

Proposal: “Inquiry / Research-Based Instruction in the College of Liberal Arts”

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Abstract:

During the 2007-2008 academic year, well over 4,000 students in approximately 150 sections of Inquiry / Research-based courses (“I-courses”) in the College of Liberal Arts will participate in helping four departments measure the success of I-courses in honing students’ critical skills and methodological sophistication. The I-courses range from introductory to majors’ courses, spreading from the 100- to the 400-level. Departmental outcomes contribute to College outcomes, which aim to increase the quantity and quality of I-courses in the College over a three-year period, and to improve student responses as measured by NSSE data. The “Indicators of Success” that departments report each year to the Dean in preparation for distributing funds for merit increases will provide an additional set of data for assessing the impact of I-courses, given that I-course involvement is now one specific measure of departmental success. One department plans to assess the effectiveness of departmental faculty workshops on I-courses; one to measure the effect of three different pedagogical approaches in the same I-course; one plans to use pre- and post-tests to assess I-courses’ effectiveness in teaching advanced students the skills necessary to conduct research in their field; one, in introducing I-courses at the lower level, hopes to increase professional skills earlier in the major.

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Prepared and submitted by:

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Date

Approved by:

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Date

Part II: Learning Outcomes

The College of Liberal Arts will:

- Include departments' meaningful participation in Inquiry / Research-based education in their annual evaluations by the dean;
- Increase the number and quality of Inquiry-rich courses offered in the College during a three-year period from 2007-2010;
- Require that all Liberal Arts students entering under Catalog 133 or later graduate with at least one Inquiry / Research-based course;
- Improve CLLA students' responses to questions about critical inquiry skills in reports from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), using the 2005 report as a benchmark and comparing "CLA" to "NSSE All" responses. The NSSE questions to be used are: Coursework emphasizes: Memorizing facts, ideas, or methods (2a); Analyzing the basic elements of an idea, experience, or theory (2b); Synthesizing and organizing ideas, information, or experiences (2c); and Making judgments about the value of information, arguments, or methods (2d).

In support of the College's outcomes, specific departmental outcomes and methods for assessing them are described below in Part III.

Part III. Process

During the 2007-2008 academic year, the College will initiate a three-year process of quality enhancement focused on Inquiry / Research-based undergraduate education. During each one-year cycle, four departments will be chosen to develop a QEP. At the end of the third year (2009-2010), all twelve departments will have increased the quality—and in some cases the number—of their Inquiry / Research-based courses, and will have implemented assessment methods for continuing to improve those courses. Each department has used the Inventory to inform its plan; has enlisted faculty support; and has taken into account the sustainability and consistent improvability of its QEP components.

For the initial 2007-2008 phase, the departments of Communication, English, Political Science, and Sociology, with the leadership of their CLLA QEP Council members, will focus their efforts as described below. The total number of students potentially affected by this first phase of QEP in four departments is over 4,000—4,350 students in approximately 150 Inquiry / Research-based course sections during two semesters.

Department of Communication

The Department of Communication will implement a comprehensive evaluation and training plan using three items on the NSSE questionnaire: (1) How much does this course emphasize analyzing the basic elements of an idea, experience, or theory? (2) How much does this course emphasize synthesizing and organizing ideas, information, or experiences? and (3) How much does this course emphasize making judgments about the value of information, arguments, or methods?

The department's plan is two-fold. First, the departmental QEP committee will gather data from all students who are enrolled in select (~15) 300- and 400-level courses offered in Fall 2007. The purpose of this is to determine if those courses that were identified previously in Texas A&M's I-

course inventory are rated higher on the three NSEE evaluation items than those departmental courses not included in the I-course inventory.

Second, another round of data will be collected from students enrolled in an additional set (~15) of 300- and 400-level courses taught by the department in the Spring of 2008. However, prior to the Spring semester, all faculty teaching these courses will be provided with a half-day, interactive training session on Inquiry / Research-based curricula. During this workshop, designed to spark ideas for how to fine-tune courses to meet inquiry-based criteria, faculty will be provided with information about inquiry-rich courses and will bring their syllabi for a round-table discussion focused on making the course more inquiry-rich.

Although a direct comparison of the numbers between Fall and Spring semesters will be imperfect, it will provide a snapshot of how students perceive courses on the three inquiry-based questions. The data from the Fall semester should show statistically significant differences between inquiry-based and non inquiry-based courses. In turn, significant differences should not exist between courses assessed in the Spring semester because instructors will have been trained in inquiry-based curriculum planning.

Funds would be used both as course development incentives for faculty members and for conducting the workshop.

Department of English

The Department of English will enhance its existing Inquiry courses—its capstone 481 and two 300-level courses from the Inventory—by infusing Inquiry / Research-based education into the department’s lower-division courses, English 104: Composition and Rhetoric, and English 203: Introduction to Literature, and officially designating the courses as such. Together, English 104 and 203 constitute the foundation for the major, linking critical thinking, effective writing, and research methods. Because the size of these classes is restricted, the courses offer ample opportunity for developing skills important to inquiry: reading critically; identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing primary and secondary sources; originating or building upon research; understanding and practicing scholastic honesty, academic integrity, and the ethics of communication.

Funds would be used as course development incentives for faculty.

Department of Political Science

Five instructors whose courses appear in the I-course Inventory would participate in the department’s plan to enhance Inquiry / Research-based instruction in political science. The department’s approach to this enhancement involves (1) correctly identifying and inventorying such courses and (2) encouraging I-course instructors to develop procedures for assessing I-related learning outcomes on an ongoing basis. During the 2007-2008 academic year, the department plans to begin the first phase of the second objective in five courses whose instructors participated in the Inventory.

Each of the five selected instructors has developed 2-3 “Inquiry-Rich Learning Outcomes” (IRLOs) and has devised course-specific pre- and post-tests involving the formulation, testing, and articulation of hypotheses. The pre- and post-tests will be used to assess student learning in

an Inquiry / Research-based course and to improve the Inquiry process for future I-courses in political science. It is expected that the tools developed by these instructors will be adopted/adapted for use in future I-courses taught by these and other instructors in the department.

Funds would be distributed evenly to the five faculty members who are the first in their department to systematically implement I-course assessment.

Department of Sociology

During the 2007-2008 academic year, the Department of Sociology plans to institute a systematic pedagogical experimentation program for undergraduate instruction. During this first year, each of three sections of a departmental Inquiry / Research-based course, SOCI 220: Sociological Methods, will be assigned to use a different teaching technique to assess mass media presentations on social issues. The focus will be on the relative effectiveness of pedagogical techniques in Inquiry / Research-based courses rather than on individual instructors, and the courses, along with their topics and techniques to be assessed, will change from year to year. Working with the SOCI 220 instructor, a faculty member knowledgeable about QEP and who is not an instructor in SOCI 220 will write, administer, and grade an exam given to all three sections in order to assess the effectiveness of the different pedagogical techniques. A report will be distributed to the department with the goal of stimulating wide discussion about pedagogy in Inquiry / Research courses.

Funds would be distributed to the faculty evaluator and to the participating faculty instructors.

Part IV. Budget

For 2007-2008, the College of Liberal Arts requests \$10,000 in QEP funding from the QEP Council. The funds would be distributed at \$2,500 to each of the four initial departments to use in preparing departmental QEPs for FY 08.

Matching resources from the College of Liberal Arts and the Departments of Communication, English, Political Science, and Sociology include graduate assistants and/or additional instructors to participate in special course sections or assessment, smaller classes, and office support for workshops or distribution of materials.