Critical Thinking (a Habit of Mind)

Learning Goal: Critical thinking includes the processes of analysis, synthesis and evaluation necessary to understand and acquire knowledge. In addition to the application of formal logic, critical thinking also incorporates careful observation, reflection and experience. Critical thinking is not only applied in investigations intended to result in a single, unambiguous conclusion, but also includes skills that allow for sound judgments to be made when multiple, competing viewpoints are possible. Throughout the core curriculum, students will practice the habits of critical thinking and move forward in their ability (and perhaps willingness) to question their assumptions. In short, students will be able to recognize, formulate and pursue meaningful questions about their own and others’ ideas. [AS]

Learning Outcomes: With increasing proficiency, students will
1. Identify and understand assumptions and theses that exist in the work of others; and
2. Ask meaningful questions, originate plausible theses, and identify their own underlying assumptions; and
3. Seek and identify confirming and opposing evidence relevant to original and existing theses; and
4. Evaluate and synthesize evidence for the purpose of drawing valid conclusions. [UEPC]

In addition, students will
5. Demonstrate conversance with formal principles and methods of well-ordered thinking, as employed in formal logic and/or the formal methodology of a major discipline. [CCIC]

Rationale (i.e., the intention of the proposed outcomes): Outcomes #1-4 articulate the primary elements of critical thinking. Outcome #1 requires that the student engage with, and understand, the explicit reasoning and the underlying assumptions posed by others. (The term “theses” is intended to include a broad spectrum of assertions and hypotheses relative to a variety of academic disciplines.) Outcome #2 requires the student to develop arguments of their own, with explicit recognition of their own assumptions. Outcome #3 is directed specifically toward helping students learn to recognize and collect evidence relevant to the theses under consideration, the evaluation of which is intended to lead to well-reasoned judgments, as stated in Outcome #4. Such habits are established by sustained practice and develop as students progress through the curriculum.

In addition to these fundamental habits of critical thinking, students are expected to take at least one course in which they engage directly in modes of formal thinking that proceed from defined starting-points (principles) and operate according to correct procedures (methods). Primary modes of formal thinking include formal logic (e.g., Aristotelian logic, mathematical logic) and the formal methodologies of the various major disciplines.

Implementation: We expect all students to engage in critical thinking throughout the curriculum. Students who spend four years at the college will be required to take four Collegiate Seminar courses, and it is expected that those courses in particular fulfill the first
four learning outcomes in a developmental way. It is the responsibility of the Collegiate Seminar Governing Board, working with the Core Curriculum Committee, to ensure this. In addition, students will need to take a course in formal methodology in their major or formal logic elsewhere in their studies (e.g., a logic course in Philosophy or in Mathematics). [CCIC]