---open-mindedness---analyticity---self-confidence--- inquisitiveness--maturity

**Institutional baselines have been or are presently being established



