

4 — Process Used to Develop the QEP

With the QEP topic narrowed to improving students' critical thinking, the QEP committee then focused on generating strategies to develop the QEP. In spring 2009, the QEP committee reviewed practices at other institutions, looked at relevant institutional data and held campus discussions to inform the development of the plan.

Programs at Other Institutions

QEP members reviewed the strategies used at over 40 other institutions including specific characteristics of first year seminars. The data were compiled on a spreadsheet of relevant factors for committee members to review and discuss. Common elements included discipline or topic focused seminars, experiential components and student mentors/assistants. (see spreadsheet summary)

Institutional Data

NSSE data were reviewed in spring 2009 to help with the development of strategies. A review of NSSE data revealed several areas that could be improved through QEP programming:

- Students' ratings of their relationships with other students, faculty and staff as well as perceptions of academic and social support, while generally comparable to or above students' ratings at other women's colleges, have been lower among first-year students in the last two years.
- Students' ratings of how often they prepared two or more drafts of a paper or assignment before turning it in were lower than ratings from students at other women's colleges, except for in 2007 and 2008.
- Students' ratings of the College's contribution to their ability to speak clearly and effectively were comparable to or lower than students' ratings at other women's colleges, except for in 2008.

These data suggested to the QEP Committee that there is a need for programming strategies to be introduced early in students' college careers that provide increased support and interaction with faculty and staff, and that strategies should focus more on actively developing skills essential for success including written and oral communication.

Campus Involvement

The QEP Committee also facilitated a number of focus groups for faculty, staff and students through campus-wide forums and dining hall discussion tables in April 2009. These focus groups were designed to gather input and ideas concerning QEP strategies to enhance Meredith students' critical thinking skills in the classroom and in co-curricular settings. Meredith community members offered input on proposed QEP critical thinking strategies –

1. A topical-driven, discipline-based freshman seminar,
2. Infusion of critical thinking tools and skills into existing upper-division courses, and
3. Professional development for faculty and staff.

Faculty and staff who participated in focus groups in spring 2009 suggested that professional development opportunities on how to promote critical thinking skills were

needed, that the College should consider using some College programs that already exist as a context for intellectual engagement and critical thinking opportunities, and that the campus needed a common set of learning outcomes for implementing critical thinking. Students who participated in focus groups offered that class participation is important for exposing and discussing ideas, that “hands on” experiences enhance critical thinking, and that while upper-division courses help with critical thinking development, it is difficult to think critically without previously being taught how to do so. Students also offered examples of how faculty had successfully engaged them as active learners in their classes.

Throughout the planning process, the Meredith College community was invited to participate in defining the topic, and identifying learning outcomes, and strategies for improving student learning. QEP updates and articles were included in the faculty/staff online newsletter, *In a Nutshell*; the student newspaper, the *Meredith Herald*; on e-news, Meredith’s electronic announcement board; and through campus-wide emails. QEP Co-Chairs presented updates at fall 2008 and spring 2009 faculty meetings, College Programs full staff meetings, academic department meetings, student life forums, Student Government Association Executive Board meetings, and academic dean meetings. Campus community members were also invited to participate on the QEP blog found on Meredith’s QEP web site, to attend weekly QEP Committee meetings, and to email feedback and ideas to QEP Committee members.

Critical Thinking Framework

In early May 2009, the QEP Committee further refined Meredith’s definition of critical thinking and agreed upon a common framework for Meredith’s work on critical thinking as presented by Linda Paul and Richard Elder. The committee also selected strategies to be detailed to achieve student learning outcomes for critical thinking - including the first year seminar, the infusion of existing courses over four years, and professional development opportunities for faculty and staff. (See Matrix of Strategies for the first year seminar)

Faculty and staff were invited to participate in a unique professional development opportunity in mid-May to begin developing tools for teaching critical thinking. On May 12, 2009 Dr. Terry Roberts of the National Paideia Center held a campus workshop on *Critical Thinking: Tools for the Classroom*. Thirty-five faculty and staff attended the all-day event, which introduced the Paideia seminar concept and provided a simulation of the seminar experience for participants. In addition to gaining information about the Paideia seminar approach as one tool for teaching critical thinking, participants also offered input on the refined Meredith definition of critical thinking and student learning outcomes. Following the workshop, QEP Committee members finalized the following definition of critical thinking for Meredith:

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 to intellectual endeavors and actions.”

Emergence of PRISM

In late May 2009, a QEP Director, Associate Professor of Mathematics Tim Hendrix, was selected to bridge planning and implementation efforts (see QEP Director position description). The QEP Director worked with the QEP Co-Chairs in summer and fall 2009, providing leadership for finalizing the components of Meredith's QEP and starting to draft the QEP report.

During the summer of 2009, the QEP Committee met with other interested Meredith College community members to detail critical thinking strategies for the first year seminar as well as critical thinking infused courses and co-curricular activities, the action timeline, the professional development plan, the assessment plan, the budget, and other resources. The committee also established a name for the program that would capture its essence and having meaning at Meredith (**Purposeful Reasoning, Inquiry and Scholarship at Meredith or PRISM**) and worked with marketing to develop initial ideas for sharing the QEP with the campus community.

In mid-August during the College's planning week for faculty, staff and student leaders, the QEP team unveiled the PRISM program, definition, learning outcomes, strategies and future plans in a general session for the campus. The general session was introduced and concluded with video clips of a number of Meredith students, faculty and staff who reflected on what critical thinking is and why it is important. The general session was then followed by breakout sessions on *Critical Thinking 101*, PRISM freshman seminar development, infusion of critical thinking skills into existing courses and curricula, and critical thinking strategies for co-curricular programs. Copies of *The Miniature Guide to Critical Thinking: Concepts and Tools* by Richard Paul and Linda Elder were distributed to faculty and staff who participated in the breakout sessions.

The QEP committee received much positive feedback about the presentation to the community. In the August faculty meeting a faculty member summed up the development of the PRISM experience in the following way, "I want to thank the QEP committee for its work. The presentation yesterday was great – PRISM is an exciting approach to critical thinking – for us and for our students. As I reflected last night, I realized that the committee has done a wonderful job of taking in and incorporating feedback from lots of different people. It shows, and I want to congratulate the group on that process and hold it up for all of us as an example – awesome."

Possible appendices for the above:

- Spreadsheet of institutions reviewed (or just a list/summary if this would count toward the 100 page limit)
- QEP Director Position Description
- Matrix of critical thinking strategies for the first year seminar

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