

Executive Summary

Cape Fear Community College's Quality Enhancement Plan addresses critical thinking, a topic with tremendous potential to improve student learning in a meaningful way. The mission of this Quality Enhancement Plan is to improve learners' abilities to apply critical thinking skills in academic and professional contexts. This, in turn, will reinforce and further the college's broader vision of "Building a future-oriented world-class workforce and a community of lifelong learners" by fundamentally enhancing the personal, professional, and civic development of our students through an emphasis on critical thinking skills.

The college defines critical thinking as the deliberate process of questioning, evaluating, and responding to problems, scenarios, and arguments in order to reach sound solutions, decisions, and positions. Based on this working definition, students demonstrate critical thinking learning outcomes when they:

- Ask pertinent questions that clarify and focus a problem, scenario, or argument;
- Evaluate the quantity, quality, and usefulness of information;
- Articulate a sound solution, decision, or position based on appropriate standards of reasoning; and
- Monitor and reflect upon the quality and fairness of their reasoning.

These learning outcomes are significant, measurable, and represent the cognitive skills required for academic and professional success in an increasingly complex world.

The college will enhance these outcomes by pursuing three specific initiatives that, while ambitious, represent a focused and thoughtful approach to improved student learning and institutional change. Implementing this Quality Enhancement Plan will involve:

1. Providing all faculty and staff with training opportunities and resources that enhance their abilities to improve students' critical thinking skills;
2. Emphasizing to students the application of critical thinking skills for student success; and
3. Facilitating, assessing, and enhancing critical thinking as a general education core competency.

These three initiatives will: 1) produce assessable student learning outcomes; 2) work within the college's institutional capability; and 3) build upon the broad-based community involvement that contributed to the development of this plan.

Implementation will begin with selected pilot courses, including College Student Success and Expository Writing. Enhancement in these pilot courses will involve pre and post assessments of student learning outcomes, identification of best practices, and evidence-based decision-making. The college will use the data from these pilot courses in subsequent enhancement efforts.

Assessment of the Plan

The assessment of the student learning outcomes addressed by this plan will use multiple measures and performance data from a variety of sources. Internal assessments of improved student learning will be complemented by external measures to produce information that can be used to evaluate the success and effectiveness of each initiative. All assessment data will be considered in the context of the critical thinking student learning outcomes identified above. Furthermore, the Quality Enhancement Plan will be fully integrated into the college's ongoing institutional effectiveness process with each initiative being tied to specific college goals. Finally, timelines, responsibilities, assessment measures, and criteria for success have been identified for the implementation of each initiative.

Institutional Capability

This plan has been developed and will be implemented with the college's institutional capabilities in mind. Wherever possible, this plan utilizes existing college resources to optimize the efficiency of implementation. Detailed budget estimates are provided for each initiative and the institution is committed to providing resources necessary to implement and sustain this plan.

Broad-Based Involvement

The broad-based involvement of the college community in shaping this plan began with focus group meetings that generated critical thinking as a topic for enhancement. These focus groups included faculty, staff, and administration from all areas of the college, as well as representatives from a local university and the college's advisory committees. In developing the plan, the college sought and received valuable input from faculty, staff, administration, students, and board members. Importantly, the development of this plan encouraged the widest possible participation and embodied the very notion of "critical thinking" by seeking a variety of perspectives, conducting thorough research, asking complex and sometimes difficult questions, and holding up all ideas to the bright light of reason. In this sense, Cape Fear Community College has already begun its transformation into a critical thinking institution.