

The Higher Learning Commission Action Project Directory

Morgan Community College

Project Details		
Title	Focus on Critical Thinking, Creativity, and Personal/Professional Responsibility	Status REVIEWED
Category	1-Helping Students Learn	Updated 09-20-2012
Timeline		Reviewed 09-21-2012
	Planned Project Kickoff 09-06-2011	Created 09-09-2011
	Target Completion 09-29-2012	Version 1

1: Project Goal

A: The purpose of this project is to explore ways to foster more critical thinking, creativity, and personal/professional responsibility in the classroom.

2: Reasons For Project

A: MCC's 2010-2014 strategic plan names several strategic commitments, including *Teaching Excellence*, which is articulated as follows: *MCC delivers quality instruction that enables students to develop critical thinking, creativity, and personal/professional responsibility*. This project is born of a desire to make good on that assertion. It focuses on identifying specific ways that faculty members can foster these three qualities in their students. We believe that

1. Students need critical thinking skills to masterfully handle the world they encounter during and beyond their college experience. It is important for them to have the ability to analyze text, data, and processes as they strive to answer questions, solve problems, and resolve issues.
2. Creativity is not simply the ability to produce works of art; creativity is the ability to view things freshly; to entertain alternative perspectives; it is the ability to perceive various connections, to explore alternatives, and to look outside of the box. Creativity is that flexibility of mind that allows one to view multiple possibilities in a given situation. Fostering creativity results in better problem solvers and more adaptive citizens.
3. A sense of personal and professional responsibility will serve students in all areas of life. Being accountable for one's behavior, performance, and ethical standards is essential for success in life. Willfully establishing and meeting high personal standards and willingly embracing recognized professional standards will take students a long way toward success in their lives and their professions.

3: Organizational Areas Affected

A: The organizational unit most affected by this action project will be full and part-time faculty. It will also involve the the V.P. of Instruction, and the Instructional Media Specialist. Division Chairs will be indirectly involved at late stages of the project when faculty members are developing their annual work plans for next year.

4: Key Organizational Process(es)

A: Instructional processes
Training processes
Professional Development Day planning processes
Faculty-to-faculty communication processes
Curriculum planning processes
Annual Work Plan development and review processes.

5: Project Time Frame Rationale

A: The project is expected to take one year.

- September all-faculty meeting during Professional Development Day
 - Introduce faculty to proposed project.
 - Come to consensus about proceeding with project or not
 - Formulate a common understanding of critical thinking, creativity, and personal/professional responsibility
 - Consider classroom implications
 - Individual
 - Departmental
- Establish a shell in D2L as a communication forum
 - Further dialogue on the meaning and importance of critical thinking, creativity, and personal/professional responsibility
 - Sharing of classroom practices
 - Sharing of links and other resources
- Spring Professional Development Sessions
 - Breakout groups (three two-hour sessions)
 - Share best practices
 - Formulate tentative individual implementation strategies
 - Follow-ups in D2L
 - Post summaries of best practices
 - Discussion group
- Those faculty who choose to take the project to the next step will formulate formal classroom implementation plans to add to their AWP for 2012-13. Faculty may choose to implement improvements in one, two, or all three areas.

6: Project Success Monitoring

A: Progress will be tracked according to the timeline above:

- Proposal of project is discussed at September faculty meeting.
- D2L environment is established in October, 2011.
- D2L environment is utilized.
 - Dialogue on critical thinking, creativity, and responsibility develops.
 - Classroom practices are shared.
 - Quantity of participation can be measured by D2L trackers, such as number of threaded discussion postings and time spent logged on to the site.
 - Quality of participation can be evaluated by team leaders.
- Sharing of best practices occurs at Spring Professional Development Session.
- Participating faculty report results on in their Spring annual work plan (AWP) evaluations in May, 2012.
- Participating faculty identify practices to be implemented on their 2012-13 annual work plan in September, 2012.
 - The number of faculty members who opt to adopt new practices and incorporate them into their annual workplan can be determined by survey in September, 2012.

7: Project Outcome Measures

- A:**
- Ultimate success would be indicated by improvement in the levels of *student* critical thinking, creativity and responsibility.
 - Interim success will be indicated by a significant number of full-time faculty implementing new practices intended to develop critical thinking, creativity, or responsibility in their students either during the current school year or beginning next school year. This can be determined by surveying the faculty toward the end of the project.

Project Update

1: Project Accomplishments and Status

- A:
- We introduced the project to the faculty at the Fall 2011 kick off meeting and appeared to have strong buy in.
 - We opened up the online component in September, as planned.
 - Initial faculty participation in the online discussion was meagre. Some dialogue occurred, but well short of expectations. There was one technical obstruction identified and removed, but dialogue remained low.
 - Spring Staff Development Day was cancelled, and no alternate forum was established for bringing faculty together to engage in a live sharing of best practices.
 - A midterm "report card" was sent to faculty in hopes of stimulating faculty to recommit to the project. The report card presented data on the quantity of participation by faculty. The effort to stimulate participation was unsuccessful. Participation in online discussion remained near zero.
 - In May a follow up survey was sent out in an effort to ascertain why participation was low.
 - No faculty members reported making it part of their next year's work plan to consciously adopt a particular teaching practice acquired through the project.

This project is currently in breakdown. We have not accomplished the established objectives and are unlikely to proceed further with it.

2: Institution Involvement

- A:
- Three team leaders were named, one for Creativity, one for Critical Thinking and one for Personal/Professional responsibility. They were tasked with initiating and monitoring the online discussions in their area.
 - Faculty were tasked with joining online threaded discussions in any or all of the three areas, and with sharing best practices with each other.
 - The three team leaders and the overall project leader met together to determine the start-off questions to be posted online.
 - The Distance Learning Coordinator set up the forum, using the D2L course management system, entering faculty as "students" in the course.
 - The overall project leader monitored the level of participation and communicated with faculty about their level of participation.

3: Next Steps

- A:
- It is probably better to let it die a graceful death than to try to beat life back into it. When Faculty proved to be resistant to participating in this effort to facilitate the exchange of best practices, a survey was sent out to try to determine why. The results suggest that though faculty thought it was a good idea, it was just too far down their list of priorities to give it proper attention. MCC will retire this project.

4: Resulting Effective Practices

- A:
- The use of an online course management system to create and sustain a forum was successful. Though participation was not what we would have liked it to be, the technology supported asynchronous exchanges and development of a specific academic community. It could well be utilized for other projects in the future.
 - The desired result of conscious adoption of each other's practices in an accountable manner by making them part of one's Annual Work Plan for the next year did not come about, but the kernel of accountability for consciously applying practices and techniques to improve one's performance (and therefore student success) remains a tantalizing goal. It is hoped that future projects will be more successful in stimulating that type of accountability.
 - The commitment to learning from failure makes any faltering project a potential treasure trove. There is a tendency to sweep failures under the rug and never speak of them again; however, once the initial disappointment passes, what rises up in its place is curiosity. When it became obvious that the bulk of the Faculty was not going to actively participate in the project, it became important to understand why. Knowing why could prevent us from making the same mistake in future projects or operations, so a follow up survey was sent out to try to ascertain the reasons. This (follow-up) is a practice we might not

have performed in the past. Although participation in the survey was also low, responses indicated faculty thought the project was a good idea, but was just too far down on their list of priorities to receive proper attention. We conclude that these are busy people with multiple commitments, for whom a voluntary activity, however potentially valuable, must be pushed aside to deal with the more immediate, mandatory parts of their job.

5: Project Challenges

A: As the project is going to be retired, no requests for assistance are being made at this time. If it were to continue, we would identify the challenges as:

- faculty buy-in
- motivation (making it mandatory? Devising a reward system?)
- project design (whether this was ever a viable way to increase student creativity, critical thinking, and personal/professional responsibility. As it never reached the student level, dying with the faculty, one would conclude it probably was not.)

Update Review

1: Project Accomplishments and Status

A: The Action Project was initiated in the Fall of 2011 with an initial meeting for faculty. An online delivery mechanism for developing the focus on critical thinking, creativity, and personal/professional responsibility was opened. Faculty response was poor. A number of efforts were made to increase participation and then to identify why faculty were not participating in the online discussion mechanism. Even responses to a survey seeking to understand the low participation were sparse. No faculty have linked the project to their work plans and teaching practices, a core objective of the project. In sum, progress on the project has stopped, and the institution has determined that it will cease to continue the project.

2: Institution Involvement

A: Operationalizing the project did occur, through involvement of the Vice President for Instruction with media and distance learning specialists identifying an overall project and team leaders. Faculty was invited to join online discussions about the three areas of focus. However, it would appear that the online design of the discussion was attempted as the sole roll-out mechanism. Furthermore, it would appear that not enough groundwork was done to inform the faculty about the project and its importance. It is unclear whether other types of actions were considered: face-to-face meetings, or a keynote address, for example. A critical event planned for the project was a Staff Development Day, which was cancelled and not re-scheduled. Since a consensus of faculty was intended to undergird the entire project, that does not seem to have transpired.

3: Next Steps

A: The update is very pessimistic about the possibility or feasibility of continuing the project. It would seem very important to consider the implications of dropping the project for accomplishment of the MCC Strategic Plan, of which this commitment is an important part. If this project is discontinued, a similar project in terms of accomplishing this tenet of the strategic plan will have to be developed in order to accomplish continuous quality improvement. Given the description of the project's details, it would appear to have centrality to the institution's mission. MCC executive leadership should consider carefully the implications of this project's experience moving forward.

4: Resulting Effective Practices

A: The update indicates several candidate effective practices, although it is unclear if their results warrant the ascription. Certainly, an online mechanism to implement a forum about the project focus is potentially valuable; however, multiple vehicles are probably in order. Is it the case that MCC faculty all want to discuss this important matter solely online? Fostering accountability through conscious adoption of mutual practices through annual work plans is a potentially effective practice, but the voluntarism that seems to circumscribe individual faculty responsibility for participation did not work. It is not simply a matter of surveys being ignored. In this instance, division chairs, the instructional vice president, and the president should reflect upon what process could be integrated into division meetings, an institution-wide meeting, human resources development modules, and other means of gathering faculty behind

the process of improving the curriculum. It is unclear if MCC has an institutional assessment system that directly impinges faculty teaching with concomitant job description duties to participate in assessment and related division and institutional evaluations. These avenues should be considered.

5: Project Challenges

A: The project faced multiple challenges, as noted in the update. Participation was voluntary. It was limited to participation through one mechanism, an online forum. A planned development event was cancelled and not re-scheduled. Institutional/project surveys achieved low response rates. No faculty integrated the project focus into their work plans. The project design itself was incomplete. It is unclear to what extent the senior leadership of the institution endorsed and drove the project's implementation. These are some touchstones to look at for improvement moving forward.