Sacred Heart Receives $203K Grant from Davis Educational Foundation for Critical Thinking Course

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Sacred Heart University has received a grant of $203,098 to fund a new critical thinking course that will be part of the University's core curriculum starting in fall 2018.

The grant was received from the Davis Educational Foundation, established by Stanton and Elisabeth Davis, after Mr. Davis's retirement as chairman of Shaw's Supermarkets, Inc. The new course will introduce concepts and terms that will be adapted for other courses, so the skills can be reinforced elsewhere in the curriculum.

Sixty percent of employers identify critical thinking as a skill in which college graduates across the country are deficient, according to research by PayScale, an online salary, benefits and compensation information company, and Future Workplace, a human resources advisory and research firm.

At Sacred Heart, recent surveys of faculty and students uncovered a great deal of support for a stand-alone course dedicated to strengthening critical thinking. The consensus was that such a course should focus on several features: argumentative writing; media literacy; analysis of real-world situations; problem-solving, inductive reasoning and fallacies; and a promotion of metacognition, or reflecting on one's own thinking.

The role of metacognition in learning is well established in literature on higher education. The intent behind this course is to enable students to acquire a meta-level awareness of their intellectual development, becoming more aware of how they think. This awareness is especially important with social issues, in which cognitive biases can undermine critical thinking.

Throughout the new critical thinking course, entitled “Critical Thinking Across the Curriculum,” students will reflect on their thought processes through short journal entries and dialogue with one another.
will work on defending a thesis with evidence, problem-solving, and consensus building. Exercise variations may include “muddiest point,” writing-to-think exercises, retrospective self-assessments and counterfactual reasoning.

Part of the grant will fund a series of week-long faculty development workshops. Like the students, faculty members will reflect on their cognitive processes and study the fundamentals of critical thinking. Afterwards, they will rework one or more of their courses substantially to enhance critical thinking components, consistent with the approach from the critical thinking course.

The workshops will provide training in establishing a growth mindset, modeling metacognition and providing formative assessment feedback to students. Each set of workshops will feature an invited speaker to bring expertise to campus.

Steven Michels, SHU’s assistant provost for teaching and learning, will serve as the principal investigator for the course. He will be assisted by David Shaenfield, a lecturer in psychology at SHU, who has done extensive research on the science of learning and cognitive development. They are partnering with Cengage, an educational content, technology, and services company, and plan to use John Chaffee’s Thinking Critically textbook to ground the initiative. Michels and Shaenfield, who wrote the proposal for the new course, have selected full-time faculty from the philosophy, religious studies, biology, English, sociology, and psychology programs to offer six sections of the new course, which will replace the Art of Thinking as a requirement.

The course will be assessed by the Critical-thinking Assessment Test, which was developed by Tennessee Technology University, with support from the National Science Foundation. The instrument has been used by more than 250 institutions. There will also be regular in-class assessments to ensure student learning.

“Critical thinking is an essential skill. It’s often mentioned by employers as something that they look for when recruiting. In that sense, critical thinking will help students not only during their time at Sacred Heart, but also in their professional lives,” said Michels.

For more information on the new critical thinking course, contact Michels at michaelss@sacredheart.edu.