Quality Enhancement Plan

Higher Order Thinking

Catch Fire:
Higher Order Thinking at Union College

UNION COLLEGE
On-site Visit: March 24-26, 2015
WHAT IS A QUALITY ENHANCEMENT PLAN AND WHY DO WE HAVE ONE?

As part of the reaccreditation process, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) requires all educational institutions under their jurisdiction to develop a plan for improving student learning. This Quality Enhancement Plan (or QEP for short) must be developed with input from faculty, staff, students, and other key constituencies. The plan must include goals and a means of assessing them, and a school must demonstrate that it has the capacity to carry out the plan.

Aside from meeting the requirements SACSCOC, however, we recognize that the landscape of higher education is changing. The Union College QEP is our institutional response to the shifting needs of our students and the professional world they will enter.

Our QEP is not, however, simply a response to forces beyond our campus; instead, this plan is a result of an assessment process within the College that has indicated a need for student improvement in higher order thinking. Cultivating these skills is essential to Union College’s mission. We have long acknowledged this goal but have not always achieved it. Our QEP reflects our efforts better to define and improve this vital area of student learning.

Higher order thinking is what brings us together as students and scholars. Moreover, when combined with a passion for learning, it serves as the spark leading to a transformative education. It is in this spirit we have developed “Catch Fire: Higher Order Thinking at Union College.”

HOW DID WE DEVELOP THE QEP?

Union College’s Quality Enhancement Plan was developed through a process with distinct steps: the identification by campus communities of an area of student learning in need of attention; the design of the plan to address that need; and, finally, the review of the plan’s key components to ensure the College’s successful implementation of the QEP.

The search for Union College’s QEP topic was initiated by a group of faculty, staff and students. This group met weekly over the course of several months to review institutional data, identify several potential topics based on the data, and survey faculty, staff, students, administration, and the board of trustees about the merits of each option. A project focused on developing higher order thinking skills was the top choice of all groups.

A larger group of faculty and staff then undertook the task of designing a workable plan to address higher order thinking. This group began by attempting to define the concept of higher order thinking based on definitions proposed in the scholarly literature. The group then outlined a general plan for helping Union students better develop their skills in three areas central to most definitions of higher order thinking: critical thinking, creative thinking, and metacognitive thinking.
Several smaller subcommittees worked out the details of implementing the plan. The work of these committees included proposing curricular changes, devising an assessment plan, outlining an approach to professional development for faculty and staff, creating a budget for the project, and communicating information about the plan to the campus community.

WHAT IS THE RATIONALE FOR THE QEP TOPIC?

The focus for Union College’s Quality Enhancement Plan, higher order thinking (HOT), was determined by a campus-wide selection process, reflecting a broad consensus among Union College groups about a particular student need at the present time.

Throughout its history, Union’s identity has been inextricably connected to southeastern Kentucky and the Appalachian region. This identity continues to play a central role in Union’s mission:

To serve the academic needs of a diverse community of undergraduate, graduate, and continuing education students in a dynamic, personal environment that promotes intellectual, spiritual, and physical enrichment of students, faculty, and staff and the economic growth and health of our Appalachian region.

This mission statement is not only about Union College; additionally, it gestures to the many social and economic challenges that have historically confronted eastern Kentucky. Seeking to empower our students with the higher order thinking skills that will help them succeed in the classroom and beyond the classroom is a means of actualizing our mission to contribute to the “economic growth and health” of the region.

As a liberal arts institution, Union College identifies a set of skills and content areas over which it expects students to develop command. One “liberal learning goal” states that “Union College teaches its students to think critically and creatively to arrive at responsible decisions.” Hence, the development of higher order thinking skills is a stated outcome for all Union College students. Institutional assessment data, however, indicate a need for significant improvement in students’ use of these skills.

WHAT ARE THE GOALS FOR UNION STUDENTS?

**Outcome 1.** Union College students will demonstrate their ability to think logically and critically at a proficient level.

**Outcome 2.** Union College students will demonstrate their ability to think creatively at a proficient level.
Outcome 3. Union College students will demonstrate their ability to think metacognitively at a proficient level.

WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY ABOUT TEACHING HIGHER ORDER THINKING?

Research on effective instructional practices suggests that the best results occur when thinking skills are taught very intentionally and embedded in meaningful content (Abrami et al., 2008; Taconis, et al., 2001).

While there is evidence that students can become better thinkers as a result of instruction in a single course (Halpern, 1998), such a course is, by itself, insufficient to guide students in the practices of logical, critical, and creative thinking in the respective disciplines. The predominant types of reasoning vary by discipline (Lehman, et al., 1988), and processes of thought are intertwined with knowledge in a given field (Willingham, 2007). Thus, it is important for an emphasis on higher order thinking to be infused throughout the curriculum (Paul, 2005).

Values, beliefs, and personal traits that individuals bring to learning and thinking tasks have an impact on the extent to which they make use of higher order thinking skills (Nilson, 2013). These include beliefs about the nature of knowledge and human ability (Dweck and Leggett, 1988; Schommer, 1990).

There tends to be little shared understanding among college faculty of what higher order thinking is and the kinds of learning experiences that nurture it (Halx and Rebold, 2005; Paul, 2005). Impact of instruction tends to be greatest when instructors receive training in teaching critical thinking (Abrami et al., 2008). Professional development can help faculty clearly articulate the skills they hope to develop in their students (Condon and Kelly-Riley, 2004; Lynch and Wolcott, 2001).


WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO?

The QEP will encompass three areas: the curriculum, specific co-curricular areas, and faculty/staff professional development.

Curriculum

- Union College will implement a newly-created standalone course in the Liberal Education Core that will be taken during the freshman year and will introduce students to basic elements of critical and creative thinking and metacognition/self-regulated learning. Emphasis will be on thinking skills that have relevance across multiple disciplines.
- Additional courses within each program of study will be identified. In these courses, higher order thinking skills will be reviewed, reinforced, and extended to disciplinary content in a manner that builds upon the concepts introduced in the freshman year course.
- Finally, each program of study will also use a capstone course or experience to provide both further application of higher order thinking and an assessable product to document achievement of the learning outcomes at the summation of the undergraduate experience.

Co-Curricular Activities

Convocation/Lecture Series: Two to four speakers will be brought to campus each semester with the goal of providing students with a wide-ranging exposure to issues in politics, society, religion, the arts and sciences.
Union College Creative Thinking Showcase: This will be a competition for which students will be invited to submit creative works that reflect the application of higher order thinking skills in their fields of study or areas of interest.

As our implementation of the QEP unfolds, we plan to include interested members of the Union community who work with students in a co-curricular capacity in leadership roles and in professional development opportunities. The goal will be to spark conversation about designing learning experiences that foster higher order thinking in the context of co-curricular endeavors.

**Professional Development**

Ongoing faculty/staff professional development is essential for building and sustaining a campus-wide emphasis on higher order thinking. Faculty and staff will have multiple opportunities to expand their knowledge of effective ways to teach higher order thinking through on-campus workshops and conference attendance.

**WHEN ARE WE GOING TO DO IT?**

**Spring/Summer, 2015:**

- A team of faculty will develop the curriculum for the new course.
- We will organize the QEP Leadership Team.
- We will make arrangements for lecture series for the 2015-16 academic year.

**2015-2016 Academic Year:**

- The new course will be offered on an experimental basis to first-year students.
- The lecture series will begin.
- Professional development opportunities will be available for all faculty.

**2016-2017 Academic Year:**

- All freshmen will take the new course.
- The lecture series will continue
- The first Creative Thinking Showcase will occur during the Spring semester.
- Faculty development efforts will continue.
- Departments will make decisions about courses in which higher order thinking skills will be explicitly taught.

**2017-2018 Academic Year**

- Designated higher order thinking courses will be developed in the majors.
• Co-curricular activities (Creative Thinking Showcase, lecture series) and professional development will continue.

2018-2019 Academic Year

• The first group of students to take the new course (now juniors) will take designated higher order thinking courses in their major areas of study
• Professional development efforts and co-curricular activities will continue.

2019-2020 Academic Year

• The first group of students to take the new course (now seniors) will complete a capstone experience that emphasizes higher order thinking.
• We will submit a five-year report to SACSCOC.

WHO IS GOING TO DO IT?

QEP Director: The QEP Director report to the Vice President for Academic Affairs and will be responsible for overseeing all aspects of the implementation of the QEP project.

QEP Coordinating Team: The Coordinating Team includes the QEP director and 2-3 deputies who will form a small steering committee. The deputies will serve on the QEP Leadership team (see below) and will be responsible for heading the subcommittees of the Leadership Team. The Vice President for Academic Affairs will be an ex-officio member of the Coordinating Team.

QEP Leadership Team: The Leadership Team will be headed by the QEP Director and will include faculty and staff who have demonstrated a serious interest in and commitment to enhancing higher order thinking skills. The Leadership Team will include faculty from a variety of academic departments and staff who have a particular interest in fostering higher order thinking skills through academic support and co-curricular endeavors. Members of the Leadership Team will form various subcommittees devoted to specific aspects of the implementation of the QEP. When appropriate and relevant, students will be invited to serve on these subcommittees. The committees will vary throughout the five-year period as differing needs arise. Initially, they will include a committee to develop the new course, an assessment committee, a professional development committee, and a co-curricular committee.
HOW WILL WE KNOW THAT THE PLAN IS WORKING?

Assessment will include a combination of a nationally-known survey (National Survey of Student Engagement), a standardized measure of critical thinking (the Critical Thinking Assessment Test), course-embedded assessment that will be scored using a common rubric, and informal student surveys. Assessment in critical and creative thinking and metacognition will occur at key checkpoints: before and after the freshman year course, in the context of an intermediate level course in a student’s chosen discipline, and following a capstone experience. This will allow us to track improvement in thinking skills as students progress through their college years.