2.12 The institution has developed an acceptable Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) that (1) includes a broad-based institutional process identifying key issues emerging from institutional assessment, (2) focuses on learning outcomes and/or the environment supporting student learning and accomplishing the mission of the institution, (3) demonstrates institutional capability for the initiation, implementation, and completion of the QEP, (4) includes broad-based involvement of institutional constituencies in the development and proposed implementation of the QEP, and (5) identifies goals and a plan to assess their achievement. (Quality Enhancement Plan)

The institution developed two Quality Enhancement Plans—one for the campus in Alpine focused on critical thinking and one for the campuses of the Rio Grande College focused on written and oral communication. The Committee found that in its QEP, the Rio Grande College identified a key issue related to learning outcomes that is of importance to the institution and in keeping with its mission, demonstrated its capability to carry out the QEP, involved constituents from across the institution in its development and proposed implementation, and developed concrete goals and an assessment plan.

Likewise, in its QEP, the Alpine campus identified a key issue related to learning outcomes that is of importance to the institution and in keeping with its mission and demonstrated its capability to carry out the QEP. In terms of broad-based involvement of campus constituents, the QEP lists 41 contributing authors (faculty, staff, 1 undergraduate student, and 1 graduate student); however, in talking with students and staff from Student Life, the On Site Committee found that the students had only a vague knowledge of the content and goals of the QEP and staff felt they had had little opportunity to provide input and participate in meaningful ways.

RECOMMENDATION #1: Therefore, the Committee recommends that the Alpine campus include students and Student Life staff in the further development and implementation of the QEP.

University Response:

The QEP selection process did have extensive student participation in the entire process as may be seen in the attached narrative describing the work of the QEP Committee [Attachment 1]. The further development and implementation of the QEP will continue to include students and Student Life staff as described below.

1. Students are the focus of our entire QEP:

All efforts are designed to increase student’s sense of belonging in this area, their critical thinking skills, and their engagement with learning by expanding outdoor hands-on opportunities and providing a support center and seminars to help faculty work together, along with student life, to
develop those opportunities and skills. Students will gradually get most of the things they initially asked for on the surveys: more field trips, more outdoor classes, more hands-on learning, more opportunities to express their own thinking, more out-of-class contact with faculty, etc. Chapter 5 of the QEP (Time-Line and Responsible Persons for the QEP) includes five columns: one for the office of the Coordinator of Faculty Support and Outdoor Learning, one for the Dean of Student Life and one column for each of the three academic deans (Dean of Arts and Sciences, Dean of Professional Studies, and Dean of Agriculture and Natural Resource Management). These deans are responsible for 10% new participation from their respective areas of responsibility each year.

2. Student involvement with oversight and decision making:

Two students and the Dean of Student Life served this summer on the selection committee for the Coordinator of Faculty Support and Outdoor Learning. The Student Government President will be an ex officio member of the QEP Advisory Committee. The QEP also specifies that sub-committees for QEP oversight will be appointed as needed (p. 8). At least one student will serve on each sub-committee. A student voice on SRSU committees has been a tradition for many years. Students serve on almost every SRSU committee and Faculty Assembly council. The QEP Advisory Committee has already designated a sub-committee to award Pilots of Engagement funding: the Dean of Student Life, the three academic deans, and the president of the Student Government Association (or a designee).

3. Student and Student Life participation through Pilots of Engagement:

All students, staff, alumni, and faculty are eligible for Pilots of Engagement. Any request for funding will require approval from one of the deans or the Student Government Association president. All ideas must be designed to improve student learning and engagement and include assessment of those goals. This portion of the QEP is designed to encourage grass-roots innovation, but to try out those new ideas on a small scale first. We hope that relying on data will prevent wasting money on large projects that don’t live up to expectations. Once an increase in student engagement and critical thinking is proven on a small scale, we can then confidently expand those successful ideas.

Each year, all students (either as individuals or as part of a group) are eligible to apply for Pilots of Engagement funding. To clarify the application process for students (which is exactly the same for faculty, staff, or others), they will need to solicit an approval signature for their proposal from either the Dean of Student Life, one of the academic deans, or the SGA president. Approved applications will then be reviewed on an equal basis with all other applications for Pilots of Engagement funding by the QEP sub-committee charged with that chore and described in #2 above. Those who sign the applications will eventually decide which project(s) to fund. While students are obtaining a signature, deans or the SGA president will also advise students about
alternate funding for worthy projects not deemed appropriate for the QEP or those eventually not awarded funding [Attachment 2].

A student might decide (either alone or in partnership with a friend, club, or class) to create an application to request funding from Pilots of Engagement by, for instance, explaining a process for testing a new critical thinking rubric on a small number of students before and after a high ropes activity. The student would need to create a budget or narrative explaining how the money would be used (possibly needed to print rubrics and to cover travel and high ropes fees for 10 students at a local facility). The student would need to submit the proposal and obtain a signature of approval from the Dean of Student Life, one of the academic deans, or the SGA president. If approved, the application would be ready to submit to the Coordinator. If selected for funding by the sub-committee, and the resulting data showed a successful increase in critical thinking and/or engagement, the student could then use that data to persuade the Dean of Student Life to propose purchasing high ropes equipment for SRSU, since purchase of the equipment and resulting liability, security, location, management, storage, etc. is beyond the scope of the QEP.

If no funding is needed (perhaps simply designing a critical thinking assessment rubric or suggesting a class activity), students may simply designate their idea for Pilots of Engagement in order to be eligible for innovation recognition from the SRSU President.

2.12  (Continued)

The institution has developed an acceptable Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) that (1) includes a broad-based institutional process identifying key Issues emerging from institutional assessment, (2) focuses on learning outcomes and/or the environment supporting student learning and accomplishing the mission of the institution, (3) demonstrates institutional capability for the initiation, implementation, and completion of the QEP, (4) includes broad-based involvement of institutional constituencies in the development and proposed implementation of the QEP, and (5) identifies goals and a plan to assess their achievement. (Quality Enhancement Plan)

The goals of the Alpine QEP are clearly articulated. The QEP also includes a chapter on assessment, indicating that critical thinking is to be assessed through administration of the Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP). This test seemed to be the primary, if not only, measure to be employed. The QEP Committee and administrators with whom the Committee spoke did not appear to have considered supplementary assessment tools that might be used—for example, portfolios in which students might demonstrate their QEP-related accomplishments across their academic careers at SRSU. It is important for the institution to develop richer ways to measuring growth in critical thinking and to apply the findings of those assessments to further curricular enhancement and faculty development.
RECOMMENDATION # 2: Therefore, the Committee recommends that the Alpine campus develop and implement a plan to assess more fully student learning in the area of critical thinking as promoted through the initiatives proposed in the QEP.

University Response:

A. Use of CLA for assessment of critical thinking

Based on both the recommendation and suggestions provided by the SACS visiting team, SRSU has redesigned our assessment plan. We want to choose a test that can measure the value a SRSU education adds to student knowledge and to design assessment plans that will encourage our faculty to improve teaching methods both in (and out of) the classroom.

1. The CLA provides guidance through design:

   Education research tells us that students disengage and learn less when asked to memorize and choose right answers that have already been provided by someone and that they engage and learn better when struggling to solve difficult assignments that have no single correct answer. The new CLA test provides a promising model not only for better testing but for better teaching. Instead of multiple-choice, the CLA asks open-ended questions to measure critical thinking, analytic reasoning, problem solving, and written communication in a holistic manner—similar to the way these skills will be measured by life after college. SRSU values students who develop the ability to take initiative, to solve complex problems, to create logical arguments and deconstruct illogical ones. We value students with the determination and work ethic to find and pull information together in order to solve a problem. Our graduates’ future employers value these same characteristics. Research also indicates that open-ended questions also stimulate student engagement with the test itself.

   The Collegiate Learning Assessment’s (CLA) testing design has the potential to inspire improvement in teaching methods and student skills. The test includes a three part written response:
   
   **Analytic writing task 1:** Make an argument (provides a prompt)
   **Analytic writing task 2:** Critique an argument (provides an illogical paragraph)
   **Performance task:** Uses real-life scenarios (provides selections from possibly a newspaper article, research report, crime statistics, tables, an annotated bibliography, maps, artwork, etc.) Students have 45 minutes to analyze the material and create a written response to the task.

   We anticipate that a desire to improve our student scores will cause our faculty to “teach to the test.” By choosing CLA, “teaching to the test”
would encourage our professors to create interdisciplinary real-world scenarios so that students could practice creating their own arguments, deconstructing illogical material, and evaluating interdisciplinary material in order to formulate thoughtful responses. Teaching to the CLA would encourage our faculty to create more opportunities for our students to think, analyze, and write. The QEP wants to encourage faculty develop student critical thinking skills that will serve them both during their education and as future employed citizens.

CLA reports results that control for entering SAT scores. Thus CLA will compare improvement in SRSU student scores between their freshman and senior years with gains that would be expected from students with similar SAT scores, as well as with actual gains made by students with similar SAT scores at similar universities. These data will remove the fear (or the excuse) that our students will score poorly on national exams because we are a liberal admissions university. Value-added scoring also measures whether or not students entering with extensive academic skills are also making progress and will encourage faculty to challenge all students to improve. We believe SRSU provides a high quality education that will be recognized through open-ended testing and value-added results.

2. Using rubrics and workbooks to improve scores and learning:

CLA is scored by a staff of trained readers who use scoring rubrics that focus on measuring thinking skills rather than writing skills and prevent undue bias against such things as ESL quirks, poor syntax or word choice, and typing errors. Teaching to the test will encourage similar behavior by professors in the classroom. Solving ESL, syntax, and surface error problems is of course important, but these errors should be considered minor when evaluating a student’s thinking. To provide guidance in grading open-ended questions like those used by CLA, both the Alpine campus and the RGC campus plan to invite T. Flateby to introduce Cognitive Level and Quality Writing Assessment (CLAQWA) to our campus communities. We will then provide faculty with a CLAQWA rubric for evaluating interdisciplinary written responses weighted for thinking.

To provide further guidance to faculty for improving and grading classroom performance tasks, the CLA also provides training called CLA in the Classroom. During the 2008-09 academic year, the QEP Committee will select someone to attend that training. After training, the campus will be able to use CLA Performance Task Workbooks free of charge. The Coordinator for Faculty Development and Outdoor Learning will provide these workbooks for so that seminar participants can more easily design
assignments for outdoor learning or group and cooperative projects as performance tasks.

B. Additional measures to guide and assess critical thinking learning goals

We are interested in value-added local data as well. Our faculty has already responded cooperatively by incorporating higher-order thinking skills in course syllabi or Learning Contracts (p. 29-31). To provide further guidance in developing critical thinking goals, the QEP Advisory Committee has created a general critical thinking rubric from Paul and Elder’s *The Miniature Guide to Critical Thinking: Concepts and Tools* (p. 14-15) to help guide development of in-house rubrics. Deans and chairs can use this general guide to create specific learning goals for each of their schools. Department chairs and faculty can then use the deans’ rubrics to create specific learning goals for each major. Individual faculty members can then use the chairs’ rubrics to create specific learning goals for their own classes that can be incorporated into course syllabi. We believe that this process will also incorporate our Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board’s required learning goals. Alignment of these various goals with assessment will create a more understandable system.

Once goals for individual classes have been created, the rubrics can be modified into assessment rubrics for in-house evaluation of graduating majors’ critical thinking skills, student self-evaluations, and before and after value-added assessment within courses [Attachment 1].

In addition, the QEP will also use NSSE to monitor engagement and situations that will promote more opportunity for critical thinking. For example, we anticipate an increase in engagement as faculty members begin to assign more open-ended questions and performance tasks, and student/faculty interaction should rise as more outdoor activities are added. The QEP also explains that we will consult numerous additional indicators that are already part of our wide array of tools: retention, dropped courses, graduation, enrolled student surveys, incoming freshman surveys, and alumni surveys. (p. 51-52, 56).

C. Student Life Assessment measures for assessing critical thinking

The QEP Advisory Committee has provided the Dean of Student Life with the same critical thinking rubric as provided to the academic deans. Since critical thinking is neither discipline specific, nor activity specific, the same rubric can be used to develop specific critical thinking goals for Student Life and various groups managed by the Dean. The same rubric can also be modified for assessment of student progress in critical thinking at program, self-evaluation, or activity levels [Attachment 2].
D. Role of the QEP Advisory Committee in guiding critical thinking assessment

The QEP Advisory Committee has the responsibility to closely monitor local assessment development. We want to encourage SRSU’s participation in the current nation-wide search for better assessment tools. The Physical Education department plans to test digital portfolios for Pilots of Engagement beginning in Fall 2008 (see p. 23). The QEP has already charged four deans (the Dean of Student Life as well as deans of each academic school) with designing critical thinking assessment for 10% of their current activities each year. Periodically, the QEP already charges various groups to hold “retreats” in order to design pilot programs. Part of each charge is assessment. As these plans and pilots unfold, we should have numerous rich and interesting assessment tools to choose from, expand, and possibly to inform the broader world of academia of our success. We hope to inspire innovation rather than stifle it with top down prescriptive assessment. Assessment seems to be undergoing a Renaissance of sorts due to pressure from accrediting agencies and the federal government. The QEP Advisory Committee will stay informed (for example the recent front-page criticism of CLA in the June 6, 2008 *Chronicle of Higher Education*) and make recommendations when successful new tools appear or current tools become discredited.