

## **7 — Action Plan & Timeline:**

### **Part A—Overview of The PRISM Experience**

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Based on the synthesis of the literature in both research and best practices, examination of other schools' campus-wide initiatives, and our own community-wide cycle of input and feedback, the QEP Committee began in earnest in January 2009 to develop program strategies that addressed the need for *critical thinking* that had been identified on our campus.

Sections III and IV of this report provide details about the chronological identification and development of the QEP focus topic—*critical thinking*—and our initial articulation of student learning outcomes, as described in Section VI. It is important to note that the evolution of our definition of critical thinking and of the student learning outcomes continued iteratively as the committee considered program initiatives that would best meet the student learning outcomes and address the need for critical thinking among our campus community. As the committee examined and pondered potential program strategies, the committee clarified student learning outcomes, which, in turn, helped to sharpen and focus the definition—in essence, operationalizing critical thinking for our campus.

Meredith College's definition of critical thinking and the desired student learning outcomes are re-presented below:

#### **Definition of Critical Thinking for Meredith College**

*"We define critical thinking as a purposeful, self-directed process in which we take charge of knowledge, use reason to propel our scholarship and solve problems, and integrate these essential skills in intellectual endeavors and actions."*

#### **PRISM Learning Outcomes**

*As a result of the QEP, students at Meredith will*

- Apply skills of reason, critique, and creative thought
- Utilize and communicate critical thinking skills through reading, writing, and speaking
- Integrate and evaluate knowledge from a variety of sources and disciplines
- Raise important questions and formulate solutions to complex problems
- Develop intellectual curiosity by thinking independently and being active in the learning process
- Practice metacognition by analyzing, assessing, and reconstructing their ways of thinking
- Exercise open-mindedness to new ideas or ways of thinking

Several factors were considered in the development of program strategies. First, the program strategies must be multi-faceted to address (a) the developmental needs of students learning skills of critical thinking, (b) the further development and application of

those skills situated within the disciplines of their majors, (c) the synthesis of those skills throughout their curricular and co-curricular college experience, and (d) the culminating demonstration of critical thinking skills as students complete their undergraduate studies. Secondly, the committee was sensitive to the unique opportunities for integrative learning on the Meredith College campus. Students arrive at Meredith College wanting “to make a difference.” Typically, they are involved extensively in co-curricular experiences and other activities outside the classroom. As our program initiatives evolved, it became clear that the committee and the campus wanted our focus on critical thinking to reach beyond the classroom, permeating the entire campus culture. Thirdly, the QEP committee recognized that program strategies must address seemingly competing purposes. Program strategies should:

- (1) Establish both a common framework or lens across campus through which we view critical thinking and a common language, which we can use to communicate concepts and skills about critical thinking with our students and with each other
- (2) Respect that critical thinking, as applied, often looks quite different within the different disciplines and within the context of particular co-curricular or non-curricular activities and experiences. Different aspects and skills of critical thinking are relevant to the context in which they are situated, and often, discipline-specific terminology is used to communicate those skills in context.

From these perspectives, the QEP committee moved toward strategies that provide an initial experience for first-time freshmen, an experience that will establish a common framework for critical thinking and introduce students to critical thinking skills and intellectual habits of mind. Upper level courses infused with critical thinking will provide students the opportunity to develop further their critical thinking skills and apply them within the context of their major discipline. Experiential components and opportunities to infuse critical thinking will be integrated into the entire college experience and become part of the campus culture at Meredith College. Assessment strategies will not only provide the campus with information about how students’ development of critical thinking progresses but will also serve as means of formative feedback that will allow students, faculty and staff to improve critical thinking skills and experiences. Students’ development of metacognition—their reflective understanding of their own thinking—will develop and improve as the college provides students both with the tools for self-evaluation and reflection as well as effective models of practice. Faculty and staff development strategies are crucial (1) to ensure common understandings, (2) to provide resources and support for changing instructional needs and teaching practices, and (3) to create a campus-wide culture of critical thinking and reflective decision-making to model for our students.

Throughout the course of the QEP development, as we have solicited feedback by our campus community about possibilities for quality enhancement, the QEP Committee has operated within several guiding principles. The QEP Committee articulated these guiding principles; the following principles establish a campus-wide trust as the committee moves forward in implementing strategies responsibly, involving campus-wide participation in this initiative:



1. **Intentionality** – First and foremost, the committee has worked within the principle of intentionality. In this vein, PRISM activities for both students and faculty/staff will be intentional and crafted to support a deeper level of critical thinking through the course of the five-year QEP implementation process. Transformation and the creation of a campus culture that supports critical thinking depend on our intentionality.
2. **Evidence-Based Decision Making**—We will assess the program continually and systematically, allowing decisions to be informed by both informal and formal measures, the value we see added to students' learning experiences, and commitment to learning outcomes.
3. **Flexibility**—Because the entire process should be evidence-based, we understand that this plan is our best guess, and we will exhibit flexibility and good stewardship in our planning and implementation.
4. **Consensus-Seeking**—Because we rely on the expertise and the experience of our faculty in their disciplines and in their departments, we will seek to build consensus inside academic departments as to how to accomplish and give evidence of critical thinking outcomes inside their disciplines and with their upper-level students. In that same vein, we will encourage and support every department on campus to create courses that explicitly teach critical thinking skills inside their disciplines. Finally, our committee structure will reflect our desire to involve as much of the campus as possible.
5. **Continuous Improvement**—We are committed to faculty and staff development and wish to build a community of critical thinking fellows/scholars committed to studying, teaching, and presenting their experiences on teaching and learning through critical thinking.
6. **Transformation**—We will actively seek ways to encourage and support critical thinking in both curricular and co-curricular endeavors, with a goal of creating a campus culture of students, staff, and faculty committed to improving their critical thinking skills in the most transformative of ways.

## The PRISM Experience

The official seal of Meredith College bears the motto *lux*, which is translated as “light.” Many popular images of critical thinking bear a symbol of light to convey its meaning and purpose. At Meredith College (where every four years, the faculty and staff present a staged production of *Alice in Wonderland* for the students and college community), it is suitable to view critical thinking “*through the looking glass.*” Based on these unique aspects of Meredith College’s campus culture and tradition, it was agreed that our perspective of critical thinking shared many similar characteristics with a *prism*. Critical thinking involves an awareness of how knowledge can be focused and filtered through a specific lens. Specific disciplines can be magnified and appreciated through critical thinking, recognizing a diversity of perspectives. At Meredith College, critical thinking can be an appropriate learning focus through which a student’s education should be both illuminating and multi-faceted.

In the summer months of 2009, the QEP committee established the name and logo of our QEP project as the **PRISM Experience**. PRISM is more than a reference to light and its many associations with critical thinking. PRISM has come to represent the unique perspective and approach to critical thinking that the QEP committee feels will meet the needs of the Meredith College community. Our logo is a simple triangular prism, designed with certain edges outlining an “M” in white, to represent Meredith College.



Figure B

***Purposeful Reasoning, Inquiry, and Scholarship at Meredith*** is what we now define as the **PRISM Experience**, an integrated program of strategies focusing on critical thinking throughout a student’s college experience. We chose a triangular prism indeed because a triangular prism is often used as a medium through which beams of light are refracted. However, it is also in concert with a triptych that guided our development of relevant critical thinking strategies: *Thinking about...thinking within...thinking beyond*. As the QEP committee developed strategies, this triptych guided the committee’s work in two ways.

First, from the perspective of an individual student’s development, a student is introduced to critical thinking in the context of thinking about an issue, a problem, a topic of some depth. As students apply and build upon critical thinking skills within their major, they move to more independent inquiry, scholarship and the development of creative thought. Beyond the classroom and the college undergraduate experience, we want our students to leave prepared to be more than carriers of light, but by utilizing critical thinking, to be creators of light.

Secondly, from the perspective of the college, the triptych reminds us of our institutional responsibility to provide opportunities for our students. In the first-year seminar, structured around thinking about a topic or an issue situated in a disciplinary context, students will begin to develop essential critical thinking skills, with a common model and language across disciplines. Armed with developing skills in thinking critically, a common framework, a common vocabulary, and common self-assessment rubrics, students will move into their major degree programs, where they have the opportunity to apply and expand their critical thinking skills within their chosen discipline. Beyond the classroom, critical thinking opportunities in co-curricular experiences are a necessity if we are serious about infusing critical thinking throughout our campus, lest our triangular kaleidoscope be “lopsided.”

In the sections that follow, we articulate the various facets of the **PRISM Experience**—strategies that the college will implement over the course of five years to improve the quality of critical thinking across our campus culture. The graphic below summarizes those strategies. These facets include the **PRISM Seminar** for first-time freshmen, the **PRISM Infusion** that addresses both upper-level coursework and co-curricular experiences, the **PRISM Assessment Plan** that provides both formative and summative feedback, and the **PRISM Faculty and Staff Professional Development Plan**, which is designed to build human capacity for implementing the strategies.

