

## Proposed Quality Enhancement Plan Focus Topic

### Title and Brief Description of QEP Topic:

"Fostering Critical Thinking and Writing: Freshman Seminars and Faculty Workshops"

In disciplines from accounting to zoology, professionals testify that the best prepared employees are those who can think critically and speak and write persuasively. In the years in which our current students will work, the content or information of their jobs—even the basic nature of their employment—will change over and over but their need to make judgments and voice those judgments will not.

At Loyola, through courses in the common curriculum, such as English 122, through our majors, and through the Writing across the Curriculum Program, we have always stressed critical thinking and writing. Our proposal is to build on that emphasis, as well as improve retention and the unity of the common curriculum, by instituting a freshman seminar program.

We thus suggest that to further stress critical thinking and writing skills across the curriculum, the university institute freshman seminars, which can count as one of the student's common curriculum courses, its slot depending on the department of the teacher who offers it. These classes, which students can elect to take during their first semester, will be focused around a common topic (religious intolerance, globalism) or will involve multidisciplinary topics chosen and developed by individual faculty. Each class will enroll fifteen students who will encounter active learning opportunities within the classroom and coordinated events outside of it.

To consider various methods of stressing critical thinking and writing, participating faculty will attend a workshop, for which they will receive a stipend. There they will consider the methodologies for these seminars:

- critical thinking activities
- writing assignments
- oral performance opportunities
- small-group involvements
- information literacy (discussed in coordination with the Monroe Library's Information Literacy Program)

A Co-Curricular Component: Within the seminar period and beyond it, students will also participate with their group and with others in appropriate service learning opportunities, undertaken along with critical reflection and writing assignments that help students analyze these activities. They will also attend lectures and other events that pertain to the class topic. Further co-curricular activities extending beyond the first semester, for which professors will be given funding, will help students maintain contact with a core group as they take other common curriculum courses and enter their majors.

As teachers participate in the training workshops, they will be considering various instructional design models that enhance critical thinking and writing. Their discussions can also focus on the best means of fostering these key skills throughout the common curriculum and within our majors.

**Proposal submitted by:**

Katherine H. Adams, Mary A. McCay, Melanie McKay

**Brief explanation of how the topic is "creative and vital to the long-term improvement of student learning at Loyola":**

The freshman seminars will involve students in active instructional methodologies: in writing assignments, in critical thinking activities, in oral performance, in small groups, and in opportunities for co-curricular activities, including service learning. Because the seminar will concern a multidisciplinary theme, it will encourage students to integrate ideas from various courses. Because it will foster an involved group considering questions together, it will engage students as active learners. Because the teacher can serve as an advisor and mentor, it will also help students with their adjustment to the university.

**Evidence (or potential sources of evidence) suggesting the need to address this topic [optional]:**

Studies suggest that students profit from the diversity of subjects covered within general education, but that overarching themes help them to process and organize this information. Many universities, such as Purdue and the University of Toronto, which report their results through the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience, have found that heightened learning and retention stem from the seminar model's active classroom, co-curricular activities, and connections to faculty. Many researchers, such as Peter Facione of Loyola University Chicago, have especially praised the emphasis on critical thinking that these seminars involve. The freshman seminar will help students to approach subject matter actively and critically and to integrate ideas and approaches from various disciplines while also giving them a "home" on campus.

**Current and planned activities at Loyola related to this topic [optional]:**

In the College of Arts and Sciences, the development of a first-year experience involving a shared reading has proven the efficacy of shared academic content and activities. The College of Business's mentor programs also testify to the effect of early interaction between faculty and students. Student groups, such as the Loyola Society for Civic Engagement, have demonstrated the students' desire for treatment of academic subject matter in co-curricular events.