Improving Mid-Continent’s Practical Application of Critical Thinking

Office for Institutional Effectiveness

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**Mission Statement**

Mid-Continent University is a Great Commission, Baptist, undergraduate and graduate, teaching institution whose primary purpose is to provide Christ-centered quality higher education. Instruction in the Bible and liberal arts is provided to traditional and non-traditional students through on-campus and off-campus programs that equip them for Christian leadership and service in a diverse society. Furthermore, the University seeks to:

- Enable students to carry out the Great Commission of Our Lord (Matthew 28:18-20).
- Imbue students with a knowledge and understanding of diverse cultures.
- Provide a quality education in both the arts and sciences and Biblical Studies from a Christian worldview.
- Facilitate student development by promoting the synthesis of academic knowledge and Christian values for spiritual, intellectual, social, and physical maturation.
- Encourage lifelong learning for people of diverse ages and educational levels in our communities.
- Cultivate student leadership and service.
- Foster competency appropriate to the degree level of the student in writing, reading, oral communication, fundamental mathematical skills, analytical reasoning, computer literacy, and library research.

(Mission Statement revised 2012)
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A Brief QEP and Critical Thinking Guide

IMPACT will provide you, the Mid-Continent University student, a route to impacting your own life by enhancing your critical thinking skills. Keep and use this guide in your life and your walk with Christ.

What is the QEP?
The Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) is a required element of Mid-Continent University’s self-study process for reaffirmation of accreditation through the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). SACS Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) defines the Quality Enhancement Plan as a “carefully designed course of action that addresses a well-defined and focused topic or issue related to enhance student learning” and is an opportunity for MCU “to enhance overall institutional quality and effectiveness” and “improve student learning” (SACSCOC QEP Handbook).

What is the focus and title of Mid-Continent University’s Quality Enhancement Plan?
The focus of Mid-Continent’s QEP is “to enhance student’s critical thinking skills as a guide for belief and action in their lives.” The title of our QEP is IMPACT: Improving Mid-Continent’s Practical Application of Critical Thinking.

How was the focus on critical thinking selected and the QEP developed?
Mid-Continent University’s selection of critical thinking as the QEP focus and development of the QEP followed a careful process, which began in June of 2010 with the SACSCOC meeting for the class of 2012. Following this meeting, previous Collegiate Academic Achievement Proficiency (CAAP) scores and Institutional Effectiveness documents (departmental planning/results charts, employer survey) were reviewed to help identify areas where student learning or the student learning environment could be improved and ensure that the focus fulfilled Mid-Continent’s
mission to “foster competency appropriate to the degree level of the student in writing, reading, oral communication, fundamental mathematical skills, analytical reasoning, computer literacy, and library research” (MCU Mission Statement).

The topic (focus) selection emerged from our mission and institutional data and included three phases involving a broad-based MCU constituency: an initial phase, a focusing phase, and a final phase. The initial and focusing phases involved administrators, faculty, staff, students, and alumni, and the final phase involved a QEP leadership team appointed to oversee the development of our QEP.

To ensure broad-based involvement and valuable input from all perspectives of the student learning environment, teams included members from all areas of MCU with faculty or staff serving as co-leaders for each team. Whenever possible, team leaders invited students to participate in the meetings and to provide feedback and suggestions. Meetings were scheduled regularly during the eighteen-month development period, and a QEP Advisory and Oversight Committee will continue to meet regularly throughout the five-year implementation process.

What is Mid-Continent University’s definition of critical thinking?

Mid-Continent University defines critical thinking as “…the process of analyzing, assimilating, appraising, and applying information.” There are four vital components: (A) Analyzing, (B) Assimilating, (C) Appraising, and (D) Applying.

**Analyzing:** Analysis of basic components and concepts is the first portion of the IMPACT plan. Successful critical thinkers should be able to consistently use this component in all your course assignments. They should consistently develop well-reasoned conclusions and solutions as well as consistently test outcomes against relevant criteria and standards. Analysis enables critical thinkers to compare and contrast ideas, identify alternate solutions to one problem, or differentiate the pros and cons of a theory or idea. Analysis allows critical thinkers to think through a biblical worldview and understand how and why they believe.

**Assimilating:** Assimilation is the ability to analyze data, prioritize relevant information, and use abstract reasoning to effectively interpret information. Critical thinkers use investigation to skills to gather information and demonstrate this ability in their education and decision-making processes.

**Appraising/Applying:** Appraisal and the application of information make judgments about the value of information. Critical thinkers should consistently make judgments based on the evidence of research and standard practices as well as communicate findings and solutions based on established criteria. Critical thinkers take the source a step further and appraise the source to see if the information will IMPACT their lives. They go above and beyond facts and actually evaluate data and information to let it IMPACT their education and decision-making processes.

What are the specific student learning outcomes?

To further help us focus on enhancing critical thinking skills, we developed the following outcomes, which we believe articulate the attributes of a critical thinker:
Mid-Continental University students will demonstrate improvement in their critical thinking ability as it relates to:

- Assimilation and organization of collected knowledge,
- Analysis of basic components and concepts, and
- Appraisal and application of information.

**How will the student learning outcomes be assessed?**

Regular assessment of our QEP using the CAAP test (Collegiate Academic Achievement Proficiency) and critical reflection papers will enable us to make appropriate adjustments along the way and better ensure the enhancement of our students’ critical thinking skills.

**Which students will be involved?**

We will begin with new first-year students in our traditional and adult on-campus programs and gradually expand the reach of our QEP until we have encompassed new first-year students at all MCU sites. Critical thinking assignments will be added to all general education courses.

Student Ambassadors/Mentors will be also trained to present the QEP (IMPACT) to new groups of students and to serve as mentors to their peers.

**How will it impact students?**

At Mid-Continental University, the development of critical thinking skills is central to our mission, so we are encouraging our students to “think critically about critical thinking.” We believe students’ enhanced critical thinking skills will also help students develop spiritually, mentally, and emotionally.

Students will experience a shift in the Adult Learner Guide/syllabus that will include critical thinking components, such as self-evaluations on specific written assignments, peer reviews, reviews of literature, critical reflections, and critical reflection/analysis paper. These components are designed to help students develop critical thinking skills and to “think outside the box” to IMPACT their educational experience and apply these concepts to their Christian faith and life.

Peers provide valuable support to each other, so we will select and train two or three students as student ambassadors/mentors. These students will assist in presenting the QEP at orientation sessions for new cohort groups, assist with facilitation of workshops and meetings, and help build and sustain excitement about our QEP. They may also serve as mentors to other students once they have received training and exhibited the ability to think critically.

**What are some tips that can help students become critical thinkers?**

A) Students can take on the role of being critical thinkers by being an active learners in all their courses and actually pushing themselves to use critical thinking in all of their assignments. Also, by taking on the role of critical thinkers, students use an open mind to implement the 4 A’s into their assignments. Next, students want to exercise free
thinking and not chain themselves to a standard thinking pattern. As most have heard, “thinking outside the box” is the exact method of free thinking students will need to apply if they want to IMPACT their educational experience. Lastly, students should be motivated about their learning. Mid-Continent students should be excited that their university wants to know what they think by implementing the 4 A’s into their assignments.

B) Once students take on the role of critical thinkers, they will be able to actually apply this concept to their Christian faith and life. Students reward themselves when they can choose a position and defend it with critical thinking skills. Therefore, a vital tip is to actually practice utilizing these skills. Why do people believe what they believe? Why do they stand on a certain position when it comes to raising their children? Why is a person a Christian? These are all questions that require students to critically analyze before they can take a stand. By exercising their minds and applying critical thinking, students can IMPACT their educational experience and their lives beyond the classroom.

How will it affect faculty and staff?

Our goal is to enhance the critical thinking skills of our students, so we intend to create a culture of critical thinking by promoting our QEP on campus and at our off-campus sites, using reflective writing assignments/activities in our courses, and providing faculty development and staff training. Our QEP will include the following activities: 1. Critical thinking assignments and/or activities in our general education courses, 2. Regular assessment of critical thinking skills through the use of a standardized test and writing assignments, 3. Professional development for all faculty members, 4. On-campus workshops/training by outside agencies, and 5. Critical thinking guides for use at Orientation and distribution to students.

The QEP requires, and receives, support from all MCU constituencies, and MCU has planned for the success of our QEP by allocating a significant investment of physical, financial, personnel, logistical, and other resources necessary for implementing. Student Life, Orientation, Advising, Student Support Services, Academics, and other areas will be among the faculty and staff affected by and involved in the implementation of our QEP.

When does the QEP begin?

We will pilot our creative reflections and critical reflection/analysis papers in August 2012 using a small portion of our student population. Our QEP will culminate in a five-year impact report to SACSCOC in 2017.

How can I learn more about IMPACT (MCU QEP)?

Questions, comments, or suggestions about IMPACT may be sent to Darlene Gibson, QEP Director and Instructor of English, by emailing dgibson@midcontinent.edu or calling 270-247-8521 x 354.