

ACS Interdisciplinary Opportunities

Interim Report

For Mini-Grants Awarded April 2006 and October 2006

Name of Person Submitting Report: Patrick D. Hopkins

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Institution: Millsaps College

Title of Project: Teaching Critical Thinking to Freshmen Across Disciplines

Date(s) of Project: August 1 2006-May 1 2007

Amount Awarded: \$8000

1. Original Goals and objectives:

- We are seeking the most effective means to teach critical thinking to freshmen, training them how to formulate and analyze arguments, and how to assess claims and evidence—abilities crucial to all disciplines. While we currently try to teach critical thinking throughout our curriculum and try to introduce it in our freshman seminar course, we proceed mainly by modeling and have an inefficient and unsystematic approach.
- Our goal is to improve on this approach by trying a systematic method of teaching critical thinking, using faculty from different disciplines working together as a team to produce a new, foundational freshman seminar.
- Fortunately, there already appears to be a better way to teach systematic and effective critical thinking and that is what we seek to accomplish in the pilot teaching program we are creating. Part of the problem in how we currently teach critical thinking seems to stem from a lack of awareness that Critical Thinking is an established academic field and that the skills of critical thinking can be taught systematically and formally, supported by many excellent textbooks and web-based learning resources. Calling it a “field” however, is somewhat misleading. Critical thinking (which may generally be defined as deciding whether to accept, reject, or suspend judgment on a claim by analyzing the presence and relevance of evidence) is the foundation of all disciplines, since all disciplines deal with claims, arguments, reasons, evidence, and conclusions. Our guiding assumption, then, is that critical thinking is meta-disciplinary or ur-disciplinary more than simply inter- or multi-, and as such, systematic training in critical thinking will be valuable for all students, no matter what fields they go into. It is this principle that makes our goals radically interdisciplinary in the true sense of the word “radical,” meaning “root”—we aim to teach the roots of thinking. In addition, since faculty from all our disciplines use critical thinking as a foundation, it will be very beneficial for us to be able to jointly organize a course, fully buy in to its structure and rationale, and share a vocabulary, set of goals, and syllabus. Ultimately, our goal is to teach critical thinking skills more extensively and

effectively in a truly interdisciplinary foundational freshman course—consistently providing students with valuable skills, and providing faculty with a coherent, organized plan that fits in perfectly with our general curriculum.

2. Any changes made in goals/objectives to date:

- No changes to goals or objectives. However, please note that two people in the original program withdrew from the project because of other interests and did not teach (as was originally planned) in the pilot program for transfer students in the spring semester of 2007. This did not affect the primary portion of our pilot however, since all four primary faculty did teach the pilot course in the fall of 2006.

3. Activities underway and/or completed to date:

- We have finished teaching the pilot program (four critical thinking courses taught to freshmen using four faculty from different areas). We have also collected pre- and post- standardized test data from these classes. The primary applicant is now entering the data from each test into spreadsheets in order to perform statistical analysis (a labor intensive process involving entering data from over two hundred tests into Excel).
- Statistical analysis will be performed as soon as this data is entered and we will be able to tell whether the critical thinking course made a differences in scores on a standardized critical thinking abilities test

4. Any snags or unanticipated delays encountered:

- The costs for administering online standardized tests for 120 students (pre- and post-) was more expensive that originally anticipated. \$3000 rather than \$2000. However, two faculty who were originally going to participate in teaching a spring version of the critical thinking pilot to transfer students withdrew so this unencumbered \$1000 which was used to purchase tests.
- Also, having to enter the pre- and post- testing data is labor and time intensive and was not originally anticipated. But this has only slightly slowed progress.

5. Approved budget:

- \$8000

6. Financial Accounting from receipt of funds through Dec. 30, 2006, showing amounts spent to date and for what it has been spent.

- \$3000: fee to purchase access to online standardized pre- and post- testing for 225 tests
- \$2000: stipends for four faculty to teach pilot course

- \$92: cost of taking four faculty to lunch after pilot course was finished to discuss the results
- Total amount spent: \$5092
- Total amount remaining: \$2908

7. Any other information you think will be helpful to include or that has affected progress.

- None

Send your report to:

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