



Need More Coffee Before Teaching ?

Constructing Our Future by Forging an Education of Engagement

Why COFFEE? Beginning in August of 2004, the SACS-QEP Team began discussing the nature of our QEP, and we decided that the best place to meet was The Coffee Table. After all, it was close enough so that some of us who taught late classes could get back in time to meet them, and it offered caffeine—lots of it—which we figured we would need after a two-hour session on critical thinking, writing skills, and faculty development. We instinctively knew that even the comedy stylings of Ray Giguette could not get us through these meetings, without the help of our old friends from Sumatra, Ethiopia, Brazil, and France.

After a few meetings we agreed that the first weeks, and indeed days and hours, of the first-year experience are crucial for student retention and progression. One of the things we knew we needed to accomplish was make students aware (to wake them up, so to speak) to how radically different the college experience is from their previous educational experiences. One way we're doing that is through the application of Downs' reading strategies, which are focused on getting students to read "consciously."

Coffee is associated with waking up and new beginnings (not to mention late-night study sessions). It also appeals to several of our senses, thus promoting a multi-sensual, complex experience, and part of reading "consciously" involves moving from a linear kind of reading, moving from beginning to end, to a spiraling or tunneling experience, reading and interrogating and circling back and reconsidering, etc. This technique also applies to writing and thinking.

Constructing: Part of our proposal is based upon Constructivist theory. Waking up students involves empowering them, encouraging them to take possession of their language and their texts (and their contexts) and their construction of knowledge.

Our: Education is a collective, public enterprise, involving students, their peers, teachers, the teachers' peers, and the local, state, national, and international communities. And it does not stop because one is degreed. Our Center for the Advancement of Faculty Engagement (CAFÉ) will foster faculty development. A more engaged faculty will better engage its students.

Future: One of the early goals of our advising initiative is to get first-year students to confront their choices regarding their choice of major. We don't want students spinning their wheels, biding their time, putting off until tomorrow crucial decisions that if made today can make tomorrow better. We want students to see *every* element of their college experience as relevant to their future.

Forging: This relates back to "Constructing." But "forging" also can add a bit of depth to this notion of "construction." "To forge" is "to move forward steadily, as if against difficulties." A forge, of course, is a structure in which metal is heated so that it can be transformed into different shapes. We want our students to adopt a mastery orientation (see Svinicki's "Student Goal Orientation, Motivation, and Learning"), and characteristics of that orientation include a willingness "to take on difficult tasks beyond present capability" and to view "mistakes as learning experiences." If students adopt this orientation, then they will not be afraid to test their mettle (pun intended).

Education of Engagement: We want our students to adopt an attitude where they see education as an ongoing process that transcends the classroom—as they discover that they can become actively engaged in their own education—and that this, in fact, is a practice that should become an integral part of what it means to be a mature participant in an educated democratic society that makes informed decisions.

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QEP Executive Summary

During the summer of 2004, the University engaged in an exploratory survey of students, faculty, and staff to identify general themes for the upcoming Quality Enhancement Plan. Over 80 percent of respondents to the survey ranked the need for improving student engagement during the first-year experience as the number one theme. Several factors contributed to this conclusion. In the fall of 2005, the University will increase its admissions standards in accordance with the Louisiana Board of Regents' *Master Plan*, which will make the recruitment and retention of first-year students an increasing priority. In preparation for the *Master Plan*, the University prepared, with the assistance of a Noel-Levitz retention consultant, a Retention Plan. Submitted to the Board of Regents in May 2003, it stressed the importance of early engagement of first-year students through both classroom instruction and academic advising. In May 2004, a senior Noel-Levitz advising consultant prepared an in-depth analysis of the University's academic advising program, placing special emphasis on the need for frequent and intrusive advising of first-year students, and also detailing the mutually supportive roles that effective teaching and advising can play with regard to improving student engagement and academic progression.

The newly developed QEP Team (with representation from faculty, students, K-12 education, and the business community) then facilitated focus groups with faculty and staff to more closely investigate the evolving theme and to identify important student learning outcomes for the QEP. A content analysis of focus group discussions helped the Team identify critical thinking and writing as important student learning outcomes. This consensus was particularly driven by assessment data. The University assesses student achievement in general education areas through the nationally-normed ETS instrument Academic Profile (AP). Since 2002, 600 to 800 junior- and senior-level students at Nicholls have taken the test every fall and spring semester. Over a three-year period, the AP results consistently demonstrate a weakness in critical thinking scores—on average, only 3 percent of juniors and 4 percent of seniors reach the minimum level of proficiency in critical thinking. In the writing area, Nicholls' students perform better, most reaching basic proficiency, but few are able to reach AP's Level 3—on average, only 8 percent of juniors and seniors reach this advanced level of writing proficiency.

During the fall of 2004, the QEP Team met monthly to familiarize itself with ongoing institutional initiatives and to discuss numerous issues related to the QEP.

During the spring of 2005, the QEP Team began to focus on identifying specific learning outcomes related to critical thinking and writing. This undertaking coincided with the University's General Education Assessment Committee's (GEAC) study and redesign of the general education curriculum. In a spirit of collaboration, the QEP Team and the GEAC formulated goals, strategies, and outcomes related to critical thinking and writing for the QEP.

A QEP retreat was then held in the summer of 2005, which provided an opportunity for the QEP committee to share its recommendations with the SACS steering committee, administrators, and students from across campus. As a result of the retreat, a more focused QEP mission emerged with specific goals and strategies to foster a dynamic relationship between student engagement and critical thinking, especially for first-year students.

QEP Mission

Because Nicholls, in keeping with its newly-adopted mission, strives to cultivate "productive, responsible, engaged citizens in a personalized, culturally rich, and dynamic learning environment through quality teaching," the Quality Enhancement Plan will promote an institutional culture that enhances learning by engaging students and faculty through critical inquiry. The mission of the Quality Enhancement Plan has evolved out of a commitment to the University's previous and future strategic plans, mission, vision, and values, and through a broad-based campus dialogue regarding our strengths and weaknesses. This review—which included significant consideration of recent University initiatives to enhance the first-year experience through the creation of a University College—has aided our development of innovative learning and teaching opportunities that will promote greater student and faculty engagement through inquiry-based strategies.

From this broad-based campus dialogue, goals and strategies were identified to improve both direct and indirect student learning outcomes. First, students will become more academically engaged during their first year by taking advantage of services offered through an improved Tutorial and Academic Enhancement Center and University 101 course. Initiatives will encourage students to become more efficient learners by better understanding their individual learning strengths and weaknesses. Less efficient learners will have opportunities to improve their learning processes and become more cognitively engaged. Second, faculty engagement will improve through the use of a new faculty development center designed to promote greater understanding of the teaching-learning process and to encourage the use of best teaching practices. Faculty engagement will also increase through teaching enhancement grants and instructional ratings that provide best practice suggestions. Finally, the creation of a critical inquiry learning community and faculty use of innovative teaching practices will promote students' critical thinking and writing.

Expected Outcomes

As a result of these goals and strategies, Nicholls expects to increase instructors' use of best teaching practices as well as improve students' use of efficient learning strategies, vocational preparation, critical thinking, and writing. Achieving these learning outcomes will help Nicholls accomplish its mission to cultivate 'productive, responsible, engaged citizens in a personalized, culturally rich, and dynamic learning environment through quality teaching.'

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