

## **UNIVERSITY-WIDE CRITICAL THINKING INITIATIVE: TWO-YEAR NARRATIVE OF VISION AND IMPLEMENTATION**

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### **ABSTRACT**

University of Houston-Clear Lake is a small state university in the space-gas corridor of southern Houston that was born out of the largesse of NASA and other neighboring institutions, and remains the post-civil rights liberal arts “dream” of highly-educated academics who believed in the right to continue education for students of all races, classes, and diverse backgrounds. Critical thinking is part of the fabric and origin story of our university born in 1974 and as we grow into a four year institution that offers Master’s degrees and even, two doctoral degrees, we are inscribing it ever deeper into our identity. In early 2013, we boldly moved toward articulating, adapting, and absorbing critical thinking (CT) in every sphere of our university life – students, faculty, staff, and all who belong to our community. Our first step of this vision is implementation of critical thinking within the classrooms; more recently, we have also included staff and all university personnel to the FCT workshops and this is a continuing trend of greater inclusion of all facets of the university. Towards enhancing the classroom experience, we have put in years of labor to finesse a Quality-Enhancement Plan (QEP) for syllabi that reflect the faculty’s learning from the principles gleaned from FCT workshops offered on our campus, and the methods in which this learning emerges in the vision, strategic practices, and assessment taking place in their classrooms. So far, we have successfully launched three cohorts of faculty through a series of four 1-2 day workshops and developed an array of QEP-approved courses being taught in all four colleges of our university. Dr. Larry Kajs, School of Education, will present the institutional vision and systematic implementation of this initiative as the administrative lead on this project. Dr. Troy Voelker, School of Business, will share the process of constructing CT-centered syllabi and the success in bringing aboard a sizeable group of business faculty to become invested in this endeavor. Dr. Kwok-Bun Yue, School of Science and Computer Engineering, will address the significance and implications of CT skills in the fast-growing and globally dynamic disciplines of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM). Dr. Shreerekha Subramanian, School of Human Sciences and the Humanities, will speak about on-the-ground classroom practices and how CT-centered discourse impacts and changes the lives of students on our campus, and a special university-degree earning program for men in

prison. Our panel seeks to demonstrate the effective institutional and individual impact of adapting critical thinking as daily practice in the university classroom.

## **UHCL CONCEPTION OF CRITICAL THINKING**

In early 2013, the University of Houston-Clear Lake (UHCL) Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) entitled *Applied Critical Thinking (ACT) for Lifelong Learning and Adaptability* was approved by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). Critical thinking can assist students to develop their interest in lifelong learning opportunities and to be more adaptable to professional career opportunities and ongoing changes in our society. The Foundation of Critical Thinking Model at <http://www.criticalthinking.org/> serves as the basis for ACT, and used in the design of university syllabi.

The course syllabus provides the framework and organization to guide the critical thinking process. In addition to learning about the specified course content, students will be engaged in various components of the critical thinking process based on the Foundation for Critical Thinking model, including the Elements of Thought and Universal Intellectual Standards. The objective of an ACT course is to develop students' abilities to become skilled at analysis and evaluation by applying a set of intellectual tools that may be effectively used across all disciplines (as well as to the student's personal life).

Based on the Foundation for Critical Thinking model (<http://www.criticalthinking.org/>), critical thinking involves the following Elements of Thought: thinking for a purpose, asking questions, using information, applying concepts, drawing inferences and conclusions, identifying assumptions, anticipating implications and consequences, and recognizing points of view. The Universal Intellectual Standards (i.e., clarity, accuracy, precision, relevance, depth, breadth, logic, significance, and fairness) are applied to these Elements of Thought to provide a cohesive approach in the process of applied critical thinking. Lynn Erickson's 2007 book entitled *Concept-Based Curriculum and Instruction for the Thinking Classroom* highlights the work of the Foundation for Critical Thinking for providing strategies to better prepare students in becoming more self-reflective, creative thinkers. The development of university syllabi that clearly address the critical thinking process can assist higher education faculty in the delivery of coursework to students.