PURPOSE

This qualitative study involved the first cadre of faculty across Broward College implementing classroom practices for increasing students’ critical thinking skills, as part of the institution’s quality enhancement plan (QEP). The purpose of this study was to identify the most ‘Promising Practices’ found by faculty for increasing students’ critical thinking skills across various disciplines at Broward College (BC). Further, the purpose was to gather information on:

- The estimated % of Students Impacted by the top Promising Practices
- Which Behaviors or Knowledge were required for the Promising Practice to be effective
- What Barriers may have prevented greater effectiveness of those Promising Practices
- What Changes these faculty members would recommend to future implementers for improving the effectiveness.

METHODOLOGY

Of the 21 original faculty members comprising the first cadre, 20 participated in these focus groups (12 in the first focus group; 8 in the second focus group). This represents an excellent 95% participation rate. Both focus groups were held at the end of the first semester of QEP implementation (Winter 2014), and represented diverse disciplines. Both focus group sessions were 1.5 hours long and facilitated by Dr. Deborah Posner, District Director of Institutional Effectiveness. No other administrators were present.

Planned and structured prompts were used following the ‘Unfolding Matrix’ research model for facilitating a focus group (Padilla, 1994). Neutral scribes recorded responses on the matrix under the guided direction of the facilitator. The facilitator then analyzed the data for patterns and trends in repeated terms, phrases, or concepts within the responses. Finally, any overarching themes were sought within each session, as well as across both groups.

RESULTS

One clear overarching theme emerged from the responses compiled across both groups – Questioning. Questioning included challenging assumptions, debating events, focused and guided prompts by the instructor to encourage deeper thought and analysis, allowing sufficient time for meaningful thought or problem-solving by students before requiring responses, having students consider ‘how’, ‘why’, and ‘what-if’ scenarios, and following the Socratic method.

Another top Promising Practice was Student Involvement, which included group activities, role playing, and other forms of peer-to-peer interaction as well as class engagement. And a third top Promising Practice identified was Metacognition Study Skills, which included reflection, journaling, self-awareness of thought processes, and having clear strategies to improve critical thinking abilities.

The overall top Behaviors and Knowledge Required for the Promising Practices to be effective included open-mindedness, effective listening skills, creativity, willingness to actively participate, and using elements of thought and intellectual standards (Paul and Elder, 2014). Top Barriers to effectiveness included personal life issues, preconceptions and biases, shyness, distraction by cell phones, lack of time, and lack of preparation.

Top recommendations for Changes included giving clear and explicit instructions up front, creating a safe and welcoming environment conducive to sharing and interaction, providing frequent feedback and reinforcement, and explaining the relevance, value, and outside application of concepts.