

## Critical Thinking at SCC

### Surry Community College Receives Award for Excellence in Critical Thinking

Surry Community College received the award for excellence in critical thinking at the 26th International Conference on Critical Thinking in Berkeley, California, on July 25, 2006. This award was symbolically memorialized in a small replica of Rodin's famous sculpture, *The Thinker*.

This award was presented at the opening address and keynote session of the conference, which was attended by more than 400 international educators, government leaders, and business representatives. At the presentation, Dr. Linda Elder, President of the Foundation for Critical Thinking, noted that "Surry Community College is the only college in the country, and indeed in the world, to ever receive this award."

This achievement is a credit not only to the faculty, the staff, the deans and department chairs who have fostered it, but to the highest administrative officers, including President Dr. Frank Sells, in their unstinting support of this ambitious and important educational goal.

Dr. Elder read the following statement at the opening session, and, along with Dr. Richard Paul, bestowed the award to Dr. Steve Atkins and Ms. Connie Wolfe:

#### Special Award for Excellence in Critical Thinking

We would like, at this time, to give a special award for excellence in critical thinking. Really there are many of you who deserve an award. We recognize that.

But we thought it was time to single out an institution that has been working toward bringing critical thinking across the curriculum for a number of years. This is a higher education institution that began its struggle toward critical thinking approximately four years ago when they placed critical thinking at the heart of their reaccreditation process. They have developed an ongoing, innovative, long-term faculty development program. They have developed and are using effective faculty and student assessments in critical thinking. They have recently developed a critical thinking website that is exceptional. And they have sent 12 people to this year's conference, because they recognize that the struggle is ever before them, to improve, to reach deeper, to go further.

The institution receiving this award **is** a higher education institution. When we think of excellence in education, we often think of the Ivy League schools, the Harvards, and the Yales. But the institution receiving this award today is not Harvard. It is not Yale. It is not Stanford. It is not any of the Ivy League schools. Rather it is a community college in a small place called Dobson, North Carolina. It is Surry Community College.

Dr. Elder acknowledges, "The struggle is ever before us to reach toward a substantive concept of critical thinking, to continually work to reach our students at a deeper and more meaningful level. This award indicates that the struggle is being

taken seriously at [this] college. I congratulate everyone at Surry Community College who made this award possible. I can only hope that the struggle continues."

### **Critical Thinking at Surry Community College**

In 2002, as part of a Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) to improve and expand student learning, Surry Community College faculty identified critical thinking as a key learning outcome for all SCC students. As work on the QEP continued through 2002-2003, it became apparent that critical thinking would play the pivotal role in transforming Surry to a learning-centered college.

According to Dr. Steve Atkins, Vice-President for Academic and Student Affairs at Surry, "critical thinking encompasses the more complex executive functions, such as reasoning, motivation, and judgment - essential skills for success in a high-performance work environment. Today's marketplace demands skilled workers who can think clearly, precisely, deeply, and accurately while solving problems, making decisions, identifying and answering questions, evaluating, analyzing, and communicating."

It is Atkins belief that colleges must focus on education that moves people away from the past and facilitates new ways of learning and interacting within the workplace, and we realize that critical thinking plays a vital role in facilitating that kind of authentic, active learning. The ability to think critically is an essential skill for community college students choosing either to transfer to a four-year college or to become a highly effective and skilled employee.

There is a growing need for workers who can adapt quickly by learning new skills or knowledge and applying those strengths quickly to respond to customer expectations. In the *Harvard Business Review*, Justin Menkes stresses the importance of good thinking skills: "Thinking critically is the primary responsibility of any manager, in any organization." Using case studies from business, he argues that critical *intellectual skills* - not likeability or charisma - are the difference between success and failure in the workplace: "It's all very well to be kind, compassionate, and charismatic. But the most crucial predictor of executive success has nothing to do with personality or style. It's brainpower." Menkes calls critical thinking "the main ingredient" in business success.

Connie Wolfe, Surry's Dean of Arts and Sciences, who with Dr. Atkins led the college's critical thinking initiative, asserts that "critical thinking is fundamental to learning any subject matter. To learn something, to truly understand it, we have to think it through, think it out, think it over - think it into our thinking. Thus, at Surry Community College, we strive to apply the concepts of critical thinking to what we teach, how we teach, and how we assess."

Richard Paul is regarded as one of the foremost scholars of critical thinking. Surry Community College uses the critical thinking model originally developed by Richard Paul, expanded by Paul and Linda Elder, and promoted by the Foundation for Critical thinking and the Center for Critical Thinking ([www.criticalthinking.org](http://www.criticalthinking.org)). As Richard Paul and Linda Elder note, "Critical thinking is necessary to all effective learning environments, and to all levels of education. It enables students to master systems, become more self-insightful, analyze and assess ideas more effectively, and achieve more control over their learning, their values, and their lives."

According to Wolfe "critical thinking, plays a vital role in moving the entire college forward - we don't limit critical thinking to the classroom: Critical thinking plays a significant role throughout the college, as administration, faculty, and staff alike are challenged to think critically with open minds regarding their roles and to engage collaboratively to remove barriers to learning. Critical thinking requires administration, faculty, staff, and students to suspend judgment, to recognize and study biases and assumptions, to closely examine conclusions and concepts. Critical thinkers must identify what is relevant, accurate, and logical; must recognize differing points of view; and must cultivate intellectual humility, intellectual perseverance, and fairmindedness, and allows for the exchange of ideas and cooperation essential to educating students for the 21st century."

Wolfe contends that "deep learning requires more than memorization; it requires critical thinking. Students memorize information and repeat it accurately on a test an hour or a day later, but does that mean they have actually learned course content? A month, a semester, a year later, will students be able to use course concepts in a meaningful way? Will their learning help them carefully think about and effectively respond to the world around them?" She contends that students need to be given problems and questions that require them to apply course concepts in novel situations. Otherwise, they can memorize a solution without having to think independently about the problem; they can mindlessly "copy and paste" answers to questions. Employers, including Surry Community College, seek employees who can think critically and communicate effectively. That's not the kind of education that will prepare students for the 21st century workplace or world.

Atkins and Wolfe contend that colleges need to teach students how to improve their thinking by requiring them to think about their thinking, by asking them *to think rigorously about course material* - not just memorize it - and by holding their thinking to high intellectual standards. Students need opportunities to identify and define problems and create logical, thoughtful solutions. Students need to learn how to ask good questions and seek relevant, reliable information.

To read descriptions of specific critical thinking skills and abilities and about strategies and assignments college faculty and staff can use to foster and apply critical thinking visit Surry's new critical thinking website (<http://www.surry.edu/about/ct/index.html>). For further information contact Connie Wolfe at [wolfec@surry.edu](mailto:wolfec@surry.edu) or Steve Atkins at [watkinss@surry.edu](mailto:watkinss@surry.edu).