PROMOTING CRITICAL THINKING IN STUDENTS:
A Career Center’s Strategy

By Janet G. Lenz, Vanessa Freeman, Kelvin Rutledge, and Calvin Williams

Career centers can play a key role in ensuring students translate their higher education experiences into those skills sought by employing organizations. Here’s how Florida State University is helping students recognize and express their critical thinking skills.

Critical thinking has long been seen as one of the top skills employers seek in graduates (Farrington, 2014; NACE, 2013). Critical thinking has been defined as including a number of components such as:

> Explaining issues and problems clearly and comprehensively,
> Selecting and using evidence/information effectively in analyzing an issue/problem,
> Analyzing context, assumptions, and perspectives when presenting a position on an issue/problem,
> Formulating hypotheses that take into account a problem or issue’s complexity and the varied perspectives on the problem or issue, and
> Drawing logical conclusions and implications from the analysis of an issue/problem (https://think.fsu.edu/).

Institutional Priority

At Florida State University (FSU), the promotion of critical thinking was embraced as part of the university’s accreditation quality enhancement plan (QEP). While the career center was not required to engage in specific initiatives related to the QEP, the career center decided to shape several of its yearly learning outcome goals around the topic of critical thinking, and developed strategies for increasing students’ knowledge and competencies in this area. To complement the national data on this topic, the center also sought data from its on-campus recruiters regarding the importance they place on a variety of skills, including critical thinking. This article describes the three-pronged approach that the career center took to target this skill and increase the likelihood that students could speak confidently...
to prospective employers about their strengths in this area.

Career Course Activity On Critical Thinking

One activity related to this initiative involved the career center's undergraduate career development class and the online career portfolio assignment required in the class.

During the fall and spring semesters, the class includes five sections. One of the class lectures focuses on skills and how the institution's online career portfolio (www.career.fsu.edu/Portfolio) allows students to identify their transferrable skills. The portfolio includes nine skills, communication, creativity, critical thinking, leadership, life management, research/project development, social responsibility, teamwork, and technical/scientific. Students can also add their own unique skill areas when designing their portfolio.

During the fall 2014 and spring 2015 semesters, three sections were randomly chosen to receive additional content in the course skills lecture related to the institution's QEP initiative on critical thinking. They also completed an activity in small groups in which they brainstormed examples of critical thinking skills. They were encouraged to include a critical thinking skill example in their portfolio assignment. The other two sections received a standard lecture on identifying skills and completing the portfolio.

After the portfolio assignments were submitted, students in all sections received a survey asking about their experience completing the portfolio. A total of 250 students responded to the survey, 139 from the fall sections and 111 from the spring sections. Two of the seven follow-up survey items focused specifically on critical thinking. Figure 1 shows the items related to critical thinking and the responses by section. (Note: * denotes sections that received the special emphasis on critical thinking.)

The results for the fall sections were mixed: Two of the three sections that received the additional content on critical thinking skills (sections 2 and 4) had higher agreement percentages with the items related to critical thinking than those sections that did not receive the special content. Section 3 had high ratings even without the added emphasis, while section 5 was somewhat lower overall on the “learn more about critical thinking skills.”

The spring results indicated that two out of three of the sections receiving additional information outpaced their counterparts in learning about critical thinking skills, and all of these sections had higher ratings in terms of developmental experiences. These results suggest that even a brief class lecture, followed by an activity highlighting specific skill examples, can influence students’ knowledge about critical thinking and how they can use their campus experience to develop and demonstrate this skill.

As a further check on the critical thinking emphasis related to the online portfolio, actual portfolio skills data submitted by students were examined from the fall sections. (Note: Spring data were not examined due to changes in the portfolio system.) Students were required to enter a minimum of two

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**Figure 1: Skills portfolio lecture and activity survey responses**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fall 2014</th>
<th>Section 1 (n=29)</th>
<th>Section 2* (n=30)</th>
<th>Section 3 (n=30)</th>
<th>Section 4* (n=23)</th>
<th>Section 5* (n=27)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learn more about critical thinking skills</td>
<td>Agree/Strongly Agree</td>
<td>Agree/Strongly Agree</td>
<td>Agree/Strongly Agree</td>
<td>Agree/Strongly Agree</td>
<td>Agree/Strongly Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52%</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learn about types of experiences that help develop critical thinking skills</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spring 2015</th>
<th>Section 1* (n=21)</th>
<th>Section 2* (n=20)</th>
<th>Section 3 (n=24)</th>
<th>Section 4 (n=23)</th>
<th>Section 5* (n=23)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learn more about critical thinking skills</td>
<td>Agree/Strongly Agree</td>
<td>Agree/Strongly Agree</td>
<td>Agree/Strongly Agree</td>
<td>Agree/Strongly Agree</td>
<td>Agree/Strongly Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>62%</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learn about types of experiences that help develop critical thinking skills</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement as to the helpfulness of the skills portfolio activity assignment in these categories.**
skill examples for the class assignment. As noted in Figure 2, students in the three sections that received the special emphasis on critical thinking included more examples of critical thinking skills than the other two sections that received the regular skills lecture.

Mock Interviews and Critical Thinking

A second initiative related to critical thinking and students’ professional development involved the center’s mock interview program.

Students who signed up for a mock interview were paired with a mock interview mentor (MIM). Students were expected to complete the following tasks through the series of interview questions: 1) evaluate their respective background and earned skill sets, including transferrable skill sets, to a specific position; 2) synthesize their personal values, interests, and skills in relation to their intended industry; and 3) articulate the value of their experiences through concrete examples, e.g., jobs, internships, and so forth, that would define the individual as a top candidate. The MIMs then facilitated a focused feedback session at the conclusion of the interview that discussed core components of critical thinking in relation to questions—such as understanding the intent of questions posed, learning the value of synthesis and reflection within a given answer, and distinguishing the importance of technical/industry-specific questions versus behavior-based/situational-specific questions. Finally, students were given tailored suggestions for improvement and resources on how to strengthen their communication style and knowledge delivery as a whole.

The specific outcome and evaluation benchmark associated with the mock interviewing program was 50 percent of students who participate in mock interviews will indicate that the mock interview increased their level of confidence in their ability to describe their critical thinking skills to prospective employers. Of the 280 students who completed the online follow up survey, 92 percent indicated that they had increased their level of confidence in describing their critical thinking ability to prospective employers. These results highlight how a mock interview

Janet Lenz is the program director for instruction, research and evaluation in the Florida State University (FSU) Career Center and an associate-in faculty member in the educational psychology and learning systems department in FSU’s College of Education. She also serves as a research associate in the FSU Center for the Study of Technology in Counseling and Career Development. She received her Ph.D. in counseling and human systems and her master’s degree in student personnel administration, both from FSU. She earned her bachelor’s degree in sociology from Virginia Commonwealth University. Lenz is a past-president and Fellow of the National Career Development Association.

Vanessa Frierson Freeman is a career adviser and career planning class instructor at FSU’s Career Center. She is currently an advanced doctoral student in the combined counseling and school psychology program at FSU. She earned her master’s degree in counseling in higher education from the University of Delaware. Prior to returning to school, Vanessa was an academic adviser at the University of Maryland, where she worked with students who were undecided about their majors. Her areas of interest include first-generation college students’ transition to college and their career development, and students who are undecided about their majors.

Kelvin Rutledge is assistant director of mock interviews and employer relations in the FSU Career Center. He is currently an advanced doctoral student in the combined counseling and school psychology program at FSU. Rutledge received a master’s degree in higher education at FSU and bachelor’s degrees in sociology and political science at Austin Peay State University. He is a directorate board member for the ACPA Commission for Career Services.

Calvin Williams, Ph.D., serves as program director, employer relations and recruitment services, for FSU’s Career Center. In this role, he leads a team of six professionals and three paraprofessionals who provide comprehensive career services for students/alumni and coordinates university-wide employer relations and recruitment services. He also serves as the liaison to the College of Business for all Career Center student, faculty/staff, and employer outreach activities. Williams completed his Ph.D. in industrial/organizational psychology at Capella University; he earned an M.A. in counseling/human relations and a B.S. in psychology, both from Liberty University. Prior to joining FSU, he worked in employer relations in the career services department at the University of Central Florida.
program can not only improve students' interviewing behavior, but can also be used to increase students' ability to demonstrate critical thinking skills in the interview process.

Campus Employers' Perspective on Critical Thinking

Finally, to gather local data on how employing organizations view critical thinking, recruiters participating in on-campus interviewing at FSU during the fall 2014 and spring 2015 semesters were surveyed at the end of their recruiting visit. Forty-eight employers completed the fall survey, and 45 employers completed the spring survey. Across both the fall and spring samples, 100 percent of the employers who responded agreed or strongly agreed that critical thinking is important for graduates' success. Employers were further asked whether students they interviewed at FSU demonstrated critical thinking skills; 95 percent of fall employers agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, and 97 percent of spring employers agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. These data suggest that the institution's efforts to promote critical thinking, including those activities initiated by the career center, are having a positive impact.

These data, in addition to the data available from other sources such as NACE surveys, provide important evidence that could be shared with students about how critical thinking is viewed by employers. Students often attend to advice about what they need to do to prepare for success particularly when that advice comes from employers that may be seeking to hire them. This type of information can be shared in career classes, workshops, and career guides geared to students' professional development and future success. It can also be shared with other university stakeholders to reinforce the role of the career center and student services in influencing this important outcome.

Conclusion

While literature related to skills that employers seek is routinely shared in the professional and popular literature, it is not always clear how a career center can play a role in intentionally seeking to build that skills capacity. The activities highlighted in this article provide some guidance on how career centers can play a key role in ensuring students translate their higher education experiences into those skills sought by employing organizations.

Endnotes


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